

Civic participation higher among male veterans compared to other men

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Since 9/11, the United States has deployed about 3 million troops around the globe. The time these troops spend in the military can profoundly shape how they participate in future social groups, and many social

scientists are keen to know the details: How civically engaged will veterans be after military service?

A new BYU study published in the journal *Armed Forces & Society* showed that contrary to many assumptions, military [service](#) has historically predicted greater civic participation—involvement in formal, purposeful social organizations—later in life.

According to survey data, male veterans who served in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War were significantly more likely than male nonveterans to join civic groups. They also on average joined 21% more groups and had a 19% higher rate of participation than nonveterans, even when researchers controlled for veterans' increased educational opportunities, which are known to boost civic activity.

These findings can reshape how we look at the effects of military service, said BYU political science professor Sven Wilson, an author of the paper.

"Many of the impacts that people talk about for veterans are negative: they're damaged, they have PTSD, they're violent, they're more likely to get divorced. While we should be very mindful of these negative aspects, we ought to look at the whole experience of veterans and the positive contributions military service can make in their lives afterward," he explained.

Although the study could not determine why veterans' civic participation rates were higher, Wilson thinks it has to do with the sense of collective responsibility prevalent in the military and the leadership skills troops develop, which may make them more civically inclined.

Data for the study came from the National Survey of Families and Households from 1987–88. It was useful to look at older veterans,

Wilson noted, because the wars they fought in were more heavily draft-based compared to the all-volunteer military of more recent conflicts, where troops might already be more predisposed to [civic engagement](#).

Wilson and coauthor William Ruger of the Charles Koch Institute examined the responses of 2,185 men aged 30–69, who were divided into nonveterans, noncombat veterans and combat veterans. Respondents indicated their civic participation from a list of 15 kinds of organizations.

Several illuminating patterns emerged in the data. Based on their responses, both types of veterans gravitated toward service, youth and sports groups in addition to veterans' groups. Importantly, [combat veterans](#) were just as likely to participate as noncombat veterans, suggesting that the traumatic experiences common in combat did not overwhelmingly cause social withdrawal.

The correlation between [military service](#) and civic engagement can be instructive for our society, Wilson said, where overall civic participation is thought by some to be in decline.

"The military emphasizes teamwork, working for a higher purpose, sacrificing your own immediate needs to achieve that end and being focused on a mission. There may be lessons there that society could learn."

More information: Sven E. Wilson et al. Military Service, Combat Experience, and Civic Participation, *Armed Forces & Society* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0095327X20934885](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X20934885)

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