THE INFLUENCE OF THE “POWER OF THE ASK” ON VOLUNTEER LEVELS IN THE UNITED STATES

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THE INFLUENCE OF THE “POWER OF THE ASK” ON VOLUNTEER RATES IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores American volunteer rates from 2008-2009 and the effect of various cultural, human and social factors on volunteer behavior. More specifically, this study builds on the work of other scholars and questions whether social connectedness, as represented by being asked to volunteer, mitigates any demonstrated effect of being a member of a minority racial group. This study uses ordinary least squares regressions to predict total hours volunteered and finds that differences in volunteer levels become insignificant once being asked is accounted for. Based on these findings, volunteer recruitment efforts should shift away from direct solicitation and instead focus on making volunteer opportunities more attractive. Additionally, volunteer organizations should focus more time on recruiting racial minorities as they are a largely untapped source of volunteer capital.
Acknowledgements

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With thanks,
Caitlin Delaney
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INTRODUCTION

The civic health of America is measured each year by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and the National Conference on Citizenship and takes stock of everything from voter turnout and civic group participation to how many times a week families eat together and how neighborly they are. The term civic health is sometimes interchanged with ‘civic engagement’ or ‘civic life’ but is generally meant to describe activities relating to service, social connectedness, group participation, connecting to news and information, and the political action of individuals (“Civic Life”, 2010). In last half century, with the development and widespread use of technology, as well as the introduction of women and minority groups to the workforce, the dynamics of civic engagement have changed. Whether these changes are for better or for worse is up for debate. It is the importance of these changes and the implications they have for society that beg more serious thought and dialogue from citizens and public leaders alike.

Underneath the umbrella of civic engagement lies volunteering. As an activity, volunteering increasingly transcends state and national boundaries, but does so while also asking for investment in local communities and neighborhoods. Some of the nation’s first voluntary associations can be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville and the founding of the country with his promotion of civil society as a condition for a health democracy. His foundational ideas have lasted through to the present day, and volunteering and civic participation levels continue to rise. Additionally, the lens through which volunteering is often understood has changed. Where formerly it was asked why people volunteer, today the question is why don’t people volunteer (Musick, Wilson & Bynum Jr., 2000). In 2010, the number of hours spent volunteering annually reached an all time high, and as the Baby Boomer generation begins to retire in coming years
these numbers are only expected to grow. Since 2002, the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Current Population Survey (CPS) has captured volunteer data annually with the most recent survey (2010) showing the addition of 1.6 million Americans to the volunteer labor force between 2008-2009 (“Volunteering,” 2010). Additionally, as the size of the volunteer labor force expands there is a trend in describing and analyzing volunteer behavior using some of the same tools and language as seen with the paid labor force. This is demonstrated clearly in the monetization of the value of a volunteer’s time ($21.36 an hour in 2010) and in the reporting of its aggregate value for 2009 of $169 billion (Independent Sector, 2010).

To better understanding this unique labor force, and to break it down into more manageable pieces, scholars have traditionally examined volunteering behavior through the influences that support or inhibit such behavior. Some of the most common influences studied are level of education, family income, community attachment, race, gender, marital status and more recently, home ownership rates (“Volunteering,” 2010). Some of these influences, like education and being female, have been shown to positively impact the likelihood of being a volunteer. Others, like low family income or not owning a home, have been shown to negatively influence the likelihood of being a volunteer. A better understanding of these influences and whether they encourage or impede volunteer participation is valuable information for civic leaders and political leaders alike. In a 2010 report, the CNCS alluded to the political and social power of volunteers in writing that although the economic climate of 2008-2009, “tested the nation's ability to support vulnerable populations…Americans are respond[ing] to the crisis by serving” (“Volunteering,” 2010, p.1). If future leaders hope to harness the energies and capital of volunteers, knowing what motivates or hinders their participation is a great place to start.
Of particular interest to this paper is the influence of race on the likelihood of being a volunteer. It has been well documented that those classified as non-Hispanic white Americans volunteer at rates much higher than those classified as black Americans. While this may sound declarative, studies into how much race actually contributes once other factors are controlled for remain unclear. For instance, when predicting the number of hours an individual will volunteer, it’s assumed that when personal resources, such as level of education and income, are included, the result will show a greater propensity for white Americans to volunteer. However, it’s also assumed that if social resources are included, such as the closeness of a community and number of connections within the community, black Americans will show a greater propensity to volunteer.

In their study on race and formal volunteering, Musick et al. (2000) added to this conversation by digging further into social resources and their influence on volunteering. In particular, the authors acknowledge a relationship between greater numbers of social connections and the increased likelihood of being asked to volunteer. As has been well documented by others (Yörük, 2007; Independent Sector, 2001), being asked is an essential factor in determining whether someone volunteers, with some reports of nearly 80 percent of people who are asked agreeing to volunteer (Musick et al., 2000). What stands out from the Musick et al. study is that when being asked was accounted for in the analysis, the race effect became insignificant. This suggests that volunteer tendencies for black and white Americans are more alike than surface-level data would have us believe, and that whether a person is asked or not may be a better indicator of whether someone volunteers.

This paper investigates these same influences on volunteer rates, and retests the findings of Musick et al. (2000) using data from the 2009 Current Population Survey supplement on
volunteering. While I anticipate finding similar results and that the race effect will be mitigated by the factor of ‘the ask’, this research offers a useful assessment of more current data to assess if this, and other key trends reported in volunteering, still hold today, ten years on. For policy makers and nonprofit leaders who hope to harness the capacity and capital volunteers’ offer, such a study can help them make more informed decisions and shape their recruitment strategies going forward.
Literature Review

I. Volunteering in America

Volunteers, and the roles they play in society, can be generally understood as unpaid participants in the labor force. They work in a wide array of areas and provide a number of different services, both in dimension and type of commitment. The general areas into which individual volunteer efforts fall into includes the arts, education, environment, health, human services, international or foreign concern, political organizations and campaigns, private and community foundations, public and societal benefit, adult recreation, religious organizations and youth development. The big five from this list (religious organizations, education, youth development, health and human services) comprise nearly 75 percent of all volunteer time and are referred to colloquially as “church, children and charity” (Brown, 1999, p. 21). These areas suggests what other scholars have identified: the roles volunteers fill within society fall along a continuum and can range from the concrete (social service delivery) to the abstract (enhancement of a robust civil society), depending on the type and purpose of their activities (Putnam, 2000; Brown 1999).

