

GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES

Working Hard or Hardly Working?

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Are government employees lazier than private-sector employees? Drawing from theories of work motivation and public service motivation, this article examines three public-private differences that might produce different levels of work effort in the two sectors. First, government and business may offer different extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. Second, public and private workers may seek different rewards. Third, public and private workers may differ in personal characteristics that predict work effort. Using 1989 and 1998 data from the General Social Survey, we find that government employees reported slightly higher work effort than those in the private sector. Public- and private-sector workers differ in the value they place on extrinsic and intrinsic motivators, in the rewards their jobs offer, and in some personal characteristics. Government jobs offering interesting work and opportunities to help others, combined with the greater age of public employees, explain most of the sectoral differences in self-reported work effort.

Keywords: *work motivation; public-private differences; public employees*

Polls show that the public believes government employees “work less hard” and are “less productive . . . than their private sector counterparts” (Volcker, 1989, pp. 82, 91). Talk-show callers complain about road crews leaning on their shovels, and the satirical “Monument of the Unknown Government Employee” features a 100-cup coffee urn as its centerpiece (available at <http://home.earthlink.net/~jmarshal/introduction.htm>). “The image of the federal service is that its members are lazy, unambitious, and less than competent” (Meier, 1993, p. 244), yet little systematic research either supports or refutes this stereotype.

When Norman Baldwin asked, “Are we really lazy?” in 1984, he found no difference between public and private managers’ motivation levels. Upon analysis of several large federal surveys, Brehm and Gates (1997) found federal employees reported working very hard. Although these findings contradict the prevailing view of public employees, they are limited in scope. Baldwin surveyed a fairly small, nonrandom sample of managers, and Brehm and Gates could not compare federal employees’ self-reports of work effort to those of private-sector workers.

Because the stereotype of the lazy public employee is so important to negative impressions of government, we provide another, stronger test using a random national sample. We begin with a brief overview of the work motivation literature, public-private comparisons,

AUTHORS’ NOTE: We are grateful to the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research for providing the General Social Survey and to Julie A. Dolan for useful comments on a previous draft. We presented an earlier version of this article at the American Political Science Association meeting in Boston on August 31, 2002.

Initial Submission : October 7, 2002

Accepted: August 5, 2003

AMERICAN REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, Vol. 34 No. 1, March 2004 36-51

DOI: 10.1177/0275074003258823

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and studies on work effort. Next, we examine how extrinsic and intrinsic motivation may influence the relative work effort of public- and private-sector employees. We then develop a set of hypotheses about public-private differences in rewards offered, rewards sought, and work effort. Finally, we test our hypotheses using 1989 and 1998 data from the General Social Survey (GSS) to see whether differences in motivators and personal characteristics lead to public-private differences in work effort.

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Work is difficult, and the question is not why people are lazy or why they goof off but why, in the absence of compulsion, they work hard” (Lipset, 1992, p. 45). Work motivation “refers to how much a person tries to work hard and well—to the arousal, direction, and persistence of effort in work settings” (Rainey, 2001, p. 20). Although there is no unifying theory of work motivation to account for the wide range of behavior found in the workplace, many theories have made significant contributions to an understanding of work motivation. Some theories focus on individual characteristics such as human needs, values, and attitudes (Pinder, 1998), whereas others emphasize environmental factors such as job characteristics and work context (Wright, 2001). The most prominent theories include operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953); Maslow’s need hierarchy (1954); needs for achievement, power, and affiliation (McClelland, 1961); equity theory (Adams, 1963, 1965); expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964); Herzberg’s two-factor theory (1968); goal-setting theory (Locke, 1968, 1990); and job characteristics theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Rainey (2001) offered an excellent review of the major work motivation theories that includes an explanation of the difficulties involved in defining, measuring, and assessing motivation.

Literature on motivational differences between public- and private-sector employees abounds (Baldwin, 1984, 1987, 1991; Bellante & Link, 1981; Buchanan, 1974, 1975; Guyot, 1962; Jurkiewicz, Massey, & Brown, 1998; Kilpatrick, Cummings, & Jennings, 1964; Newstrom, Reif, & Monczka, 1976; Nowlin, 1982; Perry & Porter, 1982; Rainey, 1979, 1982, 1983; Rainey, Traut, & Blunt, 1986; Wittmer, 1991). Baldwin and Farley (2001) and Rainey, Backoff, and Levine (1976) provided comprehensive reviews of the public-private comparative literature identifying several differences in public and private motivation. Public employees place greater importance on job security than do private employees (Baldwin, 1991; Bellante & Link, 1981; Kilpatrick et al., 1964; Lewis & Frank, 2002; Warner, Van Riper, Martin, & Collins, 1963). Nonpecuniary inducements—especially the opportunity to serve society and the public interest—matter more to public than private employees (Crewson, 1997; Kilpatrick et al., 1964; Rainey, 1982, 1983; Schuster, 1974). High pay matters less to public than to private employees (Crewson, 1997; Wittmer, 1991).

Research on work effort is limited (Brehm & Gates, 1997; Patchen, 1965; U.S. Office of Personnel Management [OPM], 1980, 1983). Table 1 shows survey items used to measure work effort in previous studies. The basic strategy for determining how hard people work is to ask them. To verify the accuracy of employee responses, some studies asked co-workers and supervisors about the level of employee work effort and compared answers (U.S. OPM, 1980, 1983). Using the OPM data, Brehm and Gates (1997, pp. 90-92) found that most federal employees reported that they and their co-workers worked very hard and that most supervisors agreed.

TABLE 1: Measuring Work Effort

Would you say that you work harder, less hard, or about the same as other people doing the same type of work in your organization?

- (1) Much less hard than most others
 - (2) A little less hard than most others
 - (3) About the same as most others
 - (4) A little harder than most others
 - (5) Much harder than most others
-

(Source: Patchen, 1965, p. 27)

How often do you do some extra work for your job which isn't really required of you?

- (1) About once a month or less
 - (2) Once every few weeks
 - (3) About once a week
 - (4) Several times a week
 - (5) Almost every day
-

(Source: Patchen, 1965, p. 27)

Do you agree or disagree with the statement: "I work hard on my job?"

- (1) Strongly disagree
 - (2) Disagree
 - (3) Neither agree nor disagree
 - (4) Agree
 - (5) Strongly agree
-

(Sources: Brehm & Gates, 1997, p. 90; U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Federal Employee Attitude Surveys administered in 1979 and 1980-1981)

Please rate the amount of effort you put into work activities during an average workday.

- (1) I give no real effort at all.
 - (2) I give enough effort to get by and keep my job.
 - (3) I give the amount of effort expected for the job; I give full services for what I am paid.
 - (4) I work very hard on my job; I put much more effort into my job than is expected of me.
 - (5) I am one of the hardest workers in my office; I often work more than 8 hours a day, take few breaks, and rarely waste time on personal matters.
-

(Sources: Brehm & Gates, 1997, p. 90; U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Federal Employee Attitude Survey administered in 1980-1981)

Which of the following statements best describes your feelings about the job?

- (1) I work only as hard as I have to.
 - (2) I work hard but not so as to interfere with the rest of my life.
 - (3) I make a point of doing the best work I can, even if it sometimes does interfere with the rest of my life.
-

(Source: General Social Survey from 1989, 1998 as cited in Davis et al., 1999)

Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation of Work Effort

Public-private differences in work effort may exist because the sectors differ in the rewards they offer or the workers they attract. Private businesses may be better structured to link external motivators to individual productivity, but government work may be intrinsically

more satisfying. Whether people perceive government jobs as safe havens for the lazy or as opportunities for public service may determine which sector attracts more motivated workers.

A belief that extrinsic rewards and punishments are the primary sources of work motivation may underlie the popular perception of the lazy bureaucrat, as governments face more obstacles than businesses in using compensation or discipline to motivate managers and employees (Baldwin, 1984; Moe, 1984). Unlike some managers in private firms, public managers cannot share in profits if their agencies perform well, and they do not lose their jobs if their agencies fail. Consequently, governments have fewer material incentives to extract high performance (Johnson & Libecap, 1994).

Employee expectations of extrinsic rewards can have a major impact on work motivation and behavior. According to expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), extrinsic motivators (such as pay and promotions) work best when employees perceive a strong link between effort and reward. Workers must (a) believe their behavior can determine their job performance, (b) expect to be rewarded for high performance, and (c) place a high value on the rewards offered (Jurkiewicz et al., 1998; Kaufman & Feters, 1980; Pinder, 1998). The first link requires an internal locus of control—a belief that “effort [is] important in attaining success” (Kaufman & Feters, 1980, pp. 260-261; see also Furnham, 1987; Lied & Pritchard, 1976; MacDonald, 1971; Mirels & Garrett, 1971). Principal-agent theory focuses on the second link and concludes that it is weaker in government than in the private sector (Moe, 1984). Rigid government personnel systems diminish extrinsic reward expectancies by weakening links between individual performance and pay, promotion, and disciplinary actions (Rainey et al., 1986). A 1979 survey of 14,000 federal employees confirmed that few federal workers expect to be rewarded for good performance or demoted for poor performance (U.S. OPM, 1980). The same conclusion has been largely confirmed by federal surveys in the 1990s (Alonso & Lewis, 2001).

The third link requires that workers value extrinsic rewards highly, but intrinsic motivation may be even more important (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959), especially in the public sector. Intrinsic motivators include interesting, meaningful work that offers opportunities for personal growth and creativity (Herzberg et al., 1959; Kaufman & Feters, 1980; Nord, Brief, Atieh, & Doherty, 1988; Pinder, 1998; Walker, Tausky, & Oliver, 1982). In one large survey of U.S. workers, four of the five most important motivators were intrinsic (“feeling pride or craftsmanship,” “feeling more worthwhile,” “being recognized and gaining the respect of others,” and “being of service to others”), whereas pay, benefits, and promotion opportunities ranked second, seventh, and eighth, respectively (Cherrington, 1980).¹

Individuals appear to choose jobs that maximize the type of rewards that they value most (Walker et al., 1982). Those who choose public-sector jobs tend to value intrinsic motivators more and extrinsic motivators less than those who prefer the private sector (Crewson, 1997; Guyot, 1962; Karl & Sutton, 1998; Kilpatrick et al., 1964; Perry, 1997; Perry & Porter, 1982; Perry & Wise, 1990; Rainey, 1982; Wittmer, 1991). Public service motivation, featuring a strong desire to serve society or the public interest, may draw people to government (Kilpatrick et al., 1964; Perry & Wise, 1990; Rainey, 1982). If public-sector jobs are intrinsically more meaningful, government may have the advantage in motivating its work force (Perry & Wise, 1990). This idea is supported by Brehm and Gates’s (1997) conclusion that federal employees who found their work intrinsically satisfying reported working harder than those who did not.

The Protestant Work Ethic

Perceptions of the public service have also been shown to affect the sort of workers it attracts (Lewis & Frank, 2002). If Americans think government jobs are undemanding, lazy people may prefer them. One indicator of how people view work is their adherence to the Protestant work ethic (PWE)—a dedication to hard work, asceticism, industriousness, deferral of gratification, avoidance of idleness and waste, conservation of resources, and individualism (Furnham, 1990; Weber, 1930). Substantial empirical research has shown the PWE to be strongly linked to work-related behavior (Furnham, 1990).

The work ethic appears to be more weakly linked to several demographic characteristics. Beit-Hallahmi (1979) and Ray (1982) found that church-attending Protestants and Catholics had stronger work ethics than Jews and agnostics. Conservative social attitudes (Furnham & Bland, 1982; MacDonald, 1971, 1972; Mirels & Garrett, 1971) and Republican Party affiliation (Beit-Hallahmi, 1979; Furnham, 1983, 1984; Tang & Tzeng, 1992) were positively correlated with PWE. Given the strong evidence that the PWE has declined in recent decades (Cherrington, 1980; Nord et al., 1988; Ravlin & Meglino, 1987), younger workers should have weaker work ethics. However, conflicting studies have found the work ethic declining with age (Furnham & Rajamanikam, 1992; Tang & Tzeng, 1992; Wentworth & Chell, 1997), rising with age (Aldag & Brief, 1975; Goodale, 1973), and unrelated to age (Furnham, 1982, 1987; MacDonald, 1972). Obtaining higher education would seem to demonstrate an ability to defer gratification, but Furnham (1987) and Tang and Tzeng (1992) found a negative correlation between education and the work ethic and others found no relationship (Aldag & Brief, 1975; MacDonald, 1972; Ray, 1982). Beit-Hallahmi found that Whites had stronger work ethic beliefs than Blacks, but Buchholz (1978) and Tang and Tzeng found no relationship with race. Some research has indicated that women have stronger work ethic beliefs than men (Baguma & Furnham, 1993; Furnham & Muhiudeen, 1984; Furnham & Rajamanikam, 1992), but Wentworth and Chell (1997) found the opposite, and other studies found no significant relationship (Buchholz, 1978; Furnham, 1982; Goodale, 1973; MacDonald, 1972; Mirels & Garrett, 1971; Tang, 1989; Tang & Tzeng, 1992).

Economic Theory

Econometric studies of wage determination offer additional insights, as economic theory posits that workers in free markets are paid their marginal productivity. Productivity depends on ability as well as effort, of course, and wage differences may reflect discrimination rather than productivity differences. Still, these studies almost universally show that pay rises with education, as rising at a declining rate with age,² as higher for White men than for women or racial minorities, as higher for full-time than for part-time workers, and as rising with marriage and children for men but declining for women to suggest that all these factors affect work effort.³

Becker (1991) explained gender patterns through the household division of labor. Couples were thought to allocate more of the wife's energy to family and home activities and more of the husband's to market activities. Because working women typically bear greater child care and household responsibilities than their husbands (Bielby & Bielby, 1988; Biernat & Wortman, 1991; Feinstein, 1979; Walker et al., 1982), Becker argued that marriage and children left women with less energy for their jobs but boosted men's incentives to earn more, thereby decreasing women's productivity but increasing men's. Bielby and Bielby (1988), however, found that women devoted more effort to work activities than men

with similar work and family situations, and that having children does not affect work effort for either men or women.

DATA

Our study utilized a self-reported measure of work effort drawn from the GSS—a highly respected series of surveys of random national samples conducted by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago. In 1989 and 1998, the GSS asked respondents,

Which of the following statements best describes your feelings about the job? (a) I work only as hard as I have to; (b) I work hard, but not so as to interfere with the rest of my life; or (c) I make a point of doing the best work I can, even if it sometimes does interfere with the rest of my life. (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 1999, p. 871)⁴

Because 58% of the 1,418 currently employed respondents with full information on all independent variables claimed the highest work effort and only 7% admitted to the lowest, we dichotomized the variable into those who let work interfere with their lives and those who did not.

Virtually all research on work effort has relied on self-assessments (Patchen, 1965; U.S. OPM, 1980, 1983). Such self-assessments do not represent objective, observable, or verifiable measurements (Baldwin & Farley, 2001), but self-assessments, peer-assessments, and supervisor ratings of work effort are “the most frequently used measures” in this area (Campbell & Pritchard, 1976, p. 92) and reports from all three sources are correlated with each other (Brehm & Gates, 1997, pp. 90-92). Although objective measures would be better, they are impossible to obtain in a natural work environment (Campbell & Pritchard, 1976), especially for a broad cross-section of public- and private-sector workers. The large percentage of respondents claiming to work at the highest level of effort suggests that many respondents overstate their work effort, but this does not pose problems for our study unless government employees exaggerate more than others.⁵ Although, as part of a series of questions about job preferences, the GSS asked whether respondents would *prefer* public- or private-sector jobs shortly before asking about work effort, it never asked whether respondents actually worked for the government, and the work effort question should not have triggered any defensiveness by public employees.

Because the GSS did not explicitly ask whether respondents worked for the government, we created a dummy variable to identify public employees based on their industrial classification code. We classified the 222 respondents (15.7%) working in public administration; education; the bus service; the U.S. Postal Service; and water supply, irrigation, or sanitary services⁶ as public servants. This measure may misclassify as many as 10% of employees, which will tend to understate whatever public-private differences exist.⁷ Of those classified as public servants, 28% worked in public administration, 62% were teachers or other education workers, and the remaining 10% worked in government services.⁸ Because much of the research on public-private differences focuses on bureaucrats rather than teachers or service employees, we repeated the analyses comparing the 61 respondents in public administration to those in the private sector (dropping the teachers and government service workers). Combining the 1989 and 1998 samples gave us sufficiently large samples of public servants for analysis without meaningfully changing the interrelationships between variables.⁹

We measured extrinsic and intrinsic motivators using two series of GSS questions. First, the GSS asked what respondents valued in a job:

On the following list there are various aspects of jobs. Please circle one number to show how important you personally consider it is in a job. (a) Job security? (b) High income? (c) Good opportunities for advancement? . . . (e) An interesting job? . . . (g) A job that allows someone to help other people? (h) A job that is useful to society?¹⁰

Next, the GSS asked respondents to describe their main job:

For each statement about your main job below, please circle one code to show how much you agree or disagree that it applies to your job. (a) My job is secure. (b) My income is high. (c) My opportunities for advancement are high. . . . (e) My job is interesting. . . . (g) In my job, I can help other people. (h) My job is useful to society.

In each case, the first three motivators are extrinsic and the latter three are intrinsic. We treated responses as if they were on an interval scale, with *not important at all* coded as 1 and *very important* coded as 5 on the first set of questions and *strongly disagree* coded as 1 and *strongly agree* coded as 5 on the second.¹¹

We also considered a variety of individual characteristics. As an indicator of an internal locus of control, we included a dummy variable coded 1 for those who say that “people get ahead by their own hard work.”¹² Religion is measured by two dummy variables, one coded 1 for Protestants and the other coded 1 for those who attend religious services weekly. Political ideology is measured on a 7-point scale with extreme liberals coded as 1 and extreme conservatives as 7. A dummy variable coded 1 for Republicans identifies political party. Age and education are measured in years. Three dummy variables (coded 1 for men, Blacks, and other minorities, respectively) indicate sex and minority status. Because we expect families to affect men’s and women’s work effort differently, we added two dummy variables to identify married men and women separately. Two dummy variables identify part-time employees and 1998 respondents.

METHOD

We want to determine whether government employees report working as hard as those in business and, if not, whether the difference can be attributed to the motivators public- and private-sector workers seek, the motivators governments and business offer, or the characteristics of the individuals the two sectors employ. First, we compared public- and private-sector employees on their self-reported work effort, extrinsic and intrinsic motivators, and personal characteristics. Next, we performed logit analysis with work effort as the dependent variable and all of these characteristics as the independent variables.¹³ Finally, we considered the possibility that the extrinsic and intrinsic motivators may have different impacts on public- and private-sector employees by repeating the logit analysis after adding interaction terms between sector and the motivation variables.

Specifically, we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1: Government workers value high income and advancement opportunities less—and job security, interesting work, and opportunities to help others and to be useful to society more—than do private-sector employees.

Hypothesis 2: Government jobs are less likely to offer high income and advancement opportunities and more likely to offer job security, interesting work, and opportunities to help others and to be useful to society than private-sector jobs.

Hypothesis 3: Intrinsic motivators (interesting work and opportunities to help others and to be useful to society) have a stronger positive impact on work effort than extrinsic motivators (high income, good promotion chances, and job security).

Hypothesis 4: Wanting job security increases work effort, but having it lowers work effort.

Hypotheses 5: A belief that people get ahead through hard work increases work effort.

Hypotheses 6: Protestants, regular churchgoers, conservatives, and Republicans are stronger adherents of the PWE and work harder than others.

Hypotheses 7: Older people work harder than younger people.

Hypotheses 8: Marriage raises men's on-the-job work effort and lowers women's.

Hypotheses 9: Education, minority status, and part-time employment may affect work effort.

Hypotheses 10: Interesting work and opportunities to help others and to be useful to society increase work effort more for public-sector than for private-sector employees.

Hypotheses 11: High income and advancement opportunities increase work effort more for private-sector than for public-sector employees.

Hypotheses 12: Work effort should decrease between 1989 and 1998 because of a decline in the PWE.

FINDINGS

Contrary to popular stereotypes, public servants were more likely than private-sector workers to say, "I make a point of doing the best work I can, even if it sometimes does interfere with the rest of my life" (the 6.5 percentage point difference in Table 2 is significant at the .10 level). When government workers are restricted to those in public administration, the difference remains in the same direction but is only half as large and falls far short of statistical significance.

We found support for most of our hypotheses about sectoral differences in extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. Private-sector employees valued high income and advancement opportunities more—and interesting work, helping others, and being useful to society less—than public-sector employees generally, but both assigned quite similar importance to job security. Public administrators differed from their private-sector counterparts primarily in their stronger desire to help others and to be useful to society. Though most respondents in both sectors disagreed that their jobs offered high income and advancement opportunities, private-sector employees were more likely than those in government to agree. Government employees were more likely to agree that their jobs offered job security, interesting work, and opportunities to help others and to be useful to society. Patterns differed little when the focus was on public administrators, except that there was no difference in the reporting of having high incomes.

Markers of the PWE did not differ dramatically between the two sectors. Private-sector employees were more conservative than government workers but not significantly more likely to be Republican. Both sectors were equally Protestant, but government workers were significantly more likely to attend religious services weekly. Government workers were substantially better educated and older, on average, as well as more likely to be female and Black. Once teachers were dropped from government employees, the percentage of public administrators who were male rose, but public-private differences did not change much.¹⁴

TABLE 2: Mean Characteristics of Public- and Private-Sector Employees

	<i>Private Sector</i>	<i>Government</i>	<i>Difference^a</i>	<i>Public Administration</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Hard work (%)	57.4	64.0	6.5*	60.7	3.2
Current job features:					
High income	1.81	1.62	-0.19***	1.87	0.06
Advancement opportunities	2.02	1.67	-0.35***	1.61	-0.41**
Job security	2.80	3.07	0.26***	3.20	0.39**
Interesting work	2.84	3.08	0.24***	3.10	0.26*
Help others	2.91	3.37	0.46***	3.28	0.37*
Useful to society	2.77	3.38	0.61***	3.34	0.58***
Part-time (%)	15.6	16.2	0.6	9.8	-5.7
Desired job features:					
High income	3.02	2.86	-0.16***	2.89	-0.13
Advancement opportunities	3.29	3.15	-0.14***	3.23	-0.06
Job security	3.46	3.48	0.02	3.46	0.02
Interesting work	3.41	3.50	0.09**	3.38	-0.04
Help others	2.99	3.16	0.17***	3.21	0.23*
Useful to society	3.00	3.28	0.28***	3.23	0.23*
Individual characteristics:					
Protestant (%)	57.9	59.5	1.5	59.0	1.1
Attends services					
weekly (%)	27.3	35.6	8.2***	23.0	-4.4
Republican (%)	32.3	29.7	-2.5	27.9	-4.4
Level of conservatism	4.07	3.80	-0.27***	3.92	-0.15
Age (years)	38.8	42.9	4.1***	43.8	4.9**
Education (years)	13.5	15.2	1.7***	14.0	0.5
Male (%)	51.3	40.5	-10.8***	54.1	2.8
Married male (%)	29.1	26.6	-2.5	37.7	8.6
Married female (%)	24.6	30.2	5.6*	19.7	-4.9
Black (%)	9.7	14.4	4.7**	18.0	8.3*
Other minority (%)	5.1	3.6	-1.5	3.3	-1.8
Agree people get ahead					
by hard work (%)	45.1	43.2	-1.8	37.7	-7.4
Sample size	1196	222		61	

Source: General Social Survey data from 1989 and 1998.

a. Some differences may appear wrong because of rounding.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Predicting Work Effort

The logit model only partly meets our expectations. Table 3 reports the logit coefficients in the first column and translates them into expected percentage point impacts in the fourth.¹⁵ Job security was the only extrinsic motivator even marginally significantly related to work effort. Holding the other variables constant at their means, those who called job security “very important” were 4 percentage points more likely to report top work effort than those who only said it was “important.” (Though the coefficient on *having* job security was negative, as expected, it fell far short of statistical significance.) Respondents who agreed that their jobs offered interesting work and opportunities to help others were 7.1 and 4.5 percentage points more likely to report extra work effort than those who neither agreed nor disagreed. The presence of these job characteristics, not a desire for them, appeared to increase motivation.

TABLE 3: Logit Model: Determinants of Self-Reported Work Effort

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>z Statistic</i>	<i>Percent Change</i>
Government employee	.017	.173	0.10	0.4
Current job features:				
High income	-.028	.067	-0.41	-0.7
Advancement opportunities	-.024	.066	-0.36	-0.6
Job security	-.061	.065	-0.95	-1.5
Interesting work	.294	.075	3.92	7.1***
Help others	.188	.084	2.23	4.5**
Useful to society	.015	.078	0.19	0.4
Part-time	-.275	.162	-1.70	-6.7*
Desired job features:				
High income	-.037	.089	-0.42	-0.9
Advancement opportunities	.064	.104	0.61	1.5
Job security	.172	.096	1.79	4.2*
Interesting work	.126	.104	1.21	3.1
Help others	.044	.103	0.43	1.1
Useful to society	-.067	.100	-0.66	-1.6
Individual characteristics:				
Protestant	.355	.122	2.90	8.6***
Attends services weekly	-.344	.136	-2.53	-8.4***
Republican	.211	.134	1.58	5.0
Level of conservatism	-.007	.046	-0.16	-0.2
Age	.027	.005	5.00	0.7***
Education	.025	.023	1.05	0.6
Male	-.128	.173	-0.74	-3.1
Married male	.151	.170	0.89	3.6
Married female	-.280	.167	-1.68	-6.8*
Black	-.449	.199	-2.25	-11.1**
Other minority	-.602	.270	-2.23	-14.9**
Agrees people get ahead by hard work	-.122	.115	-1.06	-3.0
Year 1998	-.287	.119	-2.41	-6.9**
Sample size	1418			
Pseudo R^2	.0738			

Source: General Social Survey data from 1989 and 1998.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Protestants were 8.6 percentage points more likely than comparable non-Protestants to say they worked especially hard, but those who attended religious services weekly were 8.4 percentage points less likely to do so than others.¹⁶ Neither conservatism nor being a Republican had a significant impact on hard work (though being Republican came close). Oddly, those who said that people get ahead by working hard were no more likely to work hard than those who did not.

Older workers said that they worked harder: A 10-year rise in age increased the probability of reporting top work effort by 6.6 percentage points. Comparable respondents were 6.9 percentage points less likely to report maximum effort in 1998 than in 1989. In the sample, marriage appeared to raise men's work effort and lower women's, although only the latter was significant at the .05 level, even in a one-tailed test. Still, the estimated sex difference in the effect of marriage was about 10 percentage points. Whites were 11.1 and 14.9 percentage points more likely than comparable Blacks or other minorities, respectively, to report that

they sometimes allowed their work to interfere with their lives. Education appeared unrelated to work effort.

Controlling for all these variables completely eliminated the public-private difference in reported work effort: The government employment coefficient is trivial and far from significant. When government employees are split by type, teachers reported slightly higher work effort and public administrators and service employees reported slightly lower work effort than comparable private-sector employees, but all differences fall far short of statistical significance. Public servants were 6.5 percentage points more likely than private-sector employees to report that they worked so hard that it sometimes interfered with their lives (Table 2), but having more interesting work, better opportunities to help others, and higher average age almost entirely accounted for that difference. Public-sector workers reported significantly higher means on all three variables, and all three had significant positive impacts on reported work effort. In a logit model that included just government employment and these three variables (data not shown), public servants were an insignificant 1.0 percentage point more likely to report top work effort than private-sector employees of the same age with equally interesting work that offered similar opportunities to help others, down from 6.5 percentage points in Table 2.

Differing Motivational Effects in the Public Sector

Perry and Wise (1990) and other proponents of public service motivation argue that the motivational bases of public and private service are different—that businesses can motivate their workers with pay and advancement but that government can undercut its intrinsic motivators if it relies too heavily on these extrinsic motivators. We have seen that public-sector employees do value useful, helpful, interesting jobs more (and high-paying jobs with good advancement opportunities less) than those in the private sector. To test whether the effects of these motivators also vary across sectors, we multiplied the government employee dummy variable times each of the motivational items to create a set of interaction terms. This allowed us to identify public-private differences in the motivational effects of wanting or having each of the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. None of those differences even approached statistical significance, however, either individually or collectively.¹⁷ In both sectors, an interesting job that allows one to help others and a strong desire for job security appeared to increase the probability that one will put in extra effort, and the size of the effect appeared to be about the same in both sectors.

CONCLUSION

Despite the strong cultural stereotype that government workers are lazier than those in the private sector, nearly two thirds of the public servants in the GSS reported doing the best work they could, even if it sometimes interfered with the rest of their lives. They were more likely than those in the private sector to report working this hard despite having lower pay, fewer advancement opportunities, and greater job security. In both sectors, interesting work and jobs that offer opportunities to help others were more strongly related to work effort than were pay and promotion chances. This is good news for public agencies, because GSS respondents in government jobs were more likely than those in private-sector jobs to say their jobs offered interesting work and opportunities to help others and to be useful to society, but they were less likely to say their jobs offered high pay and good advancement prospects.

Wanting job security was the only extrinsic motivator that even approached statistical significance, and government jobs are widely recognized to be more secure than those in the private sector. These advantages of government jobs, plus the facts that public servants tend to be older than private-sector workers and that older employees report working harder, essentially explain the public-private difference in reported work effort.

Does this mean that governments should not use pay to motivate workers? Public employees value intrinsic motivators more than private-sector employees, but the rewards jobs offer seem to matter more than the rewards workers seek (job security is the exception). Interesting jobs that help others are likely to inspire both public- and private-sector workers, and pay and advancement opportunities appear to have no greater impact in the private than in the public sector. Governments have an advantage in providing interesting and useful work, but many private companies can make use of intrinsic motivation. The absence of sectoral differences in the motivational effects of high pay and advancement opportunities suggests either that (a) the link between performance and reward is not appreciably stronger in the private than in the public sector, (b) these extrinsic motivators have little impact on work effort in either sector, or (c) these variables are measured too crudely in this study to capture the size of their effects. To the extent that higher pay and pay for performance have positive effects on motivation, they should have as much effect in the public as in the private sector.

Finally, our findings support the widely held belief that the work ethic has declined in recent years—older employees reported working harder than younger ones, and comparable workers were less likely to report the highest level of work effort in 1998 than in 1989. The work ethic has not declined more rapidly in the public sector,¹⁸ but federal agencies may be doing more harm than good by offering early retirement and buyouts to their oldest employees. Government must make the most of the motivational rewards it has to offer to attract and retain the hardest working public servants.

NOTES

1. Because of the long-standing belief that job satisfaction leads to greater work effort, we included it in early runs on the data but found no significant relationship.

2. Bielby and Bielby (1988, p. 1048) found that work effort increases early in a career, peaks at about age 40, and declines at the end of a career.

3. Tang & Tzeng (1992), however, found that single people and part-time employees had stronger work ethic beliefs than married, full-time workers.

4. All questions can be found at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS/>.

5. In contrast, Brehm and Gates (1997) relied on federal surveys that most employees filled in on the job. As many probably feared that their supervisors would see their answers, they may have felt pressure to overreport not only their own work effort but that of their co-workers and subordinates.

6. The 1980 Census SIC codes are 900 through 932 (public administration); 842 through 860 (education); and 401, 412, 470, and 471 (public services).

7. The 2000 General Social Survey (GSS) did ask respondents whether they work for the government but did not ask most of the questions that interest us. In the 2000 data, our measure correctly identifies about two thirds of those who said they worked for the government, and about two thirds of those we identify as public employees said they worked for the government ($\gamma = .92$ for the two variables). Even the 2000 question probably includes error, however, as 40% of elementary and secondary teachers said that they did not work for the government.

We ran a logit model on the 2000 GSS data using self-identified government employment as the dependent variable and a whole array of occupational, industry, demographic, and location characteristics as independent variables. We applied the results of this model to the 1989 and 1998 data to generate expected probabilities that one was a government employee and substituted these probabilities for our simpler measure, but it did not mean-

ingfully change any of the findings. This increases our confidence that measurement error is not strongly biasing our findings.

8. In the sample, teachers appeared to work harder than other government workers, but the differences were not statistically significant.

9. Questions were identical in both years and were administered in the same way. To test whether the variables had different effects in 1989 and 1998, we repeated our final model adding a full set of interaction terms between all independent variables and the year-identifier dummy variable. None of the interaction terms was individually significant at the .05 level. An *F* test of the full set of interaction terms was not significant at even the .80 level. We also attempted a step-wise regression on the full set of variables, including the interaction terms, using a .15 significance level; only one interaction term entered the model to suggest that having job security had a negative impact on work effort in 1998 but not in 1989.

10. For both this and the following question, the GSS also asked about leisure time, independent work, and flexible working hours, but as these variables had no interesting theoretical implications and did not meaningfully alter the findings, we did not include them in our model.

11. Substituting dichotomized versions of these variables (coded 1 for responses above the median) did not meaningfully change the findings, however.

12. The exact question is: "Some people say that people get ahead by their own hard work; others say that lucky breaks or help from other people are more important. Which do you think is most important?" We coded those who said "both" as 0.

13. We also ran ordered logit analyses on the untransformed dependent variable. The results did not differ substantively but were harder to explain.

14. Public-private motivational differences may well be stronger among professionals and administrators than among lower level employees. When we restricted the sample to college graduates, public-private differences in current job features widened on pay, promotion, helping others, and being useful to society (though all but the first were also significant for those with less education). Similar changes also occurred in desired job features with the changes more extreme for the less educated (though public-sector employees continued to express a stronger desire to be useful to society). On the other hand, having a job where one is helpful to others had a significant impact on reported work effort among those without college diplomas but not among those with diplomas. This is partly because the former sample is twice as large as the latter, but the point estimate is also higher.

15. In the logit model, independent variables are assumed to have linear impacts on the log odds (the natural logarithm of the probability of saying yes divided by the probability of saying no) that a respondent reported especially high work effort. The effects on the probabilities are therefore nonlinear and depend on the values of all the independent variables. We calculated the impact of 0 to 1 increases for dummy variables and one-unit increases (from one half-unit below the mean to one half-unit above the mean) for interval-level variables, holding all other variables constant at their mean, using the *prchange* function in Stata (Long & Freese, 2001).

16. When we substituted a dummy variable coded 1 for both Protestants and Catholics for the Protestant dummy variable, as suggested by Beit-Hallahmi (1979) and Ray (1982), the Christian coefficient was not significant, but the negative effect of church attendance was essentially unchanged.

17. In Wald chi-square tests for the full group of interaction terms and for a variety of subsets (all the desire variables, all the presence variables, interesting work, and helping others only), we never came close to rejecting the null hypothesis that the work effects of all these intrinsic and extrinsic motivators are identical in the public and private sectors. Likewise, when we removed employees' valuations of the motivators from the model and just included perceptions of what rewards their jobs offered plus the relevant interaction terms, none of the interaction coefficients was significant at even the .30 level, and the group of interactions was not significant at the .90 level. In the one test suggesting a different result, we ran a step-wise model including all the independent variables. One interaction term remained in the model: *Wanting* an interesting job appeared to have a significant positive effect on government employees' work effort but not on that of private-sector workers. When that variable was added to the full model without any other interaction terms, however, it lost significance.

18. Indeed, in a separate analysis, reported work effort did not decline between 1989 and 1998 for government employees but dropped significantly in the private sector. The difference was not statistically significant, however.

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