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Bringing the State Back In to Civic Engagement: Policy Feedback Effects of the G.I. Bill for World War II Veterans

AUTHORS: Suzanne Mettler, Ph.D.
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ABSTRACT

“American civic engagement soared in the mid-twentieth century, succeeding an era in which national government had become more involved in citizens’ lives than ever before. I examine the effects of the G.I. Bill’s educational provisions for veterans’ subsequent memberships in civic organizations and political activity. I consider theoretical arguments about how public social programs might affect civic involvement and advance a policy feedback approach that assesses both resource and interpretive effects of policy design. Newly collected survey and interview data permit the examination of several hypotheses. The analysis reveals that the G.I. Bill produced increased levels of participation—by more fully incorporating citizens, especially those from less privileged backgrounds, through enhancement of their civic capacity and predisposition for involvement. The theoretical framework offered here can be used to evaluate how other public programs affect citizens’ participation in public life.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Fifty-one percent of all World War II returning veterans took advantage of the G.I. Bill of 1944. This resulted in 7.8 million veterans either attending college or gaining vocational training under the G.I. Bill. Given the large percent of veterans who received a formal education or training through the G.I. Bill, this study examines how the G.I. Bill, a public program, influenced civic participation and political activity. Though this study examines World War II veterans, the implications for civic engagement and the theoretical framework are still applicable to post 9/11 veterans.
- Using the theoretical framework that resources, such as education, increase one’s civic capacity and interest in civic engagement, Mettler found in her mixed methods study that there is a positive association between the use of G.I. Bill benefits and participation in civic activities and organizations.
- Though not all veterans expressed a desire to give back after improving themselves through the G.I. Bill, Mettler found that veterans who utilized their G.I. Bill benefits were more likely to be civically and politically engaged. Thus, social integration through educational attainment might facilitate community and civic engagement among veterans.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Mettler found that the G.I. Bill of 1944, a public service program, promoted involvement in civic activities. Given this finding, public service programs for veterans should continue encouraging their veterans to be civically engaged. Since the G.I. Bill of 1944, more institutions of higher education have student veteran centers and other veterans support services. To better acclimate themselves with the campus and other students, student veterans should continue frequenting campus veteran's centers and services. Mettler postulates that a reason for more civic engagement in veterans who utilized their G.I. Bill might be a result of more interactions with civilians and more opportunities to participate in and join civic organizations. Both student veterans and non-student veterans should attempt to engage in community-wide activities and organizations. In addition to contributing to society, such engagement could assist in the reintegration process for recently returned veterans. Civilian students should consider inviting student veterans on their campus to civic and political activities. Institutions of higher education should continue reducing the difficulty associated with using one's G.I. Bill benefits.

FOR POLICY

Since the G.I. Bill of 1944, the VA and legislatures have made significant improvements to reduce the paperwork involved with accessing one's G.I. Bill benefits. However, since even a mild negative interaction with bureaucracy could hinder one's academic and career success, the VA and legislatures might continue working to reduce the bureaucracy associated with use of G.I. Bill benefits. The VA might continue providing information on how to determine how many benefits one has and how benefits can be used. The VA might continue encouraging veterans to actively participate in civic activities and organizations to assist with their reintegration into civilian society.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Using the policy feedback approach, Mettler found that the attainment of education and training through the G.I. Bill educational benefits increased social capital and networks for many veterans and their families. Given this finding, future researchers should continue studying how public programs, such as the G.I. Bill, enhance civic engagement. Mettler found that the G.I. Bill of 1944 promoted civic engagement among groups that were somewhat less advantaged, and fostered civic participation in already educated veterans. This study should be replicated with post 9/11 veterans to further learn how the current G.I. Bill is affecting civic engagement. Since nearly two-thirds of World War II veterans were deceased when the survey was conducted in 1998, the representativeness of this sample might be limited. Since studies have found that better education is associated with better health, and hence a longer life expectancy, continued research is needed on the health of post 9/11 veterans and how their educational attainment is affecting their life expectancy. Given that the survey used in this study was conducted in 1998, several decades after the veterans used their G.I. Bill benefits, the WW II veterans may have had difficulty recalling certain details or events. However, this limitation might have benefited the study since the events or activities the veterans recalled might have been more salient to the individual, and thus have had a greater impact on the individual. Additionally, the use of the mail survey format might have provided an opportunity for the veterans to accurately recall answers to certain questions, since multiple opportunities to answer a question has been shown to stimulate memory. Given that some post 9/11 veterans might have used their benefits more than 10 years ago, researchers studying post 9/11 veterans and the G.I. Bill should consider how they will approach recall bias.

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