

Abstract for review

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Are Government Agencies Using More Volunteers?

Evidence from the U.S. and Implications for Other Nations

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Abstract:

Scholars and practitioners rarely conceive of volunteers as assisting the public sector (Brudney 1990). Although studies based on the U.S. suggest that government may be responsible for as much one-third of all volunteering activity, scant research has examined government preparation for and adoption of volunteer programs. The great bulk of research on volunteering is directed to the context of nonprofit, voluntary organizations and associations.

In recent years, though, financial stringency and decreased budgets have led elected leaders to advocate for volunteers to sustain or expand public services, not only in the United States but also cross-nationally. In the United States, where the trend has received most attention, biennial surveys conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) attempt to document the extent of citizen volunteering -- but an effective citizen response requires greater attention by nonprofit and government organizations to having and establishing supports, structures, and programs to enable more volunteering. Brudney and Gazley (2005) examined this issue among local governments in the State of Georgia in 2005, but a systematic evaluation of the use of volunteers by local governments has not been conducted since the early 1990s (Brudney, 1990). The proposed research and presentation at the 2017 ERNOP Conference will fill that gap by using a time series approach to investigate changes in the landscape of government volunteer use over the past two decades.

The proposed research will estimate and evaluate the response by local governments in U.S. cities and counties to increased pressures to incorporate volunteers in the 2000s. For this purpose we use the Alternative Service Delivery (ASD) Surveys administered by the International City County Management Association (ICMA) of a stratified random sample of cities and counties in the United States. These surveys assess the use by cities and counties of volunteers (as well as a variety of other service-delivery modalities, such as government personnel, outsourcing, vouchers, etc.) to deliver 67 local public services in the core areas of: public works/transportation, public safety, health and human services, parks and recreation, cultural and arts programs, community development, and support function. ICMA administers these surveys at five-year intervals.

Based on the ASD surveys conducted in 1997, 2002 and 2007 (and hopefully 2012, which ICMA plans to release in 2017), we investigate how volunteer use by local governments to deliver services has shifted since the late 1990s. We also investigate how factors such as population, form of government, region, and financial resources affect these changes. We model our statistical analysis hierarchically to capture regional variations in volunteering in the United States at the highest level of aggregation, and circumstances of specific local governments such as tax burden, demands for services, population changes, etc. at a more discrete, finer level. We are thus able to observe volunteering in government services embedded in the larger context of regional differences in historical background and culture.

As governments cross-nationally attempt to draw increasingly on volunteers to assist in the delivery of services, we believe our analysis can prove helpful and instructive. For example, preliminary findings from our empirical analysis of the ASD data in the United States suggest that about one-quarter of cities and counties consistently use volunteers to deliver one more public services, and that the types of services where volunteers are incorporated have remained fairly stable over time (see Nesbit and Brudney, 2013). We can, thus, propose to researchers and practitioners in other nations that they might (tentatively) expect about this level of public participation in government services, concentrated mostly in certain service domains. Equally important, we can provide provisional advice in regard to conditions that differ cross-nationally, for example, how popular needs might stimulate volunteer involvement in government services, how fiscal stress might affect the rate of this involvement, how in-migration (or out-migration) might impact volunteer participation, etc. Through this research and presentation at the ERNOP Conference we hope to bring new light to an area of scholarship and practice that despite its rising importance has attracted little systematic attention.

References

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