



Service after Serving: Does Veterans' Preference Diminish the Quality of the US Federal Service?

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ABSTRACT

“Does preferentially hiring military veterans hurt US federal service quality? Using career progress to measure quality, past research finds that veterans who enter service in the four most common GS grades advance to higher grades more slowly than nonveterans entering in those same grades. This research, however, ignores variables that influence GS advancement. Enlisting all disclosed personnel data for white-collar federal employees from 1973 to 1997, I compare the GS advancement of veterans' preference recipients and nonrecipients who start federal service in the same grade, occupation, duty station, agency, and year. When controlling for these combined traits, I find that preference recipients hold grades higher than or statistically indistinguishable from those of nonrecipients in 15 of the first 24 years of their careers. When adding controls for an employee's gender, race, age, and education, I find that recipients hold grades higher than or statistically indistinguishable from those of nonrecipients in each of the first 24 years of their careers. These results question the claim that veterans' preference has diminished federal service quality.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- The surge in veterans transitioning to work in the federal sector has brought renewed attention to veterans' preference—a policy that prioritizes the hiring of job candidates who have served active military duty or whose family members received debilitating injuries or died on active duty.
- Previous studies have hypothesized that veterans' preference hurts service quality because it exempts veterans from full merit screening. This study examines whether individuals hired under veterans' preference hurt overall service quality.
- After comparing employees by occupation, agency, workplace, year, and grade, the study finds no difference in service quality between recipients hired under veterans' preference and nonrecipients. Furthermore, when statistical methods took into account the personal characteristics of employees, preference recipients reached higher grades than nonrecipients.
- Findings indicate that more-substantial departures from merit screening, due to veterans' preference, do not lead to lesser personnel quality. Furthermore, based on advances in grades, individuals hired under veterans' preference might perform at equal or greater quality.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

This study found that veterans and other individuals who were working for the federal sector between 1973 and 1997 performed at the same or better quality as individuals who were not hired under veterans' preference; thus, this finding verifies the age-old claim that veterans make skillful public employees. Veterans hired under veterans' preference proved to be quality workers and quickly moved up the ranks due to their performance. Furthermore, successful completion of military service might indicate employee quality: military service fosters leadership skills, enhances public service motivation, and exposes individuals to social diversity. Therefore, though veterans might not possess all the same qualifications as non-veterans, veterans offer talent and skills to the workforce that are comparable to non-veterans. Employers in the public and private sectors should consider hiring veterans based on skills obtained through service, even if veteran does not have a degree or certification in said field.

FOR POLICY

Policymakers might use these findings to develop less-arbitrary methods of accounting for successful military service when appraising job candidates. When veterans' preference was first devised and implemented, the aim was to reward military service. Given the findings, policymakers might design a policy that increases veterans' hiring chances in proportion to veterans' prospective contribution to federal service quality. Considering the success of veterans' preference in the federal sector, policymakers might encourage policies similar to veterans' preference at the state level. Implementing a veterans' preference at the state government level might offer more job opportunities for veterans to contribute to society. Furthermore, implementing veterans' preference in more sectors might lead to a more widespread understanding of veterans' preference and how successful completion of military service might be a valid indicator of merit, much like education or other forms of work experience.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study lays the foundation for the development of a more general theory of "service after serving" that emphasizes the value of prior military service on later public service as a civilian. Future researchers should explore how merit criteria can better account for other forms of public service when assessing job applicants. The study shows that confounding factors relating to employees' entry positions substantially influence grade attainment; thus, future studies should carefully account for these factors when making comparisons across groups of federal employees. A limitation of this study could be that not all the confounding factors that affect grade advancement were controlled. To remove any potential bias from this limitation, future researchers should control for all confounding factors that might affect grade advancement. To ensure a complete sample, this study was limited to data from 1973-1997 and only tracks the careers of employees who entered the federal service after 1974. Future researchers should apply this approach to more recent data, as it becomes available, to determine if career patterns in the federal service have changed significantly, and if the findings from this study apply to the current federal workforce. The study also uses grade attainment as a measure of quality, but this measure may be problematic if grade progress results from factors orthogonal to quality, such as managerial biases.

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