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Will the Boomers Volunteer During Retirement? Comparing the Baby Boom, Silent, and Long Civic Cohorts

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Data from the 1995 and 2005 waves of the Midlife in the United States panel study were used to compare rates of volunteering among the baby boomers with earlier cohorts and to predict boomers' future volunteering. When age was kept constant through the use of panel data, the first baby boom cohort (born 1946 to 1955) did more volunteering than did the "silent" cohort (born 1936 to 1945), and the silents volunteered more than did the "long civic" cohort (born 1926 to 1935). The author generated regression equations that used nine 1995 variables to predict 2005 volunteering and used the boomers' 2005 values on these variables to predict their 2015 volunteering. These equations slightly predict higher volunteering among the boomers in 2015 than the silents did in 2005. This result, combined with the large size of the boomer cohort, indicates that the total number of elderly volunteers will probably increase in the next decade.

Keywords: *volunteering; baby boomers; elderly; retirement; social capital*

As the baby boom generation grows older, social scientists and policy makers have taken an intense interest in how their aging and eventual retirement from the full-time labor force will affect society. One area of particular interest is whether they will volunteer in large numbers when they retire from full-time work. Some scholars (Goss, 1999; Putnam, 2000) argue that the boomers' low levels of social capital and religious involvement will cause them to volunteer less than the current generation of retirees. Others (Freedman, 1999) say the boomers' high education, history of political activism, and high levels of current volunteering indicate a potential for high volunteering as they grow older, as long as adequate structures, incentives, and recruitment efforts are provided for them.

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This article seeks the answers to two questions: First, has the prevalence of volunteering and time spent volunteering increased or decreased among the long civic, silent, and baby boom cohorts? Second, when the baby boom generation reaches the traditional age of retirement, can we expect them to volunteer more or less than earlier generations of retirees?

The second question, baby boomers' future volunteering, is more difficult to answer. The oldest baby boomers are just now approaching the traditional age of retirement, so we can only speculate about their future volunteering. However, the issue of baby boomer volunteering is of great importance to both nonprofits and policy makers, and speculation is necessary and justified as a way of planning for the future. One can either make wild guesses based on anecdotal evidence or make statistical predictions based on scientific research and accurate data.

This research uses the 1995 and 2005 waves of the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) panel study to compare volunteer participation among members of three birth cohorts and to predict boomers' participation in volunteer work 10 years from now, when they reach the traditional age of retirement. I found that members of the first cohort of the baby boom, born between 1946 and 1955, volunteered more in 2005, when they were in their 50s, than the silent cohort, born between 1936 and 1945, did in 1995, when they were the same age. Members of the "silent" cohort volunteered more in 2005 than members of the "long civic" generation, born between 1926 and 1935, volunteered in 1995 when they were the same age.

I answered the second question, baby boomers' future volunteering, by examining which 1995 variables predicted 2005 volunteering among the "silent generation" cohort. I used the same variables measured for the baby boomers in 2005 to predict their volunteering in 2015. After testing a wide range of predictors, I found nine variables that best predicted future volunteering: present volunteering, religious giving, secular charitable giving, education, health, meeting attendance, community trust, future plans to help others, and religious services attendance. The baby boomers, compared to the silent cohort, scored lower on religious attendance, higher on education and present volunteering, and roughly equal on all other measures. I then used these variables, measured in 2005, to predict boomer volunteering in 2015. Assuming that all other factors remain constant, the regression equation predicts a slightly higher prevalence and hours of volunteering among the baby boom cohort in 2015 than the silent cohort had in 2005.

Although the factors measured in this study predict only a modest increase in the percentage of elderly adults who volunteer and the total hours volunteered, two unmeasured factors may cause the increase in the total number of elderly boomer volunteers to be large. First, changes in the cultural meaning of retirement have led individuals to increasingly view volunteering as a normative role for the elderly. If this view of retirement becomes more prevalent in the years to come, then an even higher percentage of baby boomers will volunteer than predicted by this study. Furthermore, even if the rate of volunteering by the elderly remains constant during

the next 10 years, the sheer size of the boomer cohort will cause a large increase in the total number of elderly volunteers.

Review of the Literature

Although a very large literature exists on the correlates and predictors of volunteering, only Goss (1999) has attempted to use this information to predict the future volunteering behavior of baby boomers. I first discuss the correlates of volunteering that were used in this study to predict future volunteering among the boomers. I then discuss existing research on the effect of retirement on volunteering and on cohort and generational differences in volunteering.