With respect to social service delivery, Brown describes the role of the volunteer more explicitly as, “the low-cost delivery mechanism” for such services (1999, p. 22). This role is in part the result of changing government policies from the 1980s, which scaled back social services and put pressure on both the private and nonprofit sectors, as well as private individuals, to become resources in helping meet societal demands (Ibid). The pressure on volunteers to make up this difference in services provided is supported by data from the annual Corporation for National and Community Service survey on American volunteer behavior. The most recent survey, done in 2010, showed that 62.8 million Americans gave time to volunteer in 2009, and
that collectively they contributed 8.1 billion hours to the areas described above (CNCS, 2010).

The broad areas and interests of volunteers, and the many motives held by individuals to volunteer, help define a volunteer as someone who engages in behavior that is “not bio-socially determined (e.g., eating, sleeping), nor economically necessitated (e.g., paid work, housework, home repair), nor socio-politically compelled (e.g. paying one’s taxes, clothing oneself before appearing in public)” (Brown, 1999, p.18).

II. Characteristics of Volunteers

In his survey of the volunteer literature, Wilson (2000) finds that when it comes to gender, women are slightly more likely to volunteer than men. Women are also more likely to choose volunteer opportunities associated with caring and personal tasks, where men are more likely to engage in volunteering activities more closely related to their professional skills. Additionally, younger women are more apt to volunteer than younger men, and view volunteering as an investment in social networks and connections. The gender divide is heightened when children and employment are added to the picture. Rotolo and Wilson (2007) found that women who work full-time are less likely than part-time workers to volunteer, and that both of these groups are less likely to volunteer than women who do not work and are homemakers. However, if free-time was thought to be a factor leading to volunteering, the authors also found that women with school-age children were more likely to volunteer than women without children.

Other characteristics that have been noted to have a positive relationship with volunteering are income, and marital status. Despite an assumption by economists and rational-thought theorists that as wages rise, so too will the opportunity of cost of volunteering (Wilson does note that this relationship can vary based on how income and volunteering are measured
income has consistently been shown to have a positive relationship with volunteering. Marital status is also associated positively with volunteering, where even though single women have been found to volunteer more hours than any other demographic (Mesch et al., 2006), married couples often base individual decisions to volunteer on the decisions and behavior of their partner (Wilson, 2000).

Motivational Theory

In understanding differences within the volunteer cohort there are two main lenses used by scholars to do so: the motivational perspective and the generational perspective. Beginning first with the various motivational perspectives of volunteers, we can look to Clary, Snyder and Stukas (1996) and their work on motivations and the functional approach to volunteering. The authors begin by acknowledging that volunteering requires work, time and effort from the individual. They then ask, in spite of these obstacles, what motivates people to do it anyway. Clary, et al. then utilize the functional approach – which refers to the belief that volunteer activities satisfy some other innate need for the individual, aside from the direct benefit their actions produce – to examine different motivations. The six broad categories they define for motivations are as follows: expressing or acting on values, understanding and increasing knowledge, enhancement and building self-esteem, gaining career experiences, socializing, and lastly, protecting against feelings of guilt or inferiority. In analyzing volunteering as an activity motivated by one or more of these categories, the authors, through survey data, draw connections between certain motivations and higher levels of volunteering. Their results found expressing or acting on values was the premier motivation across gender and racial groups for volunteering. This finding emphasized a larger principle of volunteering that generally goes unspoken: it is a
concern for the wellbeing of others that distinguishes volunteers from non-volunteers (Clary et al., 1996).

**Generational Theory**

The generational lens has also received a great share of attention from both scholars and public leaders. From scholars, generational divisions of volunteers have traditionally fallen along three fault lines: The Baby Boomer generation, born between 1946-1955, The Silent generation, born between 1936-1945, and the Long Civic generation, born between 1926-1935 (Einolf, 2009). In the future, these groupings will likely be replaced with comparisons between the Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennial generation, but up to this point, it is the former cohorts that have been used to assess changes in volunteer levels, holding age constant. There are a number of scholars who have used these groupings for their research (Goss, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Einolf, 2009), and yet consensus on what exactly can be expected for future levels is still largely uncertain. Using data spanning a decade, these scholars have looked at the Long Civic generation’s volunteer levels from 1995 and compared them to the Silent generation’s 2005 levels, when both cohorts were in roughly their retirement years. Einolf (2009) found an increase in volunteer participation from the Long Civic to Silent generation’s retirement years. These findings (though varied) were then used to construct a model to predict volunteer levels for Baby Boomers’ in 2015, when they too would be in their retirement years (Goss, 1999, Einolf, 2009).

Interestingly, these studies have not produced a conclusive result on whether individuals today are volunteering more or less than generations before them. On one hand, Goss (1999) found much of the growth she observed in volunteer participation could be attributed to the sheer size of the Baby Boomer’s over-60 cohort, which is a great deal larger than the over-60 cohorts of either the long civic or silent generations. Therefore, when holding other factors constant, she
found no difference in today’s volunteer levels, once the growth of the current retirement-age population was accounted for. Einolf (2009), on the other hand, using a similar method, found volunteer levels to be progressively increasing from the Civic generation through to today.

**The Volunteer Lifecycle**

In addition to the various motivation and generational influences discussed, volunteer trends are also subject to the lifecycle constraints of the average individual. That is, as individuals age, marry, start families and retire, certain peaks and valleys in participation have been consistently observed overtime. Volunteer participation is generally observed to be at its highest during middle-age when individuals are more likely to have families, be married and be more established in their careers. As referenced earlier with respect to gender, parents of school-aged children often find increased opportunities to coach, volunteer in the classroom or school, and general contribute to the many social activities having children exposes them to (Li & Ferraro, 2006). On either side of this peak, when individuals are young and less settled, or again when they are older and retiring, volunteering is found to be less frequent. Wilson (2000) characterizes the transition between youth and adulthood as a period of time where the structures of youth give way to the freedom and independence of being a young adult. As a result of this development and the distancing form guardians, volunteering is a low priority.

