



Why Many Americans Resent Public Employees

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School teachers, mail carriers, and trash collectors – all of them are people Americans see regularly in everyday life. They live in our communities, provide important services, and interact with our friends and families. Why, then, are such public employees so often painted as villains in contemporary understandings of America's economic woes? What kinds of concerns lay behind resentments that politicians often invoke or use in heated partisan battles?

In Wisconsin, where I live and work, this question has special currency. Shortly after Scott Walker became Governor of Wisconsin in early 2011, he proposed budget bills that eliminated rights to engage in collective bargaining for most public employees and mandated that such employees make larger contributions to their health care and pensions. Thousands of people descended on the capitol in Madison to protest Walker's bills, and Wisconsin has been roiled by bitter political debates ever since. Many accuse Governor Walker of dividing public and private workers in a period of broad economic crisis. But my research suggests that widespread resentment of public employees and unions predated Walker's initiatives.

An Innovative Way to Learn How People Think about Public Issues

Most research on public opinion involves national surveys, where randomly selected individuals answer a series of questions. Thousands of responses are analyzed by broad categories such as age, gender, educational level, income level, and whether disconnected individuals say they trust government and support Democrats or Republicans. Over the past few years, I have taken a different approach, by inviting myself into conversations among groups of people who meet regularly to discuss community issues. I sampled 27 communities from across the state of Wisconsin, including urban, suburban, and rural areas. After identifying 36 groups of people that met regularly of their own accord – at gas stations, diners, restaurants, and other publicly available locales – I repeatedly participated in their conversations between May 2007 and May 2011. By listening and occasionally asking questions, I learned how Wisconsinites think about the economic troubles of their communities, who they blame, and where they look for solutions. Public employees are often resented, I discovered.

Why Public Employees are Blamed

Very few people I listened to blamed their economic troubles on private businesses or workers. That happened in only three conversations out of eighty covered in my study. But people from a wide variety of political leanings and economic backgrounds blamed government and public employees for economic woes in their communities.

Public workers came in for social condemnation even before the onset of the sharp economic recession in 2008. In part, people felt generally resentful about government. In many communities, citizens complained that they were ignored by the government. In rural areas especially, out-of-touch officials were seen as coming from a higher income class.

Yet throughout the state, more was at issue than general animosity toward the government. Often the conversation turned to who works hard – and who doesn't.

- Public employees were often denounced as lazy people who sit behind their desks all day and never get their hands dirty. Citizens saw themselves and their neighbors working hard, but forced to hand over the fruits of their labor to foot the bill for public workers' health benefits and pensions. Resentful comments often came in the midst of discussions about health care, as people expressed worries about their own ability to pay for the medical services they and their families need. Benefits for public employees seemed way out of step with the benefits available (or not) to many private workers.

- Public employees were said to routinely waste taxpayer money and be more concerned with perpetuating their own jobs rather than reducing public spending.
- In the eyes of many, public employees were equated with their unions – which only stoked further resentment. Critics blamed unions for perpetuating exorbitant benefits and salaries that bust the public budget. They believe that unions prevent school districts, universities, or other parts of the government from firing inefficient or ineffective workers. Unions, in short, make it possible for public workers to be both lazy and overly rewarded.

In rural areas, I found an additional layer of resentment, because many people who live outside Madison and Milwaukee believe that those major metropolitan centers have disproportionate public resources and decision-making power, even though people in rural areas work much harder for a living. Looking through this lens, rural Wisconsinites saw public employees not as allies but as elites unfairly usurping hard-earned taxpayer dollars.

The Bottom Line for Politics

Political campaigns that blame government employees for America's economic and fiscal troubles may not rest on sound analytical foundations, but they certainly tap into very real inequities and public attitudes. Unequal access to vital family benefits like good health insurance and pensions – and worries about the efficiency and fair distribution of public services – leave many Americans angry, not just about the shortcomings of government in the abstract, but also about the job security and benefits public employees have gained over the years. Of course, a better answer might be to improve wages and benefits for all, not just reduce rights and compensation for public employees. But supporters of such an approach will make little headway without fully understanding and effectively addressing the heartfelt resentment of public employees that is already prevalent in many American communities.

Read more in Katherine Cramer Walsh, "Political Understanding of Economic Crises: The Shape of Resentment toward Public Employees," in *The Costs of Crisis: Popular Responses to the Great Recession*, edited by Nancy Beromo and Larry Bartels (Russell Sage Foundation, forthcoming).

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