Predictors of volunteering

People tend to consistently engage in charitable activity over time, so two of the best predictors of future volunteering among the elderly are past volunteering and charitable giving. Demographic factors such as age, sex, race, and ethnicity also correlate with volunteering. I follow Wilson and Musick (1997) in dividing the remaining predictors into three categories: human capital (resources), cultural capital (values), and social capital (networks and norms). Each of these categories contributes something to the model used in this article to predict boomer volunteering.

Past volunteering and charitable giving. Past volunteering is one of the strongest predictors of future volunteering among the elderly (Mutchler, Burr, & Caro, 2003; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001), and charitable donors are more likely than are nondonors to volunteer (Independent Sector, 2001). Lee, Piliavin, and Call (1999) explained this finding through role identity, stating that as people repeatedly engage in a socially valued activity such as volunteering, they take on this role as a key aspect of their identity and seek out opportunities to fulfill this role in the future.

Demographic predictors. Volunteering varies by sex, race, ethnicity, and age. Non-Hispanic Whites tend to volunteer more than do non-Whites and Hispanics (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004; Independent Sector, 2001; T. W. Smith, 2003), although much of this difference can be explained by racial and ethnic differences in socioeconomic status. Women tend to volunteer more than men, largely because of the fact that they work fewer hours, on average, in paid employment. Age has generally been found to have a nonlinear relationship with volunteering, increasing during young adulthood and middle age but declining in old age as health declines (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004; Herzog, Kahn, & Morgan, 1989; Ladd, 1999; Wilson, 2000).

Human capital. Human capital variables measure the resources that enable one to volunteer, such as health and free time, or resources such as income and education that

make a person more desirable as a volunteer and more likely to be recruited (D. H. Smith, 1994; Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Musick, 1997).

Cultural capital. Wilson and Musick (1997) used the term *cultural capital* in a different sense than the typical use in sociology; for Wilson and Musick, the term *cultural capital* described the value orientations that motivate people to do volunteer work. A wide range of psychological research exists on the values and personality traits that motivate volunteering, and commonly cited motivations include religiosity, prosocial role identity, generativity, dispositional empathy, helpfulness, and sense of moral obligation.

Social capital. Social networks and trust foster volunteering in a number of ways (Wilson & Musick, 1997). Person-to-person appeals are one of the most common ways that organizations recruit volunteers and donors (Independent Sector, 2001), so that people with broad social networks are more likely to be asked to give their money or time. People who have a strong sense of trust feel more solidarity with other people and feel more inclined to help them and are also less inhibited by concerns about others taking advantage of their generosity (Brown & Ferris, 2007; Wilson, 2000). Participation in religious institutions and service-oriented voluntary associations involves individuals in social networks in which norms of helping are shared among members. Even if members of these networks feel little internal motivation to volunteer or give money, they are subjected to external pressure and encouragement to do so (Lee et al., 1999).

Retirement

Retirement causes an increase in the time available to volunteer, although this increase in free time may be offset by declines in health that make activity more difficult (Chambré, 1987). Furthermore, withdrawal from the work force removes individuals from some of the social networks that cause them to be asked to volunteer. The decrease in social networks and the increase in free time tend to cancel one another out, so that the net effect of retirement on volunteering is slight. Retired people do not volunteer in greater numbers than people the same age still in the work force, but retirees who do volunteer tend to devote more hours to volunteering than elderly people still in the work force (Chambré, 1993; Choi, 2003; Independent Sector, 2003; Mutchler et al., 2003).

In the past, retirement was seen as a time of relaxation and the pursuit of personal pleasure, but this view of retirement is changing. People have increasingly come to view retirement as a time of active leisure and meaningful, productive activity, including volunteering (Chambré, 1987, 1993; Moen, 2003, 2004). Volunteering among the elderly has increased over the decades (Chambré, 1993; Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007; Goss, 1999), although scholars disagree

over whether this increase reflects age or cohort effects. These changes in perceptions of retirement are discussed in more detail below.

Generational differences in volunteering

Although there has been some popular speculation about whether boomers will volunteer in their retirement years, academic research on this question is sparse. Much research focuses on shared historical experiences and cultural characteristics that create a generational consciousness among baby boomers. These characteristics can be used to support arguments for either more or less volunteering. Some authors have pointed to boomers' involvement in social activism to argue that they will volunteer more in retirement (Freedman, 1999; Steinhorn, 2006). Others characterize the boomers as selfish and individualistic (Putnam, 2000) and see them as disaffected from civic participation by the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the other negative political events of their youth (Light, 1988). These differences would tend to make boomers volunteer less than do earlier cohorts. Although cultural and historical differences among the generations are potentially important, their nature and effects are difficult to quantify (Stewart & Torges, 2006). This article focuses instead on intergenerational differences that can be more easily measured. Furthermore, the shared experiences that define a generation's identity and character are those that occur during their adolescence and early adulthood (Light, 1988). If Vietnam, Watergate, and other shared negative experiences have caused boomers to become disaffected from society, the effects of this disaffection should already be evident in reduced rates of volunteering.