The influence of volunteering on older Americans, and of older Americans on volunteering, has received a greater deal of attention than the relationship between volunteering and youth (although that is changing, see CNCS 2011 report on volunteering and college students) in part because of the speculated health benefits from engagement. In their study on middle and later life volunteering, Li and Ferraro (2006) found that volunteering was a benefit to older Americans when undertaken to compensate for declining mental health or depressive
symptoms. In these cases, volunteering works to increase socialization and helps individuals maintain “a stable socio-emotional climate in the aging process” (p.500). For middle age Americans the effect of volunteering was not as clearly beneficial, and the authors found it can be the case that efforts undertaken by busy individuals could actually be a burden on family and social roles, forcing compromise in physical and mental health. For the volunteer lifecycle, the finding that volunteer engagement may help the emotional and mental health of older adults, given they are physically capable of volunteering, is useful in understanding how the Baby Boomer generation lives out its retirement years.

III. Influences on Volunteering

To many Americans, volunteering is an activity that imposes a burden on their resources. Most clearly, volunteering requires individuals to give their time, but it also requires the financial stability to work without compensation and forego family and professional responsibilities for the periods of time required to volunteer. It is noted that possessing professional skills, such as writing, organizing, and planning make individuals more ‘successful’ volunteers (Son & Wilson, 2011). For some, the burdens and skills needed to volunteer are onerous or unattainable, for others, they are easily maneuvered and simple formalities. The personal and social resources at an individuals’ disposal that help determine how large or small the burden to volunteering is, are influenced by factors such as education level, personal or family income, race, gender, marital status, religiosity, civic group participation and personal health. As a starting point, it has been widely observed that volunteering is at its highest among white, married, well-educated, middle-aged women, who have above-average incomes and are employed (Brown, 1999; Mesch et al., 2006). While this imagines a somewhat narrow type of volunteer, the actual breadth of
volunteers is quite wide. This then begs the question – what makes some individuals more likely to volunteer than others?

For many scholars (Goss, 1999; Musick & Wilson, 2008; Son & Wilson, 2011), the strongest influence in predicting volunteer participation is education, where higher levels of education are associated with increased likelihood of volunteering. Son and Wilson (2011), building on others research, describe this relationship in three cumulative stages: first, greater levels of education allow individuals to acquire skills (writing, planning, etc.) that make them valuable as volunteers; second, higher levels of education also make individuals more confident and therefore more receptive to volunteering because they believe they can do it; and finally, with more education, the degree and diversity of an individual’s social network increases and they become exposed to increased opportunities to volunteer. Quoting Oesterle, et al. (2004), Son and Wilson (2011) cite education’s promotion of “civic skills, social connections, and civic values” as the reason for its strong influence on volunteering (p. 646).

In addition to education, scholars have identified other influences on volunteering, although not with such consensus. For instance, Putnam (2000) describes the role of participation in religious and civic organizations as a strong signal for voluntary participation. Religious giving and volunteering is too large a topic for this research, but studies have generally focused on the role of religious organization to socialize members and thereby open them to more volunteer opportunities, as well as their ‘culture;’ influence in encouraging altruistic values and promoting the public welfare (Son & Wilson, 2011). Still others have suggested income as the most robust predictor of volunteering where people with higher incomes tend to give to charity more often, and then also engaged in additional volunteer work after making monetary contributions (Goss, 1999; Mesch et al., 2006). While it remains unclear which variable best
predicts volunteering, scholars have identified some common influences that can be useful in predicting participation levels: present volunteering, religious giving, secular charitable giving, education, health, meeting attendance, community trust, future plans to help others, and religious services attendance (Einolf, 2009).

Trust, future plans to help others, and present volunteering are factors that describe what Einolf calls ‘socially valued’ activities. Such activities are said to support and help build a person’s identity, and once they are adopted, continuing with these activities becomes necessary for individuals to live up to their established identity. This suggests that for some individuals, the social benefits of volunteering they receive from doing their work becomes part of who they are. Therefore, while the decision to volunteer for many is largely related to personal resources and the ability to give up time so they are able to undertake these activities, volunteering is also a reflection of people’s identities and how they feel about the activity they are undertaking (McAdam & Paulson, 1993).

For other Americans, who are perhaps less influenced by these ‘socially valued’ factors, influences on volunteering can be understood as reflections of their human, cultural and social capital. The use of ‘capital’ here is indicative of a larger trend by scholars to study and analyze volunteering as an unpaid labor force. It is still assumed that in the majority of instances, individuals volunteer because of a desire to help others; however, the use of this language, typical of the labor market, demonstrates a shift away from personal values and identity, and frames volunteering more broadly as a question of resources.

**Human Capital**

The term human capital refers to factors such as age, income, education, and experience, as well as health status and available free time (Einolf, 2009; Mesch et al., 2006). Human capital
is positively related to volunteering, where individuals with higher levels of these measures are more likely to volunteer. Mesch et al. (2006) also note that volunteering itself can be considered an investment in human capital; that is, people may believe volunteering will help them acquire greater education, experience, or improved health. It follows then that individuals with higher levels of human capital are both more likely to volunteer and also more likely to be recruited to volunteer, as their skill sets and personal resources enhance, rather than limit their ability to volunteer (Musick et al., 2000; Mesch et al., 2006).

**Cultural Capital and Generativity**

Cultural capital is similar to human capital and the earlier discussion of motivations in that it refers to the role of values and ethics in choosing to volunteer. In particular, cultural capital describes an individual’s value orientation and how this influences their decision on volunteering (Musick et al, 2000). In addition to education and experiences, some of the most common ways people develop their value orientation is through religion and their sense of moral obligation (Einolf, 2009). Through this process, individuals also identify more innate factors of their personality, such as their sense of helpfulness or empathy (Ibid). Similar to cultural capital, in their 2011 study on influences upon volunteering, Son and Wilson employed the concept of “subjective dispositions,” first introduced by Wilson and Musick (2008), as a way to understand volunteer motivations and behaviors. The disposition, or predisposition, of an individual who volunteers is thought to be the result of how they are shaped by the world around them. This includes structural factors, such as age and income, but also includes the social context that they grow up in, for instance, a religious household.

