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## Reframing Service as Public Work

By Harry Boyte and Trygve Throntveit

In recent decades, the nation's civic and educational crises have prompted calls from diverse quarters for a major investment in national service. The assumption underpinning most such calls is the same: namely, that enlisting youth in addressing concrete, real-world public challenges will enhance the relevance and impact of their academic studies and open doors to personally rewarding lives as citizens—all while fostering skills and dispositions critical to self-government. But there is a flaw in the service strategy: the understanding of service itself.

No matter how diverse the persons encountered or significant the problems addressed, initiatives that sharply distinguish servers from served will fail to develop either the lifelong learners or the socially productive citizens that a just and prosperous democracy requires. Such initiatives perpetuate views of citizenship as a set of personal rights and responsibilities exercised outside the daily currents of life in society. Indeed, to conceive of national service as selfless sacrifice and citizenship as a rarified sphere of essentially private action is to distort and undermine the American democratic project. These conceptions ignore the daily, messy, collaborative work through which diverse individuals (young or old) learn to build common purpose and a common life. Ironically, they also obscure the genuine civic potential of educational and workplace settings.

If national service is to promote productive citizenship, we need to redefine the terms “service” and “citizenship” alike. Fortunately, both past and present provide

clues to guide us. To begin, however, it is useful to describe the modern history of service.

### **Selfless or selfish?**

In his first year as president, Donald J. Trump sought to end the federal government's flagship service agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service. In his last, he almost succeeded. His budget for Fiscal Year 2021 provided for "the orderly shutdown" of the Corporation. Why?

Since the 1960s, proposals and debates about national and community service, including service embedded in K-12 and higher education, have reflected competing narratives of citizenship and democracy itself. Some Americans—both liberals and conservatives—have promoted service as the selfless sacrifice of time and resources by the fortunate to benefit the needy. Others—again, a cross-partisan group—have criticized organized service initiatives as propaganda machines, misdirecting public and private resources toward the ideological indoctrination or disempowerment of young (serving) or vulnerable (served) individuals. What unites most advocates and skeptics of national service are their framings of service and citizenship as individual virtues promoting individual liberty. For Trump—who has often questioned the value of both personal sacrifice and government bureaucracies to his ideal of liberty—the Corporation was at best a waste of money and at worst a deep-state plot.

Trump's picture of the Corporation is correct in at least one respect. The Corporation's precursor, Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA), embodied the idea of citizenship as personal virtue, developed through selfless service. It was conceived by President John F. Kennedy, who famously launched his presidency with a call for Americans to "ask not what your country can do for you," but rather to "ask what you can do for your country." Kennedy was not calling on *all* Americans to

serve their country, but on a subset he considered capable of doing so. In planning for a National Service Corps—realized as VISTA under President Lyndon B. Johnson—Kennedy explicitly distinguished its purposes and personnel from those of the Youth Employment Program that eventually emerged as the Job Corps. The two programs “should not be confused,” he argued. “The Youth Employment Program is designed for those young people in need of help” in gaining employment. In contrast, “The National Service Corps [is]...for those who wish to be of help.” The goals of the latter, helpers-only corps were four: to provide full-time volunteers to work with the needy; for volunteers to motivate others to serve; to dramatize human needs; and to draw people into helping professions such as education, social work, and health care. Nowhere was it stated that national service should involve collaborative, egalitarian work across classes or stations.