Scholars disagree on whether the boomer generation volunteers more now than earlier generations did in the past, when they were the same age (Goss, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Rotolo & Wilson, 2004). Only a few authors have attempted to predict boomers' future volunteering, but these predictions are not based on panel data. Most estimates of future boomer volunteering range from pessimistic (Goss, 1999; Putnam, 2000) to neutral (Prisuta, 2003), and the one optimistic prediction of boomers' future volunteering (Freedman, 1999) is based on anecdotal data.

I follow Goss (1999) and Putnam (2000) in dividing those born between 1910 and 1965 into the "baby boom," the "silent," and the "long civic" generations. Putnam (2000, pp. 254-257) defined the baby boomers as those born between 1946 and 1964 and the long civic generation as those born "roughly between 1910 and 1940," with the "core" of this generation being those born between 1925 and 1930 (p. 254). Goss (1999, p. 387) drew slightly different boundaries among the generations, as she defined the long civic generation as those born before 1930, the silent generation as those born between 1930 and 1945, and the baby boom generation as those born between 1946 and 1960.

Most scholars have agreed that the long civic generation scores higher than later generations on most measures of social capital, including participation in social clubs

and voluntary associations, informal socializing, religious services attendance, and trust (Prisuta, 2003; Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, boomers are better educated than members of earlier generations. Also, volunteering has increased among each cohort of elderly despite the fact that many of the social capital measures that predict volunteering have decreased (Goss, 1999; Ladd, 1999). A recent study by the Corporation for National and Community Service (2007) found that the percentage of “midlife” adults, aged 45 to 64, who engage in volunteer work grew from 22.0% in 1989 to 29.8% in 2006, with the increase caused by high volunteer rates among baby boomers.

The most extensive investigations of cohort differences in volunteering are Rotolo and Wilson (2004) and Goss (1999). Rotolo and Wilson compared the volunteering behaviors of women from the baby boom generation in 1991 and the long civic generation in 1974, when the women of the two cohorts were between 37 and 48 years old. Although other scholars had speculated that the entry of women into the full-time work force would cause them to decrease their commitment to volunteering, Rotolo and Wilson found that the boomer women actually volunteered more than the women from the long civic generation did when they were the same age.

Goss (1999) compared data on the volunteering behaviors of elderly people using a marketing survey conducted by the DDB Needham advertising firm each year between 1975 and 1997. The surveys contained only a single question about volunteering, which asked how many times respondents did volunteer work in the previous year. Goss found that the proportion of Americans who volunteer remained steady from 1975 to 1997. The mean number of volunteer episodes increased over time, but almost all of this increase took place among people 60 years old or older. The mean scores of a number of predictors of volunteering decreased for elderly people in the sample over time, including social networks, trust, and health, but volunteering increased among the elderly nevertheless. Goss (1999) concluded that some “mysterious force” or “unseen wind” was lifting the volunteer participation of all Americans and was particularly increasing participation by the elderly. She speculated that this mysterious force might be increased recruitment efforts by nonprofits and might also relate to a “profound cultural shift in seniors’ perception of retirement—from a time of relaxation to a time of activity and adventure” (p. 411).

Although Goss was not able to measure changes over time in cultural perceptions of the meaning of retirement, evidence from other studies supports this explanation for the increase in elderly volunteering. D. B. Smith (2004) found that 57.9% of a sample of workers aged 50 to 65 considered volunteering to be a component of their ideal retired lifestyle, and a recent Association for the Advancement of Retired Persons (AARP, 2004) survey found that 51% of baby boomers planned to increase their commitment to volunteering on retirement. However, neither study made cross-generational comparisons, so it is not possible to know whether conceptions of volunteering as an essential component of the retired lifestyle have increased over time. It is also uncertain to what extent people will actually carry out plans to volunteer

when they do retire, particularly given that boomers placed a higher priority on working for pay and pursuing hobbies and leisure activities. Nevertheless, the fact that such a large number of midlife workers and baby boomers plan on volunteering in retirement indicates at least the existence of a cultural norm, even if we cannot predict with certainty that people will follow that norm in practice.

Moen (2003, 2004) has demonstrated that fewer people now retire from full-time work in a single, permanent step. Many people begin the retirement process before or after the traditional age of 65 and retire in multiple stages, going from full-time work to part-time work or volunteering. Moen has argued that the word *retirement* no longer reflects social reality and has called for the replacement of the word with the term *third age*. Instead of a single event occurring at age 65, the transition to the third age should be thought of as a process that goes on throughout an individual's older years.

