

Common Cause: How Public Service Can Revive Civic Engagement

When America's founders framed our Constitution, debate raged over the proper role of this new nation's government. Some commerce-oriented liberals and Federalists advocated a strong central government that could protect private property to ensure commercial vitality. But others, inspired by ancient Greek and Roman republics, feared this focus on national commerce might eclipse communities and threaten their bonds of mutual association. This is the sort of civic republicanism John Winthrop invoked when he told his fellow colonists, "we must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body."¹ Two and a half centuries later, many of these civic republicans' fears have come true. While today's consumers have the convenience of shopping online, driving everywhere, and now even working from home, our participation in civic life has fallen by the wayside.

One way to measure communal association is membership in chapter-based organizations, which has steadily declined since the early 1960s.² Church membership also continues to decline.³ One could point out that these secular and religious institutions are merely being replaced by other sorts of institutions; for example, membership in political advocacy and interest groups like the Sierra Club and AARP has increased. But as political scientist Robert

¹ Winthrop quoted in Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, 87.

² Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (book), 54.

³ Pew Research Center.

Putnam points out, these replacement organizations do not typically involve regular in-person meetings that would foster bonds of togetherness.⁴

Outside of a church or a sports stadium, one does not often see large numbers of non-relatives come together in service to a common cause. But when it does happen, a collective goal subsumes individual interest, creating a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Sociologist Emile Durkheim called this “collective effervescence” and noted its ability to create meaningful and lasting social bonds. Soldiers often experience such bonds, which only grow stronger when tested on the battlefield. But military service is not the only sort of service that can facilitate comradery and commitment to a common cause. National service projects like Americorps can also give young people a chance to make themselves useful to others, meanwhile providing an experience of educational and moral growth.

Service programs, if they are well-suited to the skills of their participants and the needs of the communities they serve, can benefit both parties. In helping to address the problems that plague American communities (e.g., repairing infrastructure, feeding the homeless, maintaining parks and other natural resources), participants can become more connected to the communities they inhabit. While the federal government could mandate service for the nation’s citizens, each state, county, or municipality would be best suited to decide the terms of the service, since ties and knowledge are strongest at the local level. Participants could also opt to serve outside their local communities.

If these programs introduce participants to peers of different backgrounds, they could also help reduce political polarization. In his research on civic engagement, Putnam finds that

⁴ Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (article).

“When individuals belong to ‘cross-cutting’ groups with diverse goals and members, their attitudes will tend to moderate as a result of group interaction and cross-pressures.”⁵ These programs might also help address feelings of aimlessness, boredom, and dejection that plague many young people today. Furthermore, while the rise in “deaths of despair” (alcohol-related deaths, drug overdoses, and suicides) likely stems from systemic factors like declining economic mobility,⁶ it also suggests the lack of belonging to a community. Local service programs could play a small role in helping to make people feel more connected to their neighbors.

Some might consider mandatory national service antithetical to the American value of individual liberty. Indeed, self-reliance has an almost sacred significance in the American psyche. Tocqueville captured this when he described how Americans “owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.”⁷ But liberty need not be understood as only an individually held right. Edmund Burke viewed liberty not as the “solitary, unconnected, individual, selfish, liberty” of every man to “regulate the whole of his conduct by his own will,” but rather as “social freedom...secured by well-constructed institutions.”⁸ Burke understood that freedom is best understood in the context of a society, among citizens who share it. Public service is one way to share in the American value of freedom.

I hesitate to suggest the government should mandate service to promote civic engagement; I would much rather see norms of voluntary service arise organically in the form of

⁵ Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, 90.

⁶ US Congress Joint Economic Committee, “Long-Term Trends in Deaths of Despair,” Figure 1.

⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 194.

⁸ Edmund Burke, *Letter to Monsieur DuPont*, 558.

grassroots organizations. But mandatory civic duties are not entirely foreign to this country. Jury duty, for example, compels citizens to participate in the judicial process so that defendants' fates are judged by their peers. This spirit of participatory citizenship is well-captured by JFK's famous admonition: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

Such participatory citizenship does not require us to abandon self-interest. Rather, it requires us to view self-interest in a new light, one in which my self-interest is bound up in my neighbor's. In his research from Italy, Putnam describes how citizens of democratically successful communities pursue "what Tocqueville termed 'self-interest properly understood,' that is, self-interest defined in the context of broader public needs, self-interest that is 'enlightened' rather than 'myopic,' self-interest that is alive to the interests of others."⁹ In a society more atomized than ever before, perhaps we could use a reminder that our interests align, and that by working toward common projects we can see our own self-interest in the context of others'. This is the spirit behind "civic engagement," which Putnam identifies as a strong predictor of successfully democratic political institutions.

When Tocqueville visited America in 1831, he noted that "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations...not only commercial and industrial, but others of a thousand different types."¹⁰ Though this ethic of civic association has declined in America, it can be revived, but such a cultural shift is not likely to happen on its own without institutional support.

⁹ Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, 88.

¹⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 198.

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