In the decades since VISTA’s launch—and despite many controversies surrounding the program—themes of selfless service as the antidote to America’s civic ailments continued to resonate, through both Republican and Democratic presidencies. Accepting the presidential nomination in 1988, George H. W. Bush lauded the nation's civic groups and volunteer organizations, likening them to “a thousand points of light in a broad and peaceful sky.” In the early 1990s, Bill Clinton made the connection between service and citizenship even more explicit. Persuaded by the late Benjamin Barber, a leading political theorist who deemed civil society the sphere of citizenship and work the sphere of material production, Clinton conceived of what became AmeriCorps as a distinct “civil-society” alternative to other hybrid, civic-vocational models circulating in his administration. Barack Obama, too, embraced the service strategy. Though he launched his campaign in 2007 with a promise of “reclaiming the meaning of citizenship” in America, the call to service soon came to dominate his rhetoric. Upon taking office, Obama pushed through a large expansion of the Corporation for National and Community Service, enjoining volunteers and communities to meet the material needs of those worst hit by the

financial crisis. From the Clinton through the Obama years, AmeriCorps diversified its offerings and encouraged local innovations. Still, its core mission was, and remains, "helping others and meeting critical needs in the community."

The focus on helping needy individuals rather than building collective agency for change has not been specific to government. Perhaps its most important effects were felt in K-12 and higher education. Beginning in the 1980s, service initiatives gained impetus from the arguments of public intellectuals like Robert Bellah, Amitai Etzioni, and other critics of America's "me-first" individualism: a focus on rights over responsibilities that fueled consumerism, incivility, hyperpolarization, and inequality. To counter the me-first culture, service advocates stressed experiences through which young people could develop a sense of responsibility and care for others. *A Call to Civil Society*, issued by the Council on Civil Society in 1998, is a prime example. The report, overseen by political theorist Jean Bethke Elshtain, boasted signatories including Cornel West on the left and Republican senator Dan Coats of Indiana on the right. The authors wrote that the main crisis facing the nation was "not primarily governmental or economic" but was rather a crisis of "social morality." Describing "institutions of civil society" as "the seedbeds of civic virtue," they proposed initiatives to promote character development through families, schools, faith communities, and nonprofits. Community service was touted as particularly effective for instilling civic values, especially the value of balancing a concern for "rights" with acceptance of "responsibilities."

Of course, it is essential to balance rights and responsibilities in a democracy. But the balance sought and the means to achieve it matter. K-12 community service programs typically promote outcomes like enhanced self-esteem, formation of personal values, and feelings of empowerment and social efficacy for those who serve. They rarely investigate the root causes of inequities, foster capacity for the give-and-take of everyday politics, or tap and celebrate the strengths and talents of the

served. They tend also to avoid the subject of power—power as it is misused when maldistributed, and power as it is productively used when exercised in common. As a result, rights and responsibilities are too often defined and exercised in ways that keep power where it is.

Similar dynamics have played out in higher education. Indeed, calls for a renewed service mission in higher education have sometimes been linked to overtly technocratic visions of social salvation by experts. In 1989 Donna Shalala, then-Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, declared that the sector’s “Mandate for a New Century” was to renew the fabled “Wisconsin Idea” of university engagement in society. In her version of that mandate, however, there was no role for the sorts of “citizen professionals” who, a century ago, worked as equals with other citizens, building civic capacity to solve public problems and co-creating common goods. Shalala’s “ideal,” instead, was “a disinterested technocratic elite,” enlisting “society’s best and brightest in service to its most needy, delivering the miracles of social science just as doctors cured juvenile rickets in the past.”

Today, few higher education leaders would explicitly endorse Shalala’s technocratic ideal. Yet to this day, throughout the academy, aspiring professionals are trained to see lay citizens as passive objects, full of problems and deficits, awaiting repair or enhancement at the hands of experts. This paradigm of lay citizens as clients and consumers rather than agents or producers is reflected in our dominant narrative of democracy, which relegates the general population to selecting among the priorities, policies, and other trappings of public life manufactured by the so-called political classes. Democracy as a civic enterprise, in which citizens intentionally create, share, and sustain public goods in collaboration with neighbors, colleagues, and their public officials, seems quaint. Who has time for that kind of work when we’re all busy running the rat race, seeking the “good life?”