From their discussion of dispositions, Wilson and Son (2011) use the concept of ‘generativity’ to further explain why some individuals, and not others, volunteer. They loosely
define generativity as the idea that individuals view themselves as having something worth giving back to society, and are invested in preserving institutions and practices that they see, “as a legacy for future generations” (p. 648). They look at education and religion as two strong influences shaping how generative individuals are, and find that people with broad notions of the well-being of future generations, are more likely to volunteer. This research leaves the influence largely to the side, but it is widely noted that participation in religious organizations is positively related with the likelihood of volunteering. Son and Wilson (2011) make the obvious but oft overlooked point that religious organizations themselves are voluntary, and so for reasons of social capital described below, individuals who volunteer once with an organization are more likely to volunteer again in the future. Additionally, religion’s structural and cultural influences on its members foster an environment of giving, altruism, and encourage “an ethic of caring” (Son & Wilson, 2011, p. 646), which can create a disposition and outlook often found in volunteers.

Social Capital

The final set of influences discussed here – and the one given the most attention by scholars (Putnam, 1995; Wang & Grady, 2008; Mesch et al., 2006; Musick et al., 2000) – is social capital. This term describes the broad social networks and the levels of social trust that individuals possess, and the way these networks provide access to social markets. As Putnam describes it, “social capital refers to the networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (1995, p. 97). Although definitions vary, networks generally refer to an individual’s ties to one-another, the community, and civic organizations, and reflect their embeddedness in society. Norms, on the other hand, refer to the level and depth of social trust an individual has for others and authority, as well as their
expectation and the value they place on good citizenship (Einolf, 2009; Mesch et al., 2006). Einolf (2009) defines norms more colloquially as the level of trust individuals have in their collective action; in other words, how much they “buy[ing] into the system” (p. 89). In addition to trust and social embeddedness, social capital also refers specifically to marital status and prior social participation as factors that provide access to social markets (Mesch et al., 2006).

As with human capital, individuals with high levels of social capital are more likely to become volunteers. Many scholars have noted that with higher levels of trust in others and greater solidarity to the community comes a greater sense of obligation to help others. Much of this trust is built up between individuals through social networks, both formal and informal. Formal social networks include organizational membership and sustained volunteering outside of informal networks. Informal networks are characterized as more “caring” and fostering “a sense of reciprocity,” and are most often exchanges offered between groups of friends and family members (Wang & Grady, 2008 p.28). Finally, social networks do not just characterize social capital, they also help foster its development. As Putnam writes, they, “provide the channels through which we recruit one another for good deeds, and…foster norms of reciprocity that encourage attention to others’ welfare” (2000, p. 117).

IV. The “Power of The Ask”

With all of the influences on volunteering mentioned previous to now, it is clear that volunteering is an activity undertaken by various demographics as a response to different motivations and influences. One key factor that has not been explicitly mentioned, but which was referenced in the discussion of social capital, is the “power of the ask”. Social capital and social networks are remarkable in large part for their role in connecting individuals to one another and
to new organizations and networks. The implied result of this, and the way it intersects with volunteering trends, is that with this greater number of connections individuals become exposed to additional opportunities to volunteer and encounter more peers and colleagues urging and asking them to do so.

It is now a widely held belief that when asked to participate, individuals are much more likely to do so compared to their peers who are not asked (Musick et al., 2000; Yörük, 2008; Independent Sector, 2001). In their 2001 report, Independent Sector found the probability of being asked to volunteer was approximately 50 percent; however, when it came to how many people went on to volunteer, of those who were asked, 71.3 percent reported volunteering in the last 12 months, where only 28.7 percent of those who were not asked to volunteer had actually gone on to volunteer in the last year (p. 68). In addition to showing a higher likelihood of volunteering, those who were asked and then volunteered also contributed more hours monthly (16.1), on average, than those who were not asked but volunteered anyway (12.6 hours). Goss’s work (1999) showed further evidence of the positive relationship between recruitment and volunteering, once economic and demographic factors were controlled for, and added to this base of work by evidencing a six percentage-point increase in the number of people who began volunteering as a result of being asked between 1987 and 1995 (Goss, 1999, p. 400).

While these numbers are nearly outdated, the prevailing trend of recruitment’s strength is worth noting, and this paper expects to find further gains in recruitment efforts in its analysis of the 2009 CPS volunteer data. Of note, and to be considered in this research, is the selection problem that Yörük (2008) finds in some previous work on the “power of the ask”. He finds that many previous studies have incorrectly assumed, “charitable organizations randomly solicit individuals,” when in fact, he concludes, there are at least three reasons why the probably of
being asked is not random (p. 79). These reasons include the fact that individuals who participate in organizations are more likely to be asked, that people who have relationships with organizations or other volunteers are more likely to be asked, and lastly, that former volunteers are more likely to be asked to volunteer again in the future.

Whether it is a feeling of obligation to society, or previous interaction and/or participation with the organization or asker, it is clear the role of the ask can greatly influence the level of volunteering in the country. How this specific influence is distributed among various demographics, in particular, minority groups should be of growing interest for the sector.

V. Race and Volunteering

To retest the findings of Musick et al. (2000), the volunteer participation levels of black and white Americans in 2009 is analyzed. While it has been well documented that blacks volunteer at lower rates than whites, these differences have been shown to diminish when human capital factors such as income, occupation, religion and education have been controlled for (Bryant et al., 2003; Clary et al., 1996; Musick et al., 2000; Mesch et al. 2006). To understand the lower turnout of blacks to volunteer, some scholars have used the dominant status theory and interpreted their lower participation as the result of minority status and the fewer social connections, lower socioeconomic status, and distrust of authority that has been consistent with many minority groups (Mesch et al., 2006; Musick et al., 2000).

Musick et al. (2000) and Wilson (2000) also offer up the theory that despite the low reserves of human capital, black Americans, as a result of a historical distrust of authority, have often relied heavily on internal, communal structures of support, as well as private philanthropy to meet social needs. With this in mind Musick et al. conclude the net result of social and human
capital on volunteering for blacks is unclear. Where lower levels of human capital should lead to low levels of volunteering, high levels of social connectedness and cultural capital should contribute to higher levels of volunteering. Studies on how social and human capital trends vary by racial and demographic groups are rare, and those that do exist (Musick et al., 2000) are inconclusive.