Moen (2003, 2004) has argued that the baby boom generation is particularly resistant to the traditional conception of retirement as complete withdrawal from productive activity. An AARP (2004) survey found that 79% of baby boomers planned to work at least part-time in their retirement years and 51% planned to volunteer, supporting Moen's thesis. If the boomers follow through on these plans, their continued participation in part-time employment should boost their volunteering through the social networks that come with part-time work. Furthermore, boomers' reluctance to fully withdraw from productive activity should encourage them to volunteer at higher rates than earlier cohorts of elderly.

Research question and hypotheses

This study is the first to directly compare the volunteering activities of the baby boom, silent, and long civic cohorts using data from a single panel study. It is also the first to use panel data on predictors of volunteering among the silent generation to predict future volunteering behavior among the baby boom generation. I ask two questions:

1. Has the prevalence of volunteering and time spent volunteering increased, decreased, or stayed the same among the long civic, silent, and baby boom cohorts?
2. When the baby boom generation reaches the traditional age of retirement, can we expect them to volunteer more or less than earlier cohorts of retirees?

The first question is the easiest to answer, as one can directly compare data on volunteering prevalence and hours between the baby boom cohort in 2005 and the silent cohort in 1995, when both groups were in their 50s, and between the silent cohort in 2005 and the long civic cohort in 1995, when both groups were in their 60s.

The second question is more difficult, and answering it requires several steps. First, I used logistic and Tobit regression on data from the silent cohort to test which variables measured in 1995 best predicted volunteering in 2005. I then calculated the slope coefficients of these variables in predicting current volunteering in 1995 for the silent cohort and current volunteering in 2005 for the baby boom cohort, thus comparing the two groups when they were the same age. There was little difference between the two cohorts in the variables' correlation with current volunteering, which indicates that the variables are likely to have similar coefficients in predicting future volunteering. I then compared the two cohorts on the mean values of each predictor of future volunteering, again holding age constant by comparing 1995 data for the silent cohort to 2005 data for the boomers. Finally, I entered the 2005 data for the boomers into the regression equation derived from the silent cohort as a way of estimating future volunteering among the boomers. I found that the boomers will most likely volunteer in slightly larger numbers and for slightly more hours than the silent cohort, continuing the increase in volunteering among the elderly that has occurred during the past several decades.

Data

This article uses survey and interview data from the 1995 and 2005 waves of the MacArthur Foundation's MIDUS study. The MIDUS study was based on a nationally representative random-digit dialing sample of noninstitutionalized, English-speaking adults born between 1920 and 1970. Both telephone and written survey questionnaires were used, and the estimated overall response rate to the first wave was 60.8%. The MIDUS data set contains weights to adjust for the biases related to the characteristics of nonresponders to the first wave, which were used in this study. The main MIDUS survey has a sample size of 3,032, and the survey instrument contained nearly 2,000 questions. The MIDUS survey contains modules specifically designed to measure volunteering and its correlates, making it a particularly useful source of data for this analysis. Full information about the sample, response rate, weighting, and survey design is contained in the MIDUS codebook, available from the MIDUS Web site at <http://midmac.med.harvard.edu/research.html>.

Only 1,490 respondents to the original survey responded to both the telephone and written questionnaire given in the 2005 wave. A total of 355 respondents completed only the phone survey in Wave 2, 212 died, and 735 either could not be located or refused to respond to either the phone or the mail survey. Those who responded to both the survey and the telephone questionnaire in the second wave differed from nonresponders in several ways that correlate with volunteering. Responders were slightly older than nonresponders, had higher incomes and more education, and were more likely to be White and female. They were more likely to be donors to religious and secular charities in the 1995 wave of the survey but were

not more likely to be volunteers. Respondents who died between 1995 and 2005 were older than the rest of the sample, had lower education and incomes, were less likely to volunteer in 1995, and were more likely to be male.

The MIDUS data set contains weights to account for differences between the sample and the population on age, race, gender, and region of residence, and these weights were used in the calculations for this article. However, there are no weights to account for attrition between the two waves. Given that the nonrespondents in Wave 2 scored lower than did respondents on many of the variables that predict volunteering, the overall estimates in this article of future volunteering are probably too high. MIDUS estimates of current volunteering are higher than other recent surveys (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005; Independent Sector, 2001). Estimates of volunteer rates also vary widely from survey to survey, depending on question wording and other methodological differences (Rooney, Steinberg, & Schervish, 2005). However, the goal of this article is to compare baby boomer volunteering with volunteering among the two cohorts that precede them. As biases related to attrition, sampling, and question wording should equally affect all three cohorts, they should not affect the validity of the comparison among cohorts.

