DEFINING THE PUBLIC SECTOR AND ITS OPPORTUNITIES

Undoubtedly, you have heard the term the *public sector*, but you may not have a clear sense of what that term implies, let alone the career possibilities it holds. Don't worry, you're not alone. By contrast, the *private sector* often seems much clearer as it refers to the companies that make the stuff we buy, like cell phones, or that provide the services we consume, like movie-streaming services. And these private sector companies make huge profits, or at least strive to do that. But what is it that the public sector actually does, and what kinds of meaningful career opportunities does it offer? These questions are the foundation of this chapter, so we will

- define the public sector,

- discuss the range of career options available in the public sector, and

- explore public perceptions and attitudes about the public sector and the people who work in it.

This last objective is particularly important because there are a lot of perceptions about the public sector that would likely impact anyone's consideration of a career; therefore, it is essential to acknowledge and understand those attitudes and where they come from. By the end of this chapter, you should have a good understanding of the public sector and the wide variety of job opportunities you could pursue.

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC SECTOR?

The *public sector* is a term that refers to the organizations that provide public goods and services, ranging from the military and law enforcement, to roads and bridges, to environmental protection and food safety. These are goods and services that are intended for the general public, not necessarily for any one person's individual

welfare. You may be looking at this book as part of a public policy or a public administration course and many of the topics in that course are in the purview of the public sector. The organizations engaged in these activities might be government entities or non profit organizations. These organizations might be federal, state, or local government agencies; they might be a huge non profit organization that has locations all over the country, or perhaps even the world; or they might be a small non profit organization serving the needs of your community. Public sector organizations are as varied and diverse as their private sector counterparts.

Perhaps you are interested in environmental issues and sustainability, so let's think about the range of public sector organizations whose missions are focused in that area. In terms of government agencies, there is the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency based in Washington, D.C., and has field offices all over the United States, then each state has a state-level environmental agency (as does the District of Columbia), such as the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency. The vast majority of those state agencies have a centralized headquarters location, as well as field offices throughout the state. Then in some states, there are local or regional government agencies that work on environmental issues, too, such as the Regional Air Pollution Control Agency (RAPCA), based in Dayton, Ohio, or the Miami Conservancy District, also in Dayton. If you're keeping a tally, there's already a lot of government agencies involved, but that doesn't account for the non profit organizations, including the Sierra Club or the Ocean Conservancy, which are major, national organizations (and many have local or regional chapters or offices) and smaller, more narrowly focused organizations, such as Appalachian Voices or the Chesapeake Climate Action Network. The point is that within even one specific policy area, the number of public organizations involved in efforts to improve the health of the environment and promote sustainability number in the hundreds, if not thousands, of organizations that have people who work for them to carry out their missions.

The missions and the tasks of organizations in the public sector are quite a bit different than those of private sector organizations. Just think about the example organizations already mentioned in this chapter. Apple makes a range of consumer electronics, from iPhones to Apple Watches, and there are many movie-streaming services, from Amazon Prime to Netflix, that afford us the opportunity to watch movies at any time on our own electronic devices. Now, think about the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Its mission is to protect human health and the environment. The Chesapeake Climate Action Network is a regional organization based in Maryland that strives to fight climate change. The Federal Aviation Administration is essential in managing the airspace above us for planes to take us from one place to another.

Public and private sector organizations vary in what they do. The work involved in developing the iPhone, in terms of both the physical construction as well as the software that makes it indispensable to many of us, undoubtedly took lots of time, money, and ingenuity, but the tasks before private sector organizations

are very different than those of public sector organizations. Government and non profit organizations strive to serve the public by advancing efforts around reducing environmental harms or making sure that the planes do not collide midair. It is reasonable to stipulate that these are very different kinds of organizational tasks.

Although there are many similarities between public and private organizations, as they are comprised of people trying to achieve certain goals and objectives, the differences between them are far more significant. As we have already seen, the missions of public organizations are far different from those of private organizations first and foremost. Second, authority structures also differ. In the case of Apple, where does it derive power and authority? From Apple stockholders and its customers. Apple can charge $1,000 for its iPhone X because its customers are willing to pay for it (and line up at all hours of the day to be one of the first proud new owners of the device!), and people clamor to buy Apple stock. And these forces help keep Tim Cook as the company's chief executive officer. What about the United States Postal Service (USPS)? The head of the USPS is the postmaster general (the first of whom was Benjamin Franklin) and is appointed by the Board of Governors of the USPS (akin to a board of directors), but those governors are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. At best, the USPS customers have an indirect effect on the agency's leadership. The USPS relies on Congress for its budget. To increase the cost of mailing a letter, the USPS has to navigate the administrative process to propose and approve a rate increase. And while the USPS is a rarity in that it has private sector counterparts (think UPS or FedEx), most government agencies do not have competition (after all, what other organization controls air traffic?). But the USPS is required, by law, to serve every address in the United States, something none of its competitors do (there are many rural addresses that private sector companies won't serve because it is not cost-effective for them to do so).