Where the influence of being asked to volunteer overlays with being black, the results from Musick et al. (2000) show that black and white Americans behave alike and that those who are asked to volunteer do so at higher rates than those who are not asked to volunteer, when factors of human and social capital are controlled for. These findings are supported by the work of Mesch et al. (2006), which found that social and human capital factors could also account for differences in volunteer participation along gender lines and marital status, as well as the limited research on the role of the ask in increasing volunteer turnout. On this specific intersection of race and volunteering as a result of being recruited, there is an unfortunate paucity of research; however, this paper, through it’s analysis of the 2009 CPS volunteer data, hopes to contribute first, with an up-to-date look at volunteer trends by race, and second by testing whether the role of the ask fully absorbs any differences identified between black and white Americans’ volunteering rates and behaviors.
In this study I use data collected from the 2009 Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is a monthly survey given to approximately 56,000 households in the United States and is conducted as a partnership between the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Since 2002, the volunteer supplement has been issued and captures individual level information for people 15 years and older and informs on their level of volunteering and personal characteristics. The CPS defines volunteers as anyone who perform unpaid activities in any of more than a dozen volunteer categories (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). The 2009 supplement asks about volunteer behavior taking place between September 1, 2008 and August 31, 2009.

From the approximately 56,000 households surveyed, 152,274 individual responses were recorded. The survey solicits information on whether an individual volunteered in the past 12 months and if they did so, it asks additional questions about the type of organization, the number of hours volunteered, as well as how they were introduced to the organization; for instance, were they asked to participate or did they seek out the organization on their own. The CPS also obtains basic demographic characteristics of the sample. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the variables used in this study’s model. The sample is comprised of 15,310 observations and is comprised of only those individuals who responded yes to volunteering in 2009. The list and description of the variables used in this study are below:

Main variables of interest:
Variable: $Hrsvol$
Description: Total hours volunteered

Variable: $Black$
Description: A dummy variable for a respondent’s race as black or non-black

Variable: $Asked$
Description: A dummy variable for whether a respondent was asked to volunteer
**Human Capital variables:**
Variable: Annual family income
Description: Grouping of six dummy variables reflecting different income brackets

Variable: Highest level of education achieved
Description: Grouping of four dummy variables reflecting education levels

Variable: \( PT_{work} \)
Description: Dummy variable for working less than 35 hours a week

Variable: \( FT_{work} \)
Description: Dummy variable for working 35 to 40 hours a week

Variable: \( FT_{plus} \)
Description: Dummy variable for working more than 40 hours a week

**Social Capital variables:**
Variable: Age
Description: Continuous variable for respondent’s age for those 15 and older

Variable: Married
Description: Dummy variable for marital status defined as married and non-married

Variable: Meeting
Description: Dummy variable for attending a community meeting in the last year

Variable: Neighbor
Description: Dummy variable for working with his/her neighbors in the last year

Variable: Donate
Description: Dummy variable for donating money or gifts to an organization

Variable: Region
Description: Grouping of four dummy variables for four regions of the United States

### Table 1

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<td>Dummy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.236</td>
<td>15440</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.466</td>
<td>0.499</td>
<td>15310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Hours Volunteered</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>118.088</td>
<td>230.363</td>
<td>15440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Human Capital Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Family Income</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;$15,000</td>
<td>Dummy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.196</td>
<td>15440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Range</td>
<td>Dummy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.076</td>
<td>0.265</td>
<td>15440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000-$29,999</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000-$49,999</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.165</td>
<td>0.371</td>
<td>15440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000-$74,999</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.225</td>
<td>0.418</td>
<td>15440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000-$99,999</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.181</td>
<td>0.385</td>
<td>15440</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt;$100,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.314</td>
<td>0.464</td>
<td>15440</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Highest Level of Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highschool or Below</td>
<td>Dummy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.219</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0.187</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>15440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hours Worked (weekly)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;35 hours (Part-time)</td>
<td>Dummy</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0.242</td>
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<tr>
<td>35-40 hours (Full-time)</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0.528</td>
<td>0.499</td>
<td>15440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;40 hours (More than f/t)</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.42</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social Capital Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
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<td>85</td>
<td>43.753</td>
<td>13.208</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Dummy</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0.682</td>
<td>0.466</td>
<td>15440</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attended Community Meetings</td>
<td>Dummy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.282</td>
<td>0.45</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked with Neighbors</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.235</td>
<td>0.424</td>
<td>15397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donated Money or Gifts</td>
<td>Dummy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.842</td>
<td>0.364</td>
<td>15374</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Region</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Dummy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.199</td>
<td>0.399</td>
<td>15440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Dummy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.285</td>
<td>0.451</td>
<td>15440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>Dummy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.266</td>
<td>0.442</td>
<td>15440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>Dummy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.251</td>
<td>0.433</td>
<td>15440</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With respect to our central question of the influence of race and being asked on the rate of volunteering, the statistics above show that our sample of volunteers is 5.9 percent black and that 46.6 percent were asked to volunteer (as opposed to seeking out the organization themselves, or volunteering for another reason). The human capital characteristics show that on average, 31.4 percent of volunteers have annual family incomes over $100,000 a year, and that the second largest group of volunteers (22.5 percent) have annual family incomes between $50,000 and $74,999. The dummy variables reflecting the highest level of education attained and employment status show that nearly 80 percent of volunteers had at least some college, and more...
than half of the sample (52.8 percent) work full-time (35-40 hours per week), with another quarter of the sample (23 percent) working more than full-time.

The social capital variables in our sample show that on average 68.2 percent of volunteers are married and that volunteers have an average age of 43.8 years old. The sample also suggests that on average, 28.2 percent of volunteers attended a community meeting in the last year, and 23.5 percent did something to help their neighbors or neighborhood. Additionally, 84.2 percent of volunteers donated money, gifts or an in-kind contribution in the last year. Regional differences are also accounted for with regional dummy variables which show that just more than a quarter of the sample is from the Midwest (28.5 percent), and just below a quarter is from the Northeast (19.9 percent), with nearly equal parts from the South and West (26.6 and 25.5 percent, respectively).