Dependent variables

The MIDUS survey asked respondents to write in how many hours they spend volunteering each month. It had separate questions about educational and youth volunteering, health and medical volunteering, and other volunteering. MIDUS did not ask respondents to report their religious volunteering separately, so religious volunteering is included in the "other volunteering" category. I added the answers to these three questions to create a single measure of volunteering. Four in ten respondents, or 41.5% of the total sample, did volunteer work in a given month in 1995, and 44.4% did volunteer work in 2005. The mean hours per month spent volunteering were 5.4 in 1995 and 6.3 in 2005, and the standard deviations were 15.4 for 1995 and 13.1 for 2005. The variables were skewed to the right, with a small number of respondents contributing a large amount of volunteer time.

Independent variables

In a preliminary analysis, I tested a large number of independent variables for their ability to predict future volunteering, and nine variables were found that had statistically significant and substantively meaningful correlations. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for these independent variables. Although demographic characteristics did not have a statistically significant relationship with future volunteering, variables measuring past helping behavior, human capital, social capital, and cultural capital all predicted future volunteering. Predictor variables included three measures of past helping behavior (volunteering in 1995, religious giving, and secular charitable giving),

Table 1
Mean and Standard Deviation for Independent Variables

	Silents in 1995 (<i>n</i> = 351)		Early Boomers in 2005 (<i>n</i> = 413)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Education (12-point ordinal scale)	6.4	2.6	7.0	2.6
Volunteering (% yes)	32.7	—	39.3	—
Religious giving (% yes)	49.0	—	46.6	—
Secular giving (% yes)	49.3	—	52.6	—
Health	3.6	0.9	3.6	0.9
Future contributions	7.0	2.1	6.8	2.1
Religious attendance	32.6	39.4	27.0	37.0
Community trust	3.5	0.5	3.4	0.6
Meeting attendance	2.3	4.9	2.3	4.1

two measures of human capital (education and health), two measures of social capital (meeting attendance and localized trust), and one measure of cultural capital (future plans to help others). The ninth predictor variable, religious services attendance, is a measure of both cultural and social capital.

Age cohorts. I divided the sample by birth year into three age cohorts. The long civic cohort were those respondents born between 1926 and 1935 (*n* = 214), the silent cohort were those born between 1936 and 1945 (*n* = 351), and the baby boom cohort were those born between 1946 and 1955 (*n* = 413). Respondents born after 1955 (*n* = 430) or before 1926 (*n* = 80) were excluded from the analysis. The division into 10-year cohorts, combined with the 10-year gap between panels of the MIDUS study, allowed an effective control for age. The average age of the long civic cohort was 62.6 in 1995 and 72.6 in 2005 (*SD* = 2.9), the average age of the silent cohort was 52.5 in 1995 and 62.5 in 2005 (*SD* = 2.8), and the average age of the boomer cohort was 42.8 in 1995 and 52.8 in 2005 (*SD* = 2.8).

Demographic characteristics. Gender was measured with a dummy variable. Race and ethnicity were initially measured with dummy variables for Hispanic, African American, Asian American, and Native American, with White non-Hispanic being the omitted category. However, the division into age cohorts made each of these categories very small, with 20 or fewer people in each non-White–non-Hispanic group. To make statistical analysis possible, I reduced the racial and ethnic divisions to three categories: non-Hispanic Whites, African Americans, and Other.

Human capital and resources. Education is measured on a 12-point ordinal scale, ranging from a primary school education to a doctorate or equivalent. Health was

measured using the average of two questions on mental and self-reported physical health, both of which are measured on a 1 to 4 ordinal scale, from *poor* to *excellent*. MIDUS also has measures of how health impairs ability to do work and other productive activities. However, the self-reported health scale was as good or better a predictor of volunteering as these more detailed scales, so I used the self-reported health scale instead.

Cultural capital and values. Two of the MIDUS measurements of prosocial value orientation had particularly strong correlations with future volunteering. One question asked respondents to rate what their anticipated overall level of contributions to others' welfare would be 10 years in the future, on a scale from 0 to 10. A second question asked respondents how often they attend religious services, on an ordinal scale ranging from *never* to *weekly*. I recoded this ordinal variable to create an interval variable measuring yearly church attendance, with values ranging from 0 (*never*) to 52 (*once per week*).