Third, the work of public organizations, such as the USPS, also exists in a broader political landscape, complete with sensitivity to the next election cycle and what changes in party control might mean for the organization. Politicians play a role in the senior leadership of these organizations as well as appropriating funds for the organizations to pursue their missions. Non profit organizations are also sensitive to politics since many organizations rely on government grants to carry out some of the work, or may partner with government agencies to provide services for citizens. And finally, public organizations are far more likely to be involved in the lives of citizens, whether citizens like it or not. After all, if you are not a fan of the iPhone or the Apple OS, then you would probably buy an Android phone, and avoid all things Apple. Whether you realize it or not, the USPS is instrumental in your life, along with many other public organizations. You may not even realize the work the Ocean Conservancy does to educate people and the food service industry about sustainable fishing practices when you eat fish tacos, for example. So, given the differences in tasks, authority, political context, and involvement in daily lives, the work of public organizations varies quite a bit from private sector organizations.

Application Activity

With this understanding of the public sector and the range of organizations that comprise it, you are now in a position to think about the kinds of public organizations you might be interested in. In the first activity designed to help you figure out if the public sector may be right for you, make a list of three areas of activity that the public sector engages in that you find interesting. For example, these might be growing concerns over food deserts, particularly in urban areas, or local government efforts to promote sustainability, or programs to provide young people with after-school support. Then, do some Internet searching and find a few specific organizations near you that engage in these kinds of activities. Have a look at these organizations' websites and get a sense of their size, their mission, and their efforts. You may very well be surprised about the scope of these organizations' work!

PERCEPTIONS AND MYTHS ABOUT THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Now that you have given some thought to the various types of public sector organizations and the range of activities they engage in, you might find some of these entities potentially appealing to you professionally. But, if you're like most people, there is a nagging voice in the back of your head saying, sure, these may be great missions, but who wants to work in the public sector. After all, if you were to stop people outside your favorite coffee or sandwich shop and ask them what their perceptions about the public sector were, you would probably get responses like "it's full of lazy and incompetent people," or "people who can get a real job do, and those who can't work for the government," or "it's full of waste, fraud, and abuse," or "the employees are overpaid and get cushy benefits and job security." These myths about government, and even the non profit sector, are pervasive. Indeed, Americans have a love-hate relationship with government and the public sector. On the one hand, we expect much of the government, from mail delivery to airport safety to educating young people. But, on the other hand, we loathe government involvement in our lives, we don't want to be inconvenienced, and we definitely don't want to pay more in taxes than is absolutely necessary.

These conflicted attitudes are nothing new. American history reminds us how much colonists and the nation's first citizens distrusted the British monarchy, and we know what colonists thought of taxes. While disdain for the public sector is commonplace in the United States, there have been fluctuations over time. Believe it or not, there was a time in America's history when working in the public sector was thought of as noble and prestigious—something parents wanted for their sons (this

was during the early years of the nation, and it was typically only men who worked outside of their home).

But since the latter part of the 20th century through today, we see downward trends in Americans' attitudes about government (with the notable exception of the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11). Public trust in the federal government continues to hover at near all-time lows, with only 18 percent of Americans saying they can trust government to do what is right (Pew Research Center 2017). These negative attitudes about the public sector might help explain that while 94 percent of millennials want to use their skills to be of service and benefit a social cause, only 7 percent of the federal government workforce is under the age of 30 (Curry 2017).

Application Activity

For our next Application Activity, take a minute and write down your views and perceptions of the public sector. Are your perceptions positive or negative? Next, are you intrigued by the possibility of working in the public sector? Why or why not? Write down your responses. Third, review your perceptions about the public sector. Where do you think these attitudes came from? Were they informed by your friends and family? Direct experiences with the public sector? The news media? Be honest with yourself; you may not even be able to pinpoint where these attitudes come from—most of us probably cannot (your author included!). Now, hold on to these reflections as we explore the origins of these perceptions and attitudes.