None of this is to deny the good intentions and valuable work of the tens of millions of Americans who, for decades, have volunteered in their communities or sacrificed earning potential to join the helping professions. Nor is it to dismiss current signs of Americans' growing hunger for more meaningful, less instrumental engagement with their fellow citizens. President-elect Joe Biden's pledge to tie college loan forgiveness to national and community service is one major sign of that hunger, and the pressure on politicians to sate it.

Nevertheless, the framing of service as selfless sacrifice continues to reinforce a binary between self-interest and common good that undermines popular commitment to the give-and-take politics democracy requires. We need an alternative frame to help us capitalize on the generous energies of Americans without leading us down the same forked road, dividing us into bands of server and served. Thankfully, history provides rich examples.

### **The public work tradition**

Unlike most governments preceding it, the United States' government was explicitly created by "we the people." "We the people" is a problematic phrase, the human referents of which have always been contested but, through its power, have also diversified over time. The phrase was tied through usage to the term *commonwealth*, growing from the experiences of settlers who worked together, with friends and rivals, to build public goods like wells, roads, congregations, schools—and governments. So seminal were these co-creative experiences that John Adams wanted all the colonies reorganizing themselves as members of a new united government to call themselves "commonwealths" rather than "states."

The work of building the commons was viewed neither as altruistic service nor as narrowly self-interested individualism. It was down-to-earth, practical work aiming

to make individual and family life more rewarding and fulfilling by investing in a thriving community. Benjamin Franklin's famous "Leather Apron Club" in Philadelphia, a group of local business leaders and artisans, summed it up with the phrase, "doing well by doing good." The tradition persisted into the nineteenth century: As David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, has observed, "self-rule" meant "a sweaty, hands-on, problem-solving politics" for most Americans, "rooted in collective decision making and acting." Schools, libraries, greens, and granaries were built by groups of individuals, in efforts combining practical self-interests with public purpose. A tragic amount of that collective work was destructive, especially of black and indigenous lives and cultures. But the simultaneous story of cooperative world-building that Mathews tells must also be recalled. "Settlers on the frontier had to be producers, not just consumers," Mathews writes. They depended not only on their own devices or their neighbors', but on shared civil and political institutions they "had to join forces to build." As such, Mathews concludes, "Their efforts were examples of 'public work,' meaning work done by, not just for, the public."

Such commons-building work was not every American's central experience. But it was widespread enough to shape the course of American history. It informed the "free labor" republicanism that celebrated the individual and civic benefits of work and animated Abraham Lincoln's vision for an American democracy unfettered by slavery. In the Civil War that followed, its exemplars included former slaves who served in the Union Army and taught one another to read, write, and organize to secure their liberty at war's end. After the tragic failure of Reconstruction, its products included the black congregations, schools, businesses, and colleges that would incubate and orchestrate the twentieth-century freedom struggle.

The public work tradition found another expression in the New Deal era, one with critical lessons for the contemporary national service movement: the Civilian

Conservation Corps (CCC). As President Franklin D. Roosevelt explained upon its launch in 1933, the CCC would comprise federally funded, locally organized units devoted to “forestry, the prevention of soil erosion, flood control, and similar projects”—commons-building projects. Such work would “pay dividends to the present and future generations” of the communities improved and of the nation generally. “More important” than its “material” products would be “the moral and spiritual value of such work” to those who performed it—for themselves, their families, and society. To be sure, the CCC was no model of participatory democracy. Most camps were male-only, almost all segregated, and run along military lines. Still, to focus solely on the CCC’s hierarchical aspects is mistaken. Corpsmen interviewed in the 1990s recalled expanding their conceptions of who and what was American; learning to work with others from very different backgrounds; encountering many different possible career possibilities; building confidence and skills to challenge segregation; and developing a sense of contribution to purposes bigger than, yet including their own.

