



Feeling the pressure: Attitudes about volunteering and their effect on civic and political behaviors



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving nature of volunteering among American youth, ages 12 to 17, focusing on emergent pressures to volunteer, as required by high schools or to improve one's employment or education prospects after graduation. Using survey data ($N = 736$, mean age = 14.78, 75.1% white, 49.1% female), it finds these pressures are prevalent, related to a desire to volunteer, and both of these motivations are positively associated with volunteering. It further concludes that volunteering supplements, rather than replaces or subsumes both online and offline political behaviors among youth. This has important implications for how we understand the role of volunteering in the youngest American age cohorts, and practical implications for educators and civic proponents in terms of determining what actually increases volunteering activity.

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Popular news media has recently focused in on the increasingly complicated process of applying for college (see for example, [Strauss, 2016](#); [Wong, 2016](#)). For high-achieving students seeking admission to ultra-selective universities (though of course it is worth noting that this is a significant minority of students, see [Casselmann, 2016](#)), the application process has become extremely competitive. Whereas in the past admission was based mainly on standardized tests (SAT and ACT), high school grade point average, and perhaps family name or who one knew at the institution, in recent decades it has become much more complicated. Students are now expected to write multiple lengthy essays or personal statements, and they are judged not just on academics, but particularly on extracurricular activities. High performing students are led to believe they have to succeed not just in school, but outside of it. In an effort to codify this, some schools now require participation in extracurricular activities, including volunteering.

While the literature on youth volunteering is vast (see for example, [Amna, 2012](#); [Dalton, 2008](#); [Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998](#); [Wilson, 2000](#); [Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006](#)), it has yet to account for this new dimension. On the one hand, requiring students to volunteer (or coercing them to do so through college admissions or job application processes) might encourage them to continue to engage in such behaviors, or engage in them more frequently ([Giles & Eyler, 1994](#); [Sobus, 1995](#)). On the other hand, youth rarely react positively to being forced to do something, which may decrease their willingness or eagerness to volunteer more broadly ([Batson & Powell, 2003](#)). And it is unclear how either of these outcomes might relate more broadly to civic behaviors outside of volunteering, such as political participation ([Marzana, Marta, & Pozzi, 2012](#)). Therefore this study is motivated by a trio of related questions. First, how does volunteering change when it is motivated not just by altruism, but also by opportunism or even coercion? Second, what are the demographic

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characteristics of those adolescents who feel more or less pressure to volunteer? And finally, how is volunteering now associated with other civic behaviors, like online and offline political participation?

1. Literature review and expectations

Volunteering is defined as “any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or cause” (Wilson, 2000, p. 215), and is part of a larger cluster of “helping” or civically oriented behaviors in which people may engage. Taking part in civic behaviors has been shown to be habitual (Astin, 1993; Damico, Damico, & Conway, 1998; Gerber, Green, & Shachar, 2003), increasing the importance of studying this subject among young people, as patterns they develop early on may persist throughout their lifetime, and has positive implications for future community involvement as well as intrinsic work values (Johnson et al., 1998). In general, volunteering among adolescents has increased over the past three decades (Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Osgood, & Briddell, 2010).

The shift in pressure to volunteer has been well documented. Recent literature has noted the pressure felt by students to “pad one’s resume” with multiple volunteer experiences (Friedland & Morimoto, 2005; Morimoto & Friedland, 2013). However, the exact extent to which this is a problem is unclear. Existing research has utilized qualitative methods, which provide a rich understanding of the problem, but do not shed light on the extent to which it is felt across broad swaths of the United States (Morimoto & Friedland, 2013). Moreover, most of this research focuses on the feeling that one has to do volunteer work in order to get into college. This research goes beyond that question to further consider how often volunteering is actually codified as a requirement for high school graduation. Research on service learning suggests it is increasingly so (Henderson, Brown, Pancer, & Ellis-Hale, 2007; Kraft, 1996; Skinner & Chapman, 1999), but little research can comment on how this requirement is distributed among today’s youth.

Therefore, there is not enough work yet in this area to have specific expectations for how often students feel this type of forced volunteerism pressure, and how that pressure coincides with more traditional feelings about volunteering because it aligns with morals or values of altruism and helping one another. But it is extremely important to consider these issues descriptively—in order to understand the motivations felt for volunteering among today’s youth—before delving into more complicated relationships between these motivations and other related concepts. Therefore the first set of research questions asks exactly that:

To what extent do youth today indicate they think it is important to volunteer in order to get into college? (RQ1)

To what extent are youth today required to volunteer as part of their high school curriculum? (RQ2)

To what extent do youth today feel they gain fulfillment from volunteering? (RQ3)

And finally, *To what extent do these elements of forced or coerced voluntarism and chosen or preferred voluntarism align?* (RQ4)

Beyond these questions, it is equally important to consider which different types of students feel different types of volunteering motivations. While there is extensive research on who chooses to volunteer (Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012; Dalton, 2008; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Zukin et al., 2006), only sparse research exists to motivate expectations in terms of who is most likely to feel these desires and pressures to volunteer. Research often breaks these motivations down into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. People may be motivated to volunteer because it is naturally interesting or satisfying to them (intrinsic) (van Goethem et al., 2012), or they may do so because they see themselves achieving some related outcome from volunteering (extrinsic) (Finkelstien, 2009). While the motivations considered in this study roughly align with intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, they have not been precisely measured in previous research, increasing the uncertainty around how these motivations will translate to the youth population. Volunteering itself is distributed unequally among different demographic groups, with whites and females more likely than their peers to volunteer (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003; Kelly, 2009). It is unclear, however, how these patterns translate to motivations to volunteer. I therefore pose an additional pair of research questions reflecting this uncertainty:

What demographic characteristics are associated with feelings of a desire to volunteer? (RQ5)

What demographic characteristics are associated with feelings of pressure to volunteer? (RQ6)

A related question asks how these two elements—feeling fulfilled by volunteering versus feeling coerced or pressured into volunteering—affect the extent to which a young person actually does engage in volunteering.

On the one hand, a wealth of literature suggests that the more one feels fulfilled by volunteering, the more one does so (Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996; Wilson, 2000), though the relationship between these types of values, identity, and volunteering is sometimes complicated (Crocetti et al., 2012; van Goethem et al., 2012; Wilson, 2000). More broadly, the theory of reasoned action suggests that attitudes lead to behavioral intentions and actual behaviors (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Applying that to the topic at hand suggests that altruistic attitudes about volunteering should lead to increased volunteering. For this reason, I would expect that *those who are highest in terms of fulfillment by volunteering would be more likely to volunteer than those who are lower on that measure (H1)*.

It is less clear whether this relationship should hold for pressured volunteering. On the one hand, literature shows that this is an effective motivation for volunteering—students perceive the need to volunteer for college admission reasons, and do so

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