PUBLIC SECTOR MISCONCEPTIONS

It may seem that unpacking public sector misconceptions may not be as productive as telling you how to get an internship or mapping out career paths for you. Don't worry, we will get to those topics. But before we do, we have to think about the reasons we may be skeptical of the public sector and why those people who are important in our lives may be even more concerned. In the spirit of honesty, it is important to note that most of us actually have positive experiences with the public sector even though we hold the entire sector with little regard (c.f. Charles Goodsell). After all, when was the last time you put something in the mail and worried about it getting to its destination? Or have you ever been concerned that when the trash is put on the curb that it wasn't going to be picked up by your local municipality?

The first misconception that we have to confront in understanding Americans' views of the public sector is that most of us fail to differentiate between politicians and civil servants. And since we generally don't distinguish between them, our disdain for one effects our views of the other. Politicians are those individuals who are

elected to hold governmental office, such as the president, members of Congress, governors, state legislators, mayors, county commissioners, and so forth. They get their jobs from the voters, and they have to win elections to keep their jobs. Civil servants, on the other hand, are the unelected individuals who work for government agencies or non profit organizations who carry out the decisions of our elected leaders. They are the ones who provide us public goods and services. These individuals get and retain their jobs because they have demonstrated competence in the area they work in. For example, many of the individuals who work in environmental agencies have training and degrees in environmental and earth sciences, engineering, or even environmental economics. By contrast, members of Congress write environmental legislation and many—or most—do not have this kind of training. Many members have law degrees.

The numbers of the civil servant workforce might astound you. In the United States, there is the federal government, 50 state governments, and just over 89,000 local governments (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). That's a lot of government entities! According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), there are 2.8 million federal government civil servants, and this figure does not include members of the military. In state and local government agencies, there are another 14.5 million civil servants (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). In the more than 1.4 million non profit organizations in the United States, there are approximately 14.4 million employees (McKeever and Gaddy 2016). With these numbers, you are far more likely to know, and even have family members who are, civil servants than you are to know a politician.

The distinction between politicians and civil servants is important to understanding our perceptions because most Americans do not like (and that's probably putting it mildly) politicians. So when we think about government, our attitudes about politicians are usually what we think of rather than separating views of politicians from views of civil servants. Pollsters will routinely ask Americans about their views of Democrats and Republicans and the leadership of various elected bodies. And the queries are typically around government broadly, reinforcing the collapsing of the two categories.

Another misconception might be that the people who are civil servants are lazy or incompetent or corrupt. Again, a part of this myth is the conflating of politicians and civil servants—but this is not the place to unpack the realities of elected leaders as we are focused on the rest of the public sector. Who really are civil servants? As indicated above, chances are good that you know some. In my own family, there is a civil servant who works for the U.S. Department of Defense, a public school teacher, a local government sanitation employee, and a USPS employee. Other civil servants I know well range from local government employees, to law enforcement officers, to first responders. And without a doubt, all of these people I know are competent and committed individuals who have chosen careers in the public sector over the private sector because they want to be of service, not because they are looking for a cushy, well-paying job. Despite popular opinion, most government salaries lag behind those of private sector employees (Yoder 2018). And unlike the

demographics of politicians, the demographics of civil servants look more like the average American (Goodsell 2015, 81-119). According to the OPM, 57 percent of federal civil servants are men, 43 percent are women. About 37 percent of them identify with a minority ethnic group and 52 percent of them hold a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. OPM 2017).

After confronting misconceptions about the public sector and those individuals who work in it, we also need to investigate what our actual experiences with the public sector are and separate out our views of politics and politicians. Charles Goodsell (2015) began unpacking questions about the attitudes we have about government and comparing them to our actual experiences decades ago. In his most recent updates to this research in *The New Case for Bureaucracy*, he found that despite holding negative views of government, most Americans have positive interactions and experiences with government (41-77). Relying on data from a variety of surveys and interviews with individuals, Goodsell concludes that the actual experiences we have with the public sector are overwhelmingly positive, from the local parks we visit to the snowplowing in the winter to garbage collection and mail delivery.

In light of these discussions, you are probably wondering why there is such a disconnect between our perceptions of the public sector and our actual experiences with it. Political socialization provides a substantial part of the answer to this question. As you might remember, political socialization is the process by which we come to have the beliefs we do about government and its role in society. We are not born with these views or attitudes, rather we learn them over time. Various influences contribute to our socialization, including our family and friends, education, personal experiences, religious affiliations, news media, and popular culture. Consider this last influence: popular culture. Our history as a nation reveals a deep disdain for centralized authority and government; just think about our origin stories associated with breaking free of the tyrannical British government and the colonists' rebellion over taxes. We have been distrustful of government from the beginning. And now, think about popular music, television programs, and even movies. Can you think of any movies or television shows in which the government is portrayed particularly well? Do you know of any musicians who write songs about how great it is to put a present in the mail to someone and not worry about it getting there?