Perhaps most important, the CCC never made sharp distinctions between server and served, or between work and citizenship. More than three million young men worked for the CCC between 1933 and 1942, mainly poor and unemployed young people from rural areas and small towns. These men executed public projects that ranged from planting forests to building roads, dams, bridges, and national park amenities, all of which were used by tens of millions (and many of which are used today). CCC members were paid for this work, enough to support their families during the Great Depression. They were also encouraged to use their CCC service as a chance to develop both their economic and civic potential. Every CCC camp included extensive exposure to possible careers, and every camp had a citizenship class.

The CCC was only one example of public-work experimentalism in the New Deal era. In the 1930s, citizens nationwide organized themselves to address hunger,

unemployment, poverty, and environmental degradation. In many cases, government became a partner and supporter rather than controller of such work. In others, the federal government created spaces in which state and local communities could creatively experiment. The Works Progress Administration (WPA), for instance, gave local communities and the formerly jobless wide latitude to choose and direct the work to be done. Thousands of communities nationwide still use the schools, libraries, post offices, hospitals, theaters, and plazas financed by the WPA. Meanwhile, the artistic, literary, and other cultural work supported by the WPA demonstrates just how broadly many Americans construed the nature of productive citizenship.

### **What now?**

How might such public work traditions find translation and application today? Two sets of ideas and trends seem especially promising.

#### *A Modern CCC*

Take first the remarkable document *Thriving Together: A Springboard for Equitable Recovery and Resilience in Communities Across America*, published in the summer of 2020. A joint project of the Centers for Disease Control Foundation and the Well Being Trust, *Springboard* proposes a paradigm shift in public health: a focus on supporting the “vital conditions” of entire communities by identifying and stewarding the intellectual, social, and cultural resources embedded in them. *Springboard* stresses community-led public work to create community-wide health in all senses of the word: not just physiological and psychological, but environmental, economic, educational, and civic.

To advance this holistic health agenda, *Springboard* proposes a modern version of the CCC:

A Community Commonwealth Corps would build on America's long history of public work, repairing the lives, businesses, community organizations, places of worship, infrastructures and other common goods...decimated by decades of neglect, civic erosion, and racial injustice.

In cities still reeling from the economic distress and physical destruction that followed the Covid outbreak and George Floyd murder, a modern CCC—explicitly elevating community and commonwealth—could help to spark a civic renaissance. Diverse groups could be recruited and paid to rebuild homes, stores, streets, and other infrastructure, learning valuable skills—manual, intellectual, and civic—in the process. Communal meals and collective reflections on the work, even team songs shared across neighborhoods, all could be features. Conscious design to include a pluralism of backgrounds—partisan, religious, racial, socio-economic, generational—could help to build the relational bedrock of more vibrant communities.

### *Meaningful Work and Cooperative Education*

Another trending idea is to reimagine work as a site of civic analysis and action, and education as a means to prepare for such work. Oren Cass, Mitt Romney's policy advisor in 2012, makes one strong case for imbuing work with purpose and meaning in his recent book, *The Once and Future Worker*. Cass advocates a system of “productive pluralism” in which educational systems develop clear but voluntary pathways to diverse jobs and careers, helping “people of diverse abilities, priorities, and geographies...become contributors to their communities.” Obama, too, has recently endorsed the public purpose of work. “The pace of change is going to require us to do more fundamental reimagining of our social and political arrangements, to protect the economic security and the dignity that comes with a job,” he told a South African crowd in 2018. “It's not just money that a job provides; it provides dignity and structure and a sense of place and a sense of purpose.”

Obama was describing an ideal rather than a universal reality, but like Cass, he seems to have caught the pulse of America. The *Harvard Business Review* found that 9 of 10 Americans surveyed were willing to earn less money to do work with a larger purpose. Judging by a recent Gallup/Bates College report, “Forging Pathways to Purposeful Work,” many of them have felt that way since their student days (and have been disappointed). Finally, business leaders have begun to make arguments which recall the commonwealth tradition, calling for a shift from “shareholder capitalism” to “stakeholder capitalism.” In August 2019, the Business Roundtable endorsed a new social compact in this vein, declaring: “Americans deserve an economy that allows each person to succeed through hard work and creativity and to lead a life of meaning and dignity.” It seems a propitious time to recover an understanding of education and work that connects the two in direct, practical, civically generative ways.