Using this sample, I test my null and alternative hypotheses:

- $H_0$: When accounting for whether someone was asked to volunteer black and non-black Americans volunteer at the same level.
- $H_A$: When accounting for whether someone was asked to volunteer black Americans volunteer at lower levels than on-black Americans.

To carry out this test I run an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression predicting the number of hours volunteered and include independent variables for being black and being asked to volunteer. I also include control variables reflecting human capital characteristics such as age, gender, education and income, and social capital characteristics such as marital status, attendance at community meeting and neighborhood engagement. Therefore, my theoretical models look as follows:

$$\text{Hours Volunteered} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Black} + \beta_2 \text{Asked} + \beta_3 \text{Human Capital Controls} + \beta_4 \text{Social Capital Controls} + \text{Error}$$
This study is strongly rooted in the work of Musick et. al (2000), and as such, I anticipate the coefficient on the variables *black* and *asked* to be statistically significant, initially, but as the control variables are introduced to the model, the significance of the coefficient on *black* will decline. Additionally, I expect many of the human and social capital variables to be significant predictors of the number of hours volunteered.
Data & Methods

The OLS regression modeled predicted in this study comes from demographic information on 15,310 volunteers. The dependent variable is continuous and measures the total number of hours volunteered in the last year. With the exception of an independent variable measuring age, all other independent variables are dummy variables capturing what the literature review described as social capital characteristics – geographic region, age, marital status, community meeting attendance, neighborhood involvement, donating of money or gifts – and human capital characteristics – highest level of education, annual family income, and employment status. This study assumes that the basic conditions for an OLS model are met, and that the errors are distributed normally, making ordinary least squares the best maximum likelihood estimator for the total number of hours volunteered annually.

Although this study builds off the work of Musick et al (2000), it does not follow their methodology of conducting a tobit model to predict the number of hours volunteered. The reason for this is that the data used by Musick et al. captured responses from a sample of volunteers and non-volunteers. The authors were able to draw conclusions about the likelihood that someone would volunteer depending on whether they were asked because the sample included both people who were asked to volunteer and did so, as well as people who were asked to volunteer and declined to do so. As a result, Musick, et al. had a concentration of hours spent volunteering at zero because of those individuals who declined the invitation to volunteer and reported zero. This concentration of observations at zero is what made the tobit model appropriate.

An unfortunate limitation of this study and CPS’s Volunteer Supplement is that it only captures information about how people become volunteers if they actually did volunteer in the
last year. Therefore, the sample used in this study is comprised only of volunteers and has only positive values for number of hours volunteered which, we believe is linear in nature.

In creating the variables used in this model, the variable asked was created as a dummy variable indicating whether someone was asked to volunteer or if they became a volunteer through another way – for instance, if a family member is a current volunteer, or if the individual is an existing member of the organization. The variable black was constructed as a dummy variable for whether the respondent self reported their race as ‘Black only’. An interaction term between black and asked was initially created and included in the model; however, the small share of the sample that defined this variable (409 observations out of 15,130), the insignificance of the variable’s coefficient, as well as the insignificance of t-tests of equality between the interaction and black, led to the decision to remove it from the model. In the end, although there may be something different about individuals who are both black and asked to volunteer, this interaction term did not improve the explanatory power of the model nor the understanding it offers for the question at hand. Lastly, the variables for family income and education level were originally created as categorical variables but are recreated as sets of dummy variables for ease of interpretation.
Results

As stated above, while this study departs from the methodology of Musick, et al. (2000) slightly, the results in Table 2 (below) show that at least the initial OLS regression using only the main variables of interest: black and asked, produces results consistent with the authors’ findings. Working through the results, model by model, we see that in Model 1, black starts out as significant (p<0.05), but when being asked is accounted for in Model 2, the significance on black disappears and asked becomes statistically significant (p<0.01). This describes a story similar to Musick et al. in that race is initially a significant predictor of hours volunteered and being black is associated with an additional 13.7 hours of volunteering a year. When being asked to volunteer is added to the regression, race becomes insignificant and being asked, as compared to other means of becoming a volunteer, is highly significant and associated with 34.02 fewer hours volunteered per year.

| Table 2 |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|
|                  | Model 1          | Model 2          |
| Independent Variable | Coefficient (Std. Error) | Coefficient (Std. Error) |
| Black        | 13.70* (7.86)   | 12.82 (7.89)    |
| Asked        |                  | -34.02*** (3.73) |
| Constant     | 117.28*** (1.91) | 133.29*** (-2.59) |
| R-Squared    | 0.0002          | 0.0056          |
| N            | 15440           | 15310           |

***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1

Adding to the models described above, two groups of control variables are introduced, first separately, and then together. These results are reported in Table 3 (below). In the first of these more complex models, the human capital control variables are included and allow us to
describe the impact of being black and being asked to volunteer when accounting only for income, education and employment status (Model 3). In the next iteration, the social capital control variables are included in the model and show the influence of race and being asked to volunteer when the societal influences of civic engagement, age and marital status are accounted for (Model 4). Finally, the full regression model is run with both human capital and social capital control variables included (Model 5).

In analyzing these results, we shall use Model 2 as our starting point. Doing so, we see that when the human capital controls are included, the variable *black* becomes marginally significant (p<0.10) while *asked* remains significant (p<0.01) and indicates people who are asked volunteer 33.17 hours less than those who become volunteers another way. And while the race variable is only marginally significant in this regression, it does tell us that black individuals are expected to volunteer 15.61 hours more per year than individuals who are not black. Although none of the household income variables are significant, two of the education variables and both employment variables are statistically significant. This tells us that individuals with a college degree and those with advanced degree will volunteer roughly 13 hours more per year than those individuals who have a high school education or less. The employment status variables suggest that full-time employment (35-40 hours a week) and those who work more than 40 hours a week, not-surprisingly, have a negative impact on the total annual hours volunteered. When compared to individuals who work part-time, full-time workers volunteer an average of 28.92 fewer hours per year, while people working more than 40 hours per week volunteer 22.38 fewer hours, on average. These results make sense intuitively if we imagine that a person’s time is a trade-off between labor and leisure, where people with greater amounts of labor have less leisure and therefore volunteering must compete with all other leisure activities for time. Additionally, with
respect to highest level of education achieved, these results appear to be consistent with the literature in that higher levels of education and number of hours volunteered seem to be positively correlated. In sum, while education and employment status tell some of the story about hours volunteered, the magnitude of asked still explains the greatest variation in how much time individuals spend volunteering annually.

