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The Impact of Veterans' Preference on the Composition and Quality of the Federal Civil Service

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Although veterans' preference provides significant benefits for veterans, it also creates obstacles for diversity in the federal service as the veteran population has traditionally been disproportionately male, white, native born and heterosexual.
- Compared to non-veterans, veterans are far more likely to have federal jobs, but only slightly more likely to have state and local government jobs. While 10.5% of veterans and 2.9% of non-veterans held federal government positions, 14.6% of veterans and 14.2% of non-veterans work in state and local government.
- Having veteran status makes more of a difference for women than men, with female veterans being 5.5 times as likely to have federal jobs, and male veterans being 3.8 times as likely, compared to non-veterans. Veterans' preference also leads to a less-educated federal civil service, as over half of non-veteran hires, compared to one-third of veteran hires, had completed college. Non-veterans were also twice as likely to have graduate degrees, compared to veteran hires.

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ABSTRACT:

“Government preference for military veterans in hiring, a means to honor them for their service and sacrifices, potentially conflicts with other values of the public service, including its diversity and quality. Census data for 1990, 2000, and 2006–2009 show that veterans are at least three times as likely to hold federal jobs as, but only 10% more likely to hold state and local government jobs than, comparable individuals without military service. Veterans' preference has substantially increased the percentage of federal employees who are men and has probably decreased the percentages who are Asians, gay men, and immigrants, but its effects on the composition of state and local governments are small. Federal personnel data for the past decade show that veteran new hires are older and less educated than nonveteran new hires, and that they do not advance as far in the first 15 years of their careers as nonveterans hired into the same grades at the same time, suggesting that veterans' preference may be lowering the performance of the federal civil service.”

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Veterans' preference has a significant impact on hiring in the federal civil service, with military service members being almost four times as likely to obtain federal jobs compared to Americans who have not served in the military. This higher probability of employment for those who have served in the military holds across demographic categories, including gender, race, sexual orientation and education level. If veterans' preference was not considered in the federal hiring process, at least 16% of federal employees would be different people. As a result, more women, minorities and members of the gay and lesbian community would be included in the population of federal employees. Veterans' preference has overwhelmingly benefited men, as they still outnumber women in the U.S. military at a rate of six to one. If gender, race/ethnicity, age, education and sexual orientation impacted the chance of federal employment for the general population the way these factors affect non-veterans, and veterans status were not a factor, federal jobs would have been almost equally occupied by men and women since 1990. In addition, the number of Hispanics, Asians and gay men in federal service employment would have been 20% higher.

FOR POLICY

Although we are unlikely to see any changes in veterans' preference in the near future, the results of this study indicate that preference is a powerful tool that does not come without costs. Veterans' preference in federal hiring has led to older, less-educated individuals being hired, and veteran new hires appear, on average, to have lower potential than non-veterans hired into the same entry grades. Non-veterans tend to move ahead of veteran hires within the first two years, and remain in higher grades over the first 15 years of the career, compared to veteran hires. Although state governments have veterans' preference programs that are similar to those at the federal level, veterans are only slightly more likely to work for state governments than non-veterans. However, this pattern does not hold in all states.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the future, researchers should increase analyses focusing on how veterans' preference impacts women and minorities, further exploring whether or not veterans' preference makes a significant difference in their career outcomes. Researchers can also replicate the current study using more recent data to examine employment trends over time and changes in the federal service by education level. Future studies should investigate the differences in job performance by education level and experience to determine the benefits of more educated or more experienced employees in the federal workforce.

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