There is a ready-made public-work tradition called Cooperative Education that does just that. Cooperative Education combines academic study and classroom learning with practical work experience for which students earn academic credit. Pioneered by Herman Schneider, it seeks to embody John Dewey’s argument that education should connect students “with real things and materials,” and heed his warning about “the tendency for every vocation” to emphasize “technical method at the expense of meaning.” From 1965 to 1996, colleges and universities across America received federal funding for Cooperative Education programs, which enjoyed cross-partisan support in Congress. Lois Olson, long-time director of Cooperative education at Augsburg College (now University) in Minneapolis, described the approach as somewhat akin to recreating “the local pool hall” in a small town, where “conversations intertwined citizenship, politics, religion and economics.” Olson recruited an employer council from the Twin Cities business community and a faculty council including many department chairs in the liberal arts. Together they developed plans for incorporating academic learning objectives into the work the employers expected of students. They also posed questions to students to help them

think about their careers in civic terms. “Describe the culture, policies, allocation of resources that might impact citizenship,” Olson instructed. The varying answers excited some students, disappointed others, and spurred still others to organize discussions with their fellow workers.

The Clinton administration abolished Cooperative Education to direct more resources to AmeriCorps. Now might be just the time to bring it back, and to restore or create other programs imbued with its spirit. A renewed focus on service as community building is emerging not only in Biden’s orbit but in conservative circles, led by civic theorists and policy advocates such as Pete Peterson, director of The American Project at Pepperdine University; Yuval Levin, Director of Social, Cultural and Constitutional Studies at the American Enterprise Institute; and Senator Mike Lee (R-Utah), who recently repurposed the Joint Economic Committee of Congress to focus on building social capital. Such cross-partisan ferment has begun to excite close students of American civic life like Robert Putnam, best known for his 2000 study of civic erosion, *Bowling Alone*. In his new book, *The Upswing*, Putnam and co-author Shalyn Garrett argue that the nation is on the cusp of a shift back from “I to We.”

The framing of service as selfless sacrifice is inadequate to this moment. Forty years after George H. W. Bush invoked America’s “thousand points of light,” Donald Trump mocked his predecessor at a Montana rally. “Thousand points of light, what the hell is that?” he asked. “Putting America first we understand.” The conflation of non-serving, non-sacrificing, selfish individuals with “America” writ large is telling: it assumes that America can only be first if Americans think first of themselves. At first blush, selfless service is an appealing alternative. But selfless sacrifice glorifies its own form of atomistic individualism. It marks the server as more capable, more autonomous, more powerful than the served. And because it recognizes no reciprocal benefit, no mutual renewal, and no increase of collective capacities, selfless sacrifice

is unsustainable, a temporary experience of altruism before entering the dog-eat-dog world. Sacrifice ends.

Citizenship does not end. It is not a task to be completed, and it is not something done to or for other citizens. It is work: continuous, difficult, often frustrating, yet inherently dignified, personally rewarding, and publicly meaningful *work*—work that embodies inclusive democratic ideals for the frankly practical reason that no one group or generation can do it. It is the kind of work that a truly just, equitable, and vibrant democracy of “We the People” will afford and commend to all Americans. And that would be a service not only to our country, but to our world.

*Harry Boyte is Co-Founder of the Institute for Public Life and Work and Senior Scholar in Public Work Philosophy at Augsburg University.*

*Trygve Throntveit is Director of Strategic Partnerships, Minnesota Humanities Center; Global Fellow for History and Public Policy, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; and Editor, The Good Society: A Journal of Civic Studies.*