Social capital. Three social capital measures strongly predicted future volunteering. First, church attendance is both a measure of prosocial values and a measure of social capital, as religious services attendance involves people in social networks that have norms of obligation that encourage volunteering (Wilson & Musick, 1997). Second, the MIDUS study has a four-item measure of trust and integration into one's community derived from Keyes (1998), which measures how much individuals trust their neighbors, feel safe in their neighborhoods, and feel that they can call on their neighbors for help if needed. Finally, the MIDUS survey asked respondents to write in how many meetings they attend each month in three types of nonaltruistic voluntary associations: labor unions and professional associations, sports and recreation groups, and all other groups. The variables were added together to make a single measure of nonaltruistic voluntary participation, with a mean of 2.27 and a standard deviation of 4.52. The variable was truncated at 15 meetings per month, or the 97th percentile, to prevent outliers from biasing the regression analysis.

Past helping. The 1995 variable for volunteering was identical to the 2005 variable for volunteering, described above. For regression analysis, I converted it into a dummy variable, with 1 = *any volunteering in 1995* and 0 = *no volunteering*. I converted religious and secular charitable giving into dummy variables as well, as exploratory analysis showed that the dummy variables were statistically significant in multivariate analysis, whereas the original interval variables were significant in bivariate analysis but not always significant in the multivariate equations. During a typical month, 39.0% of the total sample volunteered in 1995, 45.5% gave money to a religious charity, and 44.2% gave money to a secular charity.

Method

As the dependent variables were not normally distributed, ordinary least squares regression could not be used in analysis, and logistic and Tobit regression were used instead. To conduct logistic regression, the volunteer measure was converted into a binary variable, with 0 = *no volunteering* and 1 = *any volunteering*. Tobit regression was performed on the original volunteering variable. The Tobit and logistic results were similar, so to save space only the logistic results are reported here, and the Tobit results are available from the author on request. I chose to report the logistic results because logistic regression is more widely known and easier for readers to interpret. Also, Tobit regression is more sensitive to violations of the assumptions of the mathematical model, making it somewhat less reliable for prediction. In reporting the logistic results, I give the log of the odds ratio for each independent variable rather than the slope coefficient. Estimates of the predictive power of each regression model are estimated using the Nagelkerke calculation of pseudo- R^2 (Nagelkerke, 1991).

Findings

Generational trends in volunteering

The MIDUS data showed that volunteering by the elderly has increased steadily from the long civic cohort, born between 1926 and 1935, to the silent cohort, born between 1936 and 1945, to the early baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1955. In 2005, 49.0% of the silent generation members, then in their 60s, volunteered at least once in the previous month, compared to 41.1% of the long civic generation members in 1995, when they were the same age. The silent generation members volunteered an average of 7.9 hours to the long civic generation's 5.1. One can also use the panel data to compare the total volunteering of the boomers in 2005, when they were in their 50s, with the silent cohort in 1995, when they were the same age. In 2005, 42.4% of the boomer cohort volunteered an average of 5.0 hours per month, whereas in 1995 only 36.5% of the silent generation volunteered, for an average of 4.3 hours per month. When groups of the same age are compared, one sees a steady increase in volunteering from the long civic to the boomer cohort.

Predictors of volunteering

Although a large number of variables were tested, only nine were statistically significant and substantively strong predictors of future volunteering: current volunteering, church giving, secular giving, education, health, religious attendance, anticipated future contributions to others' welfare, community trust, and meeting attendance. Not statistically significant even at the bivariate level were race, ethnicity, or gender. Although not significant, the slope coefficient for other race and ethnicity (Asian

Table 2
Multivariate Logistic Regression of 2005 Volunteering
on 1995 Characteristics (Silent Cohort)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Volunteering	3.598****	4.371****
Church giving	1.130	—
Secular giving	1.512	—
Education	1.114*	1.156***
Health	1.029	
Future helpfulness	1.512	—
Services attendance	1.007*	1.007**
Local trust	1.617*	1.713*
Meeting attendance	1.026	—
Constant	0.018****	0.023****
-2 log likelihood	325.8	331.1
χ^2	67.6	64.7
<i>df</i>	9	4
% correct (base = 54.9%)	70.0	71.1
Nagelkerke R^2	.282	.269

Note: $N = 351$.

* $p \leq .10$. ** $p \leq .05$. *** $p \leq .01$. **** $p \leq .001$.

American, Latino, Native American, Biracial, and Other) was negative in a bivariate regression equation predicting future volunteering and positive in the multivariate model.

Taken together, the nine significant variables measured in 1995 predict 28.2% of the variation in decisions to volunteer in 2005, although some variables fail to attain statistical significance in the full model (Table 2, Model 1). A reduced model containing only four variables, all of which are significant at $p < .10$, explains 26.9% of the variation in probability of volunteering in 2005 (Table 2, Model 2).