When we run a regression with our main variables of interest and the social capital variables (Model 4) we see that the coefficient on asked only changes slightly (increasing just three one-hundredths of an hour) but maintains its significance (p<0.01). However, the race variable loses its significance entirely. Many of the social factor variables are significant and have relatively large and positive magnitudes. Age is significant at the p<0.01 level, however the magnitude is quite small and every additional year only increases annual hours volunteered by 0.5. In contrast, attending a community meeting, helping neighbors and donating gifts or money are all significant (p<0.01) and have large, positive coefficients. Community meeting attendants are expected to volunteer 35.58 hours more than those who do not participate in such meetings, while individuals who help their neighbors are expected to volunteer 44.30 hours more per year than those who did not report helping their neighbors. Finally, individuals who make donations of money or gifts are expected to volunteer 18.65 hours more per year than those who do not make such donations. The smaller coefficient on donate (as compared to neighbor and meeting), is likely explained by the fact that some people view giving money or gifts as a substitute for giving their own time.

Two of the regional variables, South and West, were also found to be significant predictors of hours volunteered; however, since this study has not introduced research on geographic volunteer trends it will not attempt to interpret these results here.
Lastly, in Model 5, the full regression model is run and includes both human capital and social capital control variables. The results are again consistent with Musick’s work and race is an insignificant factor when these other variables are included. Also like the previous models, \textit{asked} is significant (p<0.01) and those who are asked to volunteer are predicted to give 32.1 fewer hours per year as compared to those who volunteered for another reason. The educational attainment variables and household income variables are not significant at any level; however, both employment status indicators are significant (p<0.01) and people employed full-time are predicted to spend 27.62 fewer hours volunteering than those who are employed only part-time (0-34 hours a week), and individuals working more than 40 hours a week are expected to spend 25.22 fewer hours volunteering as compared to those employed part-time. It is interesting to note that individuals who work more than 40 hours a week, despite having less leisure time available, appear to volunteer a few hours \textit{more} than individuals working 35-40 hours a week.

The significant social capital variables in Model 5 are the same as the variables in the previous model, and only their magnitudes differ slightly. The civic-minded variables are significant (p<0.01) and continue to account for the majority of the variation in hours volunteered. The results suggest that being a donor, holding all else constant, is associated with 20.49 additional volunteer hours per year, a slight increase from Model 4. Additionally, helping with neighborhood projects and attending community meetings are associated with an additional 44.62 and 36.7 hours, respectively, which are only slightly higher than the coefficients from Model 4.
### Table 3

**OLS regression predicting total hours volunteered with human and social capital controls**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>(Std. Error)</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>15.61*</td>
<td>(8.15)</td>
<td>11.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asked to Volunteer</td>
<td>-33.17***</td>
<td>(3.82)</td>
<td>-33.20***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Human Capital Variables**

| Income 15-29k        | 7.28        | (12.12)     | 3.65        | (11.92)      |
| Income 30-49k        | 11.25       | (10.98)     | 4.16        | (10.83)      |
| Income 50-74k        | 13.87       | (10.75)     | 5.14        | (10.70)      |
| Income 75-99k        | 8.27        | (10.99)     | -2.57       | (11.02)      |
| Income >100k         | 4.22        | (10.72)     | -10.33      | (10.82)      |
|Some College          | 4.10        | (5.60)      | -0.11       | (5.53)       |
|College Grad          | 13.10**     | (5.75)      | 5.76        | (5.71)       |
|More than College     | 13.73**     | (6.49)      | -0.45       | (6.47)       |
|Full-Time             | -28.92***   | (4.85)      | -27.62***   | (4.78)       |
|>Full-Time            | -22.38***   | (5.77)      | -25.22***   | (5.69)       |

**Social Capital Variables**

| Age                  | 0.50***     | (0.15)      | 0.56***     | (0.16)       |
|Married               | 2.25        | (4.14)      | 6.55        | (4.50)       |
|Attended Meeting      | 35.58***    | (4.69)      | 36.70***    | (4.80)       |
|Neighbor              | 44.30***    | (4.95)      | 44.62***    | (5.04)       |
|Donated               | 18.63***    | (5.25)      | 20.49***    | (5.55)       |
|Midwest               | -3.24       | (5.35)      | -4.27       | (5.51)       |
|South                 | 16.79**     | (5.50)      | 15.48**     | (5.63)       |
|West                  | 21.93***    | (5.51)      | 20.35***    | (5.65)       |
|Constant              | 137.85***   | (10.80)     | 64.09***    | (8.16)       |
|R-Squared             | 0.0083      |             | 0.0296      |             |
|N                     | 14680       |             | 15232       |             |

***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1

Model 5 has the highest R-squared value of all the models (.0329), which can be interpreted as follows: with the inclusion of all independent variables, the OLS regression explains 3.29 percent of the variation in our dependent variable, hours volunteered. This R-squared value appears to be low, especially because the model includes many of the factors and influences the literature suggests have strong explanatory power for volunteer rates and motivations. It could be the case that the factors included in the model do capture some of the factors that motivate volunteering, but fail to capture the influences that lead to higher rates of
volunteering. Looking in particular at the social factors included in the model, it might be that attending a community meeting and helping out in the neighborhood make someone more likely to be a volunteer because of the personal relationship (and the sense of inspiration, guilt, or cooperation, etc.) created in these exchanges; and yet, these may not be the same factors that lead someone to volunteer greater amounts of their time.
Discussion

I. Policy Implications

The clearest result of this study, and one that builds on the literature cited in this study – though takes it in a slightly different direction – is that being asked to volunteer significantly influences the level at which volunteering is done. In their 2000 study, Musick et al. found a positive relationship between being asked to volunteer and volunteer participation rates. An unfortunate limitation of this study and the CPS survey design is that it cannot make such a comparison or draw such a conclusion because of the nature of the data. What this study is able to conclude, however, is that being asked to volunteer is a significant predictor of the number of hours an individual volunteers annually. In some ways this seem a natural and logical conclusion for many of the same reasons for why the social capital variables centered on personal interactions were significant in the regression models - personal relationships and the commitment made when asked to volunteer influences the rate that someone volunteers. What is surprising about this study’s findings then is not that asked is significant, but rather, that it is significant in a negative direction.

To better understand why this is the case, it is worth highlighting that the dummy variable asked is constructed to represent being asked to volunteer (46.22 percent of the sample) as compared to not being asked to volunteer. The vast majority of these not-asked volunteers are individuals who sought out a volunteer opportunity on their own (40.25 percent). If we simplify our asked variable to ignore the other 13 percent of respondents, asked can be viewed as a dichotomous dummy for either being asked to volunteer or seeking out an organization. In this light, the negative coefficient on asked is more logical result. We could certainly imagine a case where being asked to volunteer is not the motivating factor scholars have described and in fact
produces a feeling of obligation or duty to say yes. It can still be the case that being asked makes someone more likely to say yes to volunteering, however it may not necessarily produce greater levels of volunteering. To that end, we can conclude that individuals who are self-motivated and seek out organizations proactively are the people more likely to spend great amounts of time volunteering.

For policymakers living in a world that increasingly relies a volunteer labor force to staff businesses and programs, these results suggest recruitment and marketing strategies that have traditionally relied on peer outreach and solicitation should be adjusted if they hope to attract and retain new volunteer talent. One way this can be done is by raising the profile of the volunteer opportunity and making it a more desirable choice. Using college-aged programs like CityYear and AmeriCorps as examples, in practices these changes could mean shifting away from on-campus booths or solicitation and instead moving to improve the stature and reputation of the organizations by enhancing the benefits participants receive and strengthening the selection process to make it a more competitive process. These changes could make CityYear and AmeriCorps more like their peer, Teach for America, which is regarded as more prestigious and has shown high program retention and satisfaction rates. If we know that people who are self-motivated and seek out volunteer opportunities give more of their time, then making volunteer opportunities more attractive must be a priority for nonprofits and volunteer organizations looking to enhance their use of volunteers.

The second policy implication from these results relates to the insignificance of the race variable, black. The numbers show quite clearly that a greater number of white Americans volunteer than black Americans annually; this sample in particular was only 6 percent black, with only 914 volunteers identifying as “Black Only,” compared to 13,715 volunteers who
identified as “White Only”. Despite this gap in participation at the individual level, this study asked if there were differences in the volunteer commitment based on these racial differences. The result is a resounding no. This suggests it’s time for policy-makers, non-profits, and other organizations utilizing volunteers, to engage with and even target non-white Americans to build their volunteer capacity. In economic times such as these, where non-profits and businesses are being forced to layoff employees and scale back production, minority volunteers can serve as an untapped source of human capital that could help bridge the gap employers face.

II. Areas for Additional Research

The clearest area for additional research, and where this study would have been helped a great deal, is if volunteer survey data existed that included religious affiliation and church attendance. The inability to comment in any way on how religious values and religious attendance influences the likelihood of being a volunteer is a weakness of this study. Although the existing literature on the influence of religious attendance on volunteerism is not plentiful, what exists suggests that church attendance and volunteering are at least positively associated. If data were available, it might be possible to better understand how religious values influence the decision to become a volunteer and level of dedication of religiously-motivated volunteers. Allegorically, the relationship between the church and volunteering is thought to be particularly strong for African American churches and their communities. If this holds, it would certainly have informed this study’s interpretation and understanding of how the Power of the Ask influences the behavior of black volunteers.

The omission of religious characteristics from the OLS model could explain, at least in part, why the explanatory power of the regressions is so low. Future research could add to the
conversation on volunteers by surveying religious people of many faiths and observing the role of The Ask and other societal influences in their behavior.

In addition to religious characteristics, this paper suggests there is also a need for greater research on the Power of the Ask. The CPS – one of the country’s most prominent and prolific surveys – fails to take this theory into account in the design of its Volunteer Supplement. Additionally, although there is great work coming out of a number of volunteer and civic engagement organizations, including Independent Sector and the Corporation for National and Community Service, neither has included the Power of the Ask in their research in at least a decade. The field of volunteering, nonprofits and civic engagement would all benefit from updated research on which influences or motivations are most effective in producing and supporting a strong volunteer culture.

A final area for future research would be to apply the Power of the Ask to new demographics. Although the concept of The Ask was explored here with a comparison between black and white Americans’ volunteer levels, the country’s changing demographics offer new possibilities for its application. One cultural group that would be of interest and where political implications would be informative for a whole host of policies, would be to apply the idea of The Ask to foreign-born Spanish speakers, in particular, Mexican immigrants. Much has been written about the assimilation of this group and questions have been raised about how well America’s cultural values and commitments have been adopted. Volunteerism is a central cultural commitment of this country and any study of immigrant volunteer behavior could offer fresh insights into these on-going conversations of assimilation and civic responsibility.
Conclusion

The role of the volunteer has increased in importance, responsibility, and visibility in communities and organizations across the country. As we continue to push through troubling economic times, and as policymakers grapple with new tools and strategies to bridge capacity gaps and engage civil society, volunteers continue to be of unique service in their ability to do good and feel good in a range of issue areas. Volunteers are of many races, ages and economic circumstances, and are willing to dedicate their time and efforts to causes that are sometimes their own, but more often the causes of their community or others. The literature has pointed out a number of motivational factors that influence volunteers, including personal values, cultural settings, and expected contributions and gains. There are also factors that can constrain one’s ability and commitment to volunteer, including education and income levels, a lack of social connectedness, and sometimes, membership to a particular racial group.

This study builds on earlier work and adds to the conversation by renewing Musick et al.’s question of how race and requests to volunteer influence behavior. While it is certainly a noteworthy finding of this study that being asked to volunteer has significant influences on behavior; as this study’s results relate to broader social policies, the race results are more interesting and important. While there are far more white volunteers, on average, than any other racial group, this study suggests that this is the product of recruitment strategies and proximity, and not because minority volunteers have lower commitments than their white peers to these activities. Moving forward, if a key objective of those who employ volunteers is to increase the number and level of commitment they receive from participants, then shifting current strategies to engage black and other minority Americans could go a long way towards achieving this goal.
References