Let's explore one aspect of popular culture a bit more to illustrate more deeply one of the various influences on political socialization. In the movies, government broadly is portrayed negatively (Pautz 2018). The 2016 Disney film *Zootopia* is about a city of anthropomorphic animals in which a rookie bunny cop and a con artist fox have to work together to uncover a conspiracy. And in the movie, there is a bureau of motor vehicles agent that is literally played by a sloth. One would be hard pressed to be any clearer about sending a message about civil servants who work in the BMV than a literal sloth portraying the character. By contrast, when renewing my driver's license recently, I went to my local motor vehicles office that had a pleasant enough waiting area where no one had to stand in line since we all took a number and could have a seat wherever we wanted while we waited. When it was my turn, the clerk was more than efficient, and was slowed down only while waiting for me to pay

my renewal fee. In all honesty, I have probably waited longer for my coffee at my local Starbucks. Movies matter in their portrayals of government and their potential effects on our political socialization for a number of reasons. First, when we watch movies, we're typically doing it to be entertained (unless you're in my film and politics course!), so we let our guard down and we aren't critically evaluating the images we see. This leaves us open to influence. Second, watching movies, particularly in the cinema, immerses our senses. It is one of the few times that the distractions of our small screens are set aside while we watch a big screen. This is potentially very powerful in its ability to influence us. Additionally, young people—those under 25—are the most likely to watch movies, and they are in their most formative years for their political socialization. In other words, the images that young people see may be even more powerful and influential.

All of these influences that are a part of our political socialization are neither good nor bad; they are simply influences. They are discussed here because understanding them helps us figure out where our attitudes about government—and more importantly for our purposes—the public sector come from. Just as it is essential to think about civil servants as distinct from politicians when we talk about government, it is important to understand our attitudes about government and their origins when we consider pursuing a career in the public sector as they may be influencing whether or not we think the public sector might be a meaningful and viable career path. If we understand how we perceive the public sector, we may be able to separate our views based on experiences and our views based on other influences and this may open us to the possibilities in the public sector.

Application Activity

The Application Activity at the end of the last section asked you to identify your attitudes and perceptions of the public sector. In the final activity for this chapter, go back to your notes from that effort, and in light of what you have learned in this section, let's see if we can pinpoint some of their origins. Write down the most recent experiences you had with the public sector. Were those experiences mailing a package at the Post Office? Interacting with a law enforcement officer? Attending a local government meeting? Now think about some of the images of the public sector we are bombarded with in our culture; make a list of three examples of incompetence in the public sector from entertainment or news media. Now make a list of three examples of competence in the public sector from the media. Which list was easier to come up with? Why do you think that list was easier than the other? This exercise will help further your understanding of your political socialization and the influences that are particularly strong. Doing so might enable you to think about a public sector career in a new light and remove (or at least push to the side) common perceptions about the ineptitude of the public sector to allow you to see the possibilities.

CHAPTER WRAP-UP

Exploring a career path in the public sector requires us to understand the public sector, what it entails, and to confront some perceptions about it. In this chapter, we have discussed the vastness of the public sector in the United States, delineated the work of civil servants from the work of politicians, and considered where some of the erroneous perceptions we often have about the public sector come from. This establishes the foundation upon which we can discuss strategies for figuring out if a public sector career path is right for you. In the next chapter, we explore how your college courses can help you further this investigation.

ACTION ITEMS

After reading this chapter, you should have (1) identified some areas of public sector activities that interest you and (2) considered your own views and perceptions of the public sector and where those beliefs might have come from. With these interests articulated, find three public sector organizations that are interesting to you. Look at their websites and social media presence. For each of the three, identify the mission of the organization, explore the backgrounds and job descriptions of the people who work there, and find out from their website or by getting in touch with their human resources department or contact if they offer internship positions and what the requirements are for those positions.

PUBLIC SECTOR PROFILE

Robin J. Bachman, Chief, Policy Coordination Office, and Chief Privacy Officer, U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce[1]

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1. **What is your current job and how did your studies prepare you for this role? How does that job align with what you thought you'd be doing when you were in college?**

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[1] Disclaimer: The replies to these questions are Ms. Bachman's own and do not necessarily represent the views of her agency. She contributed to this Q and A in her personal capacity.

I have fond memories of my undergrad studies. I am a Miami University alumna. My college years helped me pick my path. I started school in the business program and after a few classes realized that I needed to keep exploring other fields of study because I would be a truly unhappy accountant. Because of the strong liberal arts offerings at Miami of Ohio, I was able to find a better fit for me, government and non profit work.

My job aligns very well with my major and graduate work. However, the question made me smile: I envy those who can image long time horizons; after I realized I did not want to be an accountant, I took all four years of school to figure out what job I might be able to land upon completion of my undergraduate degree. And with the economy in recession when I graduated, I felt very fortunate when I was hired three months after graduation.

2. **What were some of the classes that really stood out to you in school that were influential in finding your career path?**

My undergraduate classes that were smaller, discussion-based, encouraged critical thinking, and included a strong writing component are the more memorable ones for me. For instance, Women in Politics was an important class because it introduced me to national leaders that I did not know and opened my eyes to the work of America's women trailblazers. I took a First Amendment and Free Speech class that taught me about the courts and how to dig into case law. My American Studies courses were some of my favorite because of their interdisciplinary approach to subjects. In grad school, one of my best classes was Normative Foundations. I also valued being able to enhance my educational experience by taking classes in other departments. To this day I still quote performance = motivation x ability from my Industrial and Organizational Psychology class, and from Communication's Public Relations Theory and Practice, I often probe at work if we are establishing a two-way symmetrical relationship with our audiences. I attended graduate school 11 years after I graduated with my bachelor's; pursuing my master's was a time to reflect and spend focused energy on my studies. I appreciated the professors that helped me hone my writing and challenged me with weighty topics, including those beyond the practical day-to-day application of the public sector craft. Graduate school was a place I explored the nexus between non profits and government and how they collectively advance the common good.

3. **What are some classes you wish you took now that you didn't take or didn't have the chance to take in college?**

There is never enough time to take all the classes one wants to take, but in my current post I am reminded that even more grounding in these areas would help me manage my office and my 38+ staff, classes like applied public sector budgeting, finance, appropriations law; acquisitions and contracting; and personnel/human resources management. And because I am at a statistical agency, there are some

days I wish I would have kept going in statistics and research methodology. The good news is there is lifelong learning; the federal government offers training, too.

4. **What internships and/or co-curricular activities did you participate in and how did they prepare you for your graduate work and/or professional trajectory?**

During my undergraduate years, I was very active in organizations, particularly College Democrats. It was the relationships I developed during these co-curricular moments that helped me figure out my career/life path and gain my first job. They were also a saving grace, for when I was struggling to figure out my academic self, my activities made sense. It took me a minute, but I finally figured out that there was an academic connection to the campaign work we were doing in our after-class organizations and school: I could major in political science. I ended up running for local city council my senior year, too (a story for another time). Additionally, I was in the Honors Program; it had a focus on studies but also had a tight-knit social component. Some of my best friends to this day are friends I met in the Honors Program. It also led me to a summer internship in Hamilton, Ohio, with the Hamilton Appalachian Peoples Service Organization (HAPSO). HAPSO introduced me to the Ohio Appalachian community, its history and its people. HAPSO also gave me a first hand look at the importance of good governance and how non profits struggle without solid financial footing.

In grad school, I became a graduate assistant in the Institute for Governance and Accountabilities, School of Public and International Affairs. I helped create and implement the Leadership through the Arts Program, an effort to revitalize Virginia's Dan River Region. It was a good application of my MPA studies and my earlier government experience. I also really enjoyed that our research took us to Southside Virginia and we engaged with persons beyond the classroom.

5. **What advice would you give to your undergraduate self? Or, in other words, what do you wish you knew as an undergraduate that you know now?**

When I was trying to figure out my major, I wish I would have sought more counsel, including talking to an academic advisor. I do not recall seeking out advice and, to be honest, it was a lonely moment during my sophomore year. I am the first in my immediate family to go to school; therefore, I did not have family to turn to for guidance. I remember at one point in my sophomore year when I realized I wanted to leave the business program, I considered dropping out because I was not sure what one did when "the plan" was no longer a good one. Luckily, I had started my American studies classes the same time I started my business ones, and realized that the arts and sciences were the better path. My advice would be to ask for help if you need it. It is a lesson I believe I have learned. Relatedly, I would recommend talking out some of your decisions. That same year, I was enrolled in

a public speaking communications class. It was a requirement for business majors and very hard to get into. I dropped the class when I made the decision to move to political science and American studies. But taking a step back, it is and was a very helpful class no matter what one's discipline, but I dropped it to completely pivot to my new major. I still shake my head at that decision. The last bit of advice I would offer would be to enjoy your classes, all of them. Life, including one's professional life, is a tapestry of many interconnected topics; knowledge and learning enrich the whole experience.