The Case for “Service”

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On September 11, 2008, both major presidential candidates traveled to New York City, where some of the nation’s most prominent corporations and foundations were sponsoring a forum on civilian community service. September 11 is a solemn day, rich with patriotic meanings, when politicians are expected to demonstrate their commitment to essential American values. But they can choose which values to emphasize, from military strength to prosperity to civil rights. This year, Barack Obama and John McCain joined such luminaries as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Hillary Clinton to affirm the value of service. More concretely, they endorsed a bill, the Kennedy-Hatch “Serve America Act of 2008” (S.3487), that would dramatically expand federal support for civilian service programs. Given their support and the leadership of Senators Orrin Hatch and Edward Kennedy, the Serve America Act seems destined for passage—although perhaps not for full funding at a time of economic and fiscal crisis.

The bill has many sections and features, but two of its major objectives are to get at least 250,000 Americans involved in federally supported service every year and to institutionalize “service-learning” (the combination of community service with academic study) in school systems and colleges. Kennedy-Hatch would provide significant new funding to programs that recruit economically disadvantaged Americans to participate in service and service-learning, and it would focus volunteers’ work on three social objectives: reducing the dropout rate, improving public health, and conserving energy.

In current legislative parlance, “service” refers to a variety of programs funded by the government but often organized by private contractors (see sidebar on page 5). To a philosopher who wants to consider whether government-funded service is a good thing, the heterogeneity of these programs—with their diverse purposes, constituents, and methods—poses a challenge. Nevertheless, “service” constitutes a field of practice, with many overlapping networks of alumni and leaders, similar funding sources, frequent meetings and conferences, a common genealogy, and a shared political agenda—currently focused on the passage of Kennedy-Hatch. We ought to be able to say whether supporting such fields of practice is good public policy, and whether it is wise to shift such fields by preferring some of their elements over others. Kennedy-Hatch seeks to alter the field of service through the two proposals mentioned above: investing in lower-income volunteers and focusing on three major social purposes. Does an expanded civilian service initiative with these priorities merit government support?

Addressing National Challenges

One major argument for service programs is that federally financed volunteers can effectively address public problems. If Kennedy-Hatch becomes law, it will put Congress on record as saying that “focused national service efforts can effectively tackle pressing national challenges, such as improving education for low-income students, increasing energy conservation, and improving the health, well-being, and economic opportunities of the neediest individuals in the Nation.”

It remains to be seen whether this proposition is true. AmeriCorps has sometimes tried to estimate its members’ impact on the neighborhoods they serve; a 1995–96 evaluation of Learn & Serve America concluded that each hour volunteered by students was worth about $8.76 to their communities. But such a statistic is not especially helpful in assessing a program’s ability to address “pressing national challenges.” Perhaps a dollar spent on tax credits would have more impact on energy conservation than a dollar spent to recruit volunteers to weatherize homes.

To take another example, consider YouthBuild, a job training program for disadvantaged youth ages 16 to 24.
YouthBuild members learn construction trades by building houses for people in their communities. An evaluation by the Department of Housing and Urban Development found that the program generated relatively few new housing units. On the other hand, 29% of participants who entered without having graduated from high school obtained diplomas while they served, and 12% pursued higher education afterwards. These figures suggest that the best rationale for supporting YouthBuild is not that it will address the urban housing crisis, but that, through its impact on participants, it will address the dropout problem.

Certainly the organizers of service programs need to pay some attention to their impact on communities. When volunteers contribute tangible public goods, such as affordable homes and clean parks, they offset the programs’ costs. Besides, volunteers need to have a positive impact to be satisfied and motivated. If National Civilian Community Corps members never planted any trees, they would become cynical and discouraged.

Nevertheless, it is only a hypothesis that community service is an efficient and effective way to address national problems. I hope the hypothesis is true, but we should also consider other rationales for government support of service programs. As the YouthBuild example suggests, one such rationale emphasizes the value of service not for the recipients, but for the volunteers.

Individuals as Public Assets

Service programs regard individuals as potential public assets, as contributors to the common good. This is philosophically appealing because it reflects a basic principle (which we could call Kantian) of respecting other people’s moral agency. Kant insisted that all human beings be treated as responsible, as members of the Kingdom of Ends.

Among the various social groups who tend not to be treated that way, disadvantaged youth are a leading example. Many schools and other institutions treat teenagers in low-income communities as bundles of problems or risks. Cumulatively, such treatment sends a debilitating message. An alternative approach is supported by the psychological theory known as “positive youth development.” This theory tells us that young people are more likely to avoid pitfalls such as crime, unwanted pregnancy, and academic failure when they are given opportunities to contribute their talents to the community. For low-income youth, the need for such opportunities would seem to be especially great.

Positive youth development is consistent with a Kantian view of human agency, but it is also an empirical theory: it holds that society can enhance individuals’ welfare by giving them opportunities to serve. This theory may seem romantic, but it has been vindicated in numerous studies. For example, a randomized experiment showed that it was possible to cut the teen pregnancy rate by offering young women service opportunities. Generalizing from other studies, the Kennedy-Hatch bill notes that “high-quality service-learning programs keep students engaged in school and increase the likelihood that they will graduate.”

At present, however, the most expansive and rewarding service programs tend to be provided in affluent schools and communities. In a survey of more than 2,000 California students, Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh found that service-learning experiences were less common for African American and Latino youth than for white and Asian youth; less common for students whose parents had low education levels; and much less common for students who had low grade-point averages. To its credit, Kennedy-Hatch addresses such inequalities by giving priority to schools and independent programs that offer service-learning opportunities to disadvantaged students.

Service and Civic Engagement

We have seen that service has the potential to benefit those who serve as well as those who are served. One rationale for publicly funded service programs emphasizes its potential to foster the participants’ civic identity and improve the relationship between citizens and their government.

Richard Stengel made this case for universal service in an August 2007 cover story for TIME magazine. He began by noting that “while confidence in our democracy and our government is near an all-time low, volunteerism and civic participation since the ‘70s are near all-time highs.” To Stengel, the explanation for this paradox seemed obvious: “People, especially young people, think the government and the public sphere are broken, but they feel they can personally make a difference through community service… People see volunteering not as a form of public service but as an antidote for it.”

Stengel argued that universal service, undertaken in a patriotic spirit, would reconnect volunteerism to the ideals of public service and a common civic identity. Devoting a year to national service, he wrote, “should become a countrywide rite of passage, the common
expectation and widespread experience of virtually every young American.” The program he favored would not be “mandatory or compulsory,” he explained. But it would “harness the spirit of volunteerism that already exists and make it a permanent part of American culture.” It would also lead, presumably, to greater political participation, in the forms of voting, following the news, and running for public office. In Stengel’s view, nothing much less ambitious than universal national service could achieve the goal of reconnecting millions of Americans to public life.

But the Serve America Act stops far short of creating a universal service program—and I think its relatively small scale is wise. About 4.5 million Americans are 18 years old. If they were all to participate in service programs, we would need an enormous new infrastructure. As a point of comparison, there are 18 million students enrolled in all the institutions of higher education in the United States. Thus, universal national service programs would have to serve as many young people as one fourth of all our colleges and universities do. To build valuable new learning opportunities for all those participants would cost billions of dollars and require hundreds of thousands of new full-time, permanent positions for corps leaders and administrators.

It is difficult to provide high-quality learning opportunities through service, and we could do damage by calling on young people—especially disadvantaged young people—to fill menial or make-work positions. Michelle Charles has described inner-city Philadelphians doing a deliberately lackluster job on a service project that was designed by outsiders. The project (temporarily removing graffiti from a wall) sounds pointless, and one might argue that the participants’ foot-dragging was a form of civic action that achieved a desirable social outcome: ending a misguided program. I am not suggesting that the Philadelphia project is typical. But as Paul Light recently observed, “[T]oo many charitable organiza-

Young people are assisting with hurricane recovery efforts in Gulfport, Mississippi, as members of the YouthBuild AmeriCorps Katrina Rebuilding Project. (YouthBuild USA)
tions do not know how to manage volunteers effectively or recruit new employees. Young Americans want the chance to make a difference and learn new skills, not work in the back office stuffing envelopes.” Under Kennedy-Hatch, nonprofits applying for federal grants would have an incentive to develop truly educational and meaningful service opportunities. In addition, the bill creates a new commission to investigate how nonprofits use volunteers.

I would support creating as many service positions as we can that do not displace regular employees and that attract applicants because of their social impact and the opportunities they offer for experiential learning. The right number is hard to predict, but 250,000 sounds like a reasonable estimate. (It translates to about one in every 18 18-year olds.) I would want to see AmeriCorps and other federal service programs attