How Can Governments Encourage Volunteering?

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Commentary

It is very welcome to find that what you know from practical experience is supported and illuminated by research, as the conclusions of Koen P. R. Bartels, Guido Cozzi, and Noemi Mantovan’s “‘The Big Society,’ Public Expenditure, and Volunteering” do from my perspective. Moreover, the article points to further research in an area in which there are large gaps in the empirically based understanding needed to develop policy and practice: what is it that governments can do to encourage individuals to volunteer?

Bartels, Cozzi, and Mantovan find that governments do need to support volunteering through public expenditure. They find against the arguments that public services “crowd out” voluntary activity and that “rolling back” the state encourages volunteering. Their study is prompted by the Big Society agenda in England and has significant application in policy development across the United Kingdom and other countries.

Centrally, they conclude that public spending is necessary to support volunteering but is not sufficient in itself because localized partnerships are needed to make volunteers feel that it is worthwhile to volunteer. In other words, as I read it, they say that it is not just the level of public expenditure that has an impact on volunteering (the “crowding out/in” argument), but also the allocation of public expenditure to the support of volunteering.

For those of us engaged in making the case to governments for local and national infrastructure, this could be manna from heaven.

But we should not get too excited about the conclusions. I do not find the evidence presented here as strong as I would want to slap the citation on the table when we next meet government policy makers.

The article is based on two empirical investigations:

- Econometric analyses of spending by governments and of characteristics of employed people as volunteers in the United Kingdom (applying the British Household Panel Survey) and across Europe (applying the European Values Study).
- Interviews with seven volunteers and 12 local public service professionals in Glasgow, Scotland.

The econometric analyses establish that volunteering depends positively on the size of government expenditure as well as personal characteristics. (The latter finding is largely, but not wholly, consistent between the two analyses and other research.)

The dilemma for the practitioner, however, is that although the inquiry is set out robustly, what it regards as “classical” assumptions for the methodology are uneasily simplistic for the policy agenda. I can cope with what the authors recognize is an “extremely optimistic” view and “pure situation” for the purposes of econometric inquiry, but the Big Society agenda was not so simple as to assume, in Bartels, Cozzi, and Mantovan’s words, that voluntary activity can be a “perfect substitute for the welfare state.” Analysis of the policy agenda ought to distinguish...
between volunteering and voluntary organizations. Government policy in England is at least as much about contracting out public services to voluntary organizations, working with paid staff, as it is about involving volunteers.

The article’s analysis of the Big Society agenda is even broader brush than its political protagonists had it, notably on the key relationship to public expenditure. The Big Society proposal arguably has been undermined by the current austerity in public expenditure, rather than predicated on it.

The assumptions for econometric inquiry about individuals’ reasons for volunteering are thought provoking, partly because they are not squarely founded on the body of knowledge familiar to me about how people come to volunteer (see Brodie et al. 2011; Low et al. 2007). Interestingly, one of the assumptions is that employed individuals choose volunteering in competition with employment, though it is at least as much the case that people choose to volunteer in competition with other leisure pursuits or domestic roles.

More exact analysis would also need to distinguish between different forms of volunteering, although in this respect, the Big Society agenda was also lacking. How people come to be engaged in community activism, for instance, is likely to be different from how people come to help out in a hospital.

Across the spectrum, volunteering can be variously prompted by and undermined by low levels of public expenditure. Traditionally, volunteering has been initiated as protest or as charity when public services are lacking, but public services also have played a major part in building national and local volunteering systems. Currently, we see how, in some places, people have come forward voluntarily to run libraries where services have been cut by local authorities, but also how some local volunteer centers cannot cope with demands from would-be volunteers because of the cuts in their funding.

On the street, of course, it is more complex than econometrics, and Bartels, Cozzi, and Mantovan move on to apply the framework to analyze 19 interviews with volunteers and public services staff working with volunteers. They focus on two of them, one with a local government worker in Glasgow and one with a community activist, and this at first looks like it produces an impasse or a paradox: the former works hard to involve and support volunteers, and the latter believes that effective voluntary activity requires that local government backs off.

But this is not so much a paradox as a helpful illumination of the real problems of understanding what it is that mediates between the macro level of public expenditure and the individual decision. It helps suggest some lines of inquiry within the big question of what governments can do to encourage individuals to volunteer.

For instance, what helps localized partnerships be effective in encouraging volunteering, both when they involve local government (as in the interview) and when they involve local voluntary sector infrastructure agencies, such as volunteer centers and councils for voluntary service? What can the partnerships do to strengthen community activists, and volunteers in many other roles? What programs of government expenditure support localized partnerships to be effective in supporting volunteers?

Thus, given concern about how to improve policy and practice in government support of volunteering, Bartels, Cozzi, and Mantovan are helpful, I find, not so much with conclusive answers as more questions.

Note
1. Although the Big Society formed part of the platform for the Conservative Party, led by David Cameron, for the U.K. general election in 2010, policy on volunteering issues is devolved to the administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, which have not adopted it.

References