Generational differences in the predictors of volunteering

Before using the 2005 data to predict boomer volunteering in 2015, one must consider the possibility that the factors that predicted future volunteering in the silent cohort do not predict future volunteering in the same way for the early boomer cohort. Although there is no way to directly answer this question, one can at least examine whether the variables have similar correlations with current volunteering. If the variables that predicted current volunteering for the silent cohort 1995 also predict current volunteering for the early boom cohort in 2005 and the slope coefficients are similar, then one can be somewhat confident that the variables that predicted future volunteering among the silent cohort will also predict future volunteering among the early boom cohort.

Table 3
Comparison Between Silent and Boomer Cohorts of Logistic Odds Ratios
and Statistical Significance of Predictors of Current Volunteering

Variable	Silents in 1995 (<i>N</i> = 351)	Boomers in 2005 (<i>N</i> = 413)
	Odds Ratio	Odds Ratio
Church giving	3.820****	3.793****
Secular giving	3.815****	2.321****
Education	1.272****	1.232****
Health	1.131	1.375***
Future helpfulness	1.270****	1.174***
Services attendance	1.013****	1.015****
Local trust	2.066***	2.086****
Meeting attendance	1.109**	1.286****

* $p \leq .10$. ** $p \leq .05$. *** $p \leq .01$. **** $p \leq .001$.

Table 3 presents bivariate odds ratios and significance levels for the seven most significant predictors of current volunteering among the silent cohort in 1995 and the early boom cohort in 2005, when both cohorts were in their 50s. For most variables, the significance levels and odds ratios are similar in both groups. The two exceptions are secular giving, which is a stronger predictor of current volunteering among the silent generation, and self-reported health, which is a statistically significant predictor of current volunteering only among the boomers.

I also examined the relationship between employment and volunteering for respondents in their 60s, using the 1995 survey of the long civic cohort and the 2005 data for the silent cohort. In both cases, full-time workers were no more likely than nonworking elderly to volunteer, but the relationship between part-time employment and volunteering was statistically significant and positive.

Predicting future volunteering among the baby boomers

To predict whether the baby boom generation will volunteer extensively in their 60s, one can compare how they score on the major predictors of volunteering in 2005 with how the silent generation scored on the same variables 10 years before. The baby boom generation scored higher in 2005 than the silent generation did in 1995 on the two most important predictors, present volunteering and education, but scored lower on religious giving and religious services attendance (Table 1).

Given that the boomers score higher on two predictors of future volunteering and lower on two others, it is unclear on the face of it whether the higher or lower values will predominate or whether the differences will cancel one another out. To determine which effect predominates, I inserted the baby boomer's mean scores on these variables, measured in 2005, into the regression equations that predicted future volunteering

for the silent cohort in 1995. The logistic regression equation was used to predict future volunteer prevalence, whereas the Tobit equation was used to predict future hours. The logistic regression equation for the nine variable model estimates that 49.9% of the baby boomers will do volunteer work in 2015, more than the 49.0% of silents who volunteered in 1995. The Tobit regression equation estimates that the boomers will volunteer an average of 0.6 more hours per month.

Discussion

Volunteering among the elderly has increased from cohort to cohort during the past two decades. The regression models used in this study predict a further increase in the future, albeit a less dramatic increase than that observed in the past.

The steady increase in volunteering among cohorts, despite the decrease in some of the social capital measures that correlate with volunteering, presents something of a puzzle. Boomers in their 50s volunteered more than silents did when they were the same age, despite lower scores on religious services attendance and trust in one's local community. Only part of this increase can be attributed to the boomers' higher level of education; some other unmeasured factor or factors must explain the increase. Goss (1999) speculated that nonprofits' increased efforts to recruit volunteers, combined with changes in cultural views of the nature of retirement, might explain the increase in volunteering. However, as Goss found that increases in volunteering occurred only among the elderly in her sample, she concluded that the unmeasured force that was causing volunteer rates to rise did not affect the boomers. She warned that the current high rates of volunteering among the elderly represented not a "spring" but an "Indian summer" of elderly volunteering, which will end as the boomer generation replaces the current generation of elderly.

I disagree with Goss's analysis on several counts. First, more recent data (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007) found increases not only among the elderly but also among middle-aged and young volunteers. Second, Goss's data did not permit her to distinguish between age and cohort effects. In this study, which used panel data to make this distinction, a steady increase was seen in volunteer rates from the long civic to the silent to the boomer cohort. The one other study that has used panel data to separate age and cohort effects also found higher volunteering rates among boomers than among members of an earlier age cohort (Rotolo & Wilson, 2004).

Third, even if the unmeasured factor causing an increase in volunteering affects only the elderly, there is no reason to assume that the boomers will not be affected by this unmeasured factor when they become elderly themselves. Goss speculated that the unmeasured factors were nonprofit recruitment efforts and changes in cultural views of retirement. Absent any evidence to the contrary, it seems logical to assume that these two factors would increase volunteering among elderly baby boomers just as they increased volunteering among previous cohorts.

In fact, cultural changes in the view of retirement may affect the volunteering of boomer retirees even more than earlier cohorts. If Moen (2003, 2004) is correct and future generations of retirees see retirement as a time of activity, not relaxation, two factors may cause volunteering to increase even further among the boomers. First, boomers may see volunteering as a type of active leisure and value it more highly than passive leisure activities. Second, boomers may be more likely to work part-time. The MIDUS data indicated that part-time work positively correlated with volunteering for members of the long civic and silent cohorts when they were in their 60s. If baby boomers do more part-time work in their retirement years than earlier cohorts, this may cause a further increase in volunteering, presumably through the action of the social networks that come with part-time employment.

Finally, simple demographic changes will greatly increase the total number of elderly volunteers as the boomers grow older, even if the percentage of boomers who volunteer remains constant. On one hand, the baby boom generation contains more Hispanics and Asian Americans than previous cohorts, some of whom are first-generation immigrants, and these immigrants may volunteer less than native-born citizens. The MIDUS data suggest that this may be the case, given that respondents of Other race and ethnicity (primarily Asian Americans and Hispanics) were less likely to volunteer than Whites, although the difference was not statistically significant. However, a much more important demographic change lies in the fact that the number of people older than 65 years in age is expected to double in the next two decades. Even if the prevalence of volunteering by the elderly does not increase and remains only constant, then the total number of elderly volunteers would double as well. Nonprofit organizations probably do not need to worry about having enough potential volunteers. It is more likely that they will find themselves with more volunteers than they can effectively use.

Limitations

There are numerous limitations that make the conclusions of this study tentative. The cohort samples used in this study are small ($n = 351$ and $n = 413$), and the attrition rate between Wave 1 and Wave 2 was high (50.9%). The moderate initial response rate (60.8%) and the high attrition make the sample imperfectly representative of the U.S. population and affect the reliability of the predictions of this article. The small cohort sample sizes also made ethnic and racial comparisons difficult. This problem was partially solved by dividing all respondents into three ethnic groups (White, Black, and Other), but a larger sample with more non-White respondents would be desirable.

Extrapolating future trends from historical data is always difficult, as there may be unmeasured differences between the silent and baby boom cohort that would cause the factors that predicted future volunteering among the silent cohort to be inaccurate predictors of future volunteering among the boomer cohort. However, at

least some of these unmeasured differences would lead to an underestimation of boomer volunteering, making the conclusions of this study conservative. Boomers are less likely to volunteer in traditional associations such as churches and neighborhood groups, so the boomers' lower scores on religious giving, religious attendance, and local trust may have less of a negative effect on their volunteering than was estimated in this study.

Conclusion

No support was found for Putnam's (2000) and Goss's (1999) conclusion that baby boomers will volunteer in smaller numbers than previous cohorts of elderly. It seems much more likely that boomers will volunteer in larger numbers than members of earlier cohorts, continuing the upward trend in elderly volunteering that has been going on for several decades. Even if they volunteer in similar rates to previous cohorts, the sheer size of the boomer cohort will cause a large net increase in the number of elderly volunteers.

Knowledge of how the predictors of volunteering differ between the boomer cohort and earlier cohorts can help nonprofits recruit boomer volunteers. Religious attendance and giving remain significant predictors of retired volunteering but are less important for the baby boom cohort than previous cohorts. Past volunteering is by far the most important predictor of future volunteering, meaning that organizations interested in attracting retired boomer volunteers may want to start recruiting them now, while they are still in the full-time work force.

On the other hand, the future increase in elderly volunteers may be so large that nonprofits might not have to devote special efforts to recruiting them. In fact, the large size of the baby boom cohort and the increasing proportion of elderly who volunteer may create a situation in which organizations have more volunteers than they are able to manage. Johnson, Parcel, Cobb, and Uy (2003) and Freedman (1999) have argued that the infrastructure of nonprofits is already inadequate to support current levels of elderly volunteering, and this problem is likely to worsen as volunteer numbers increase in the future. Instead of focusing on recruitment, organizations may wish to focus on capacity building to accommodate the large number of new elderly volunteers, and policy makers may wish to support capacity building as well. Although much public attention has been given to the costs that will be associated with the aging of the large baby boom cohort, some attention should also be paid to the public service benefits that their aging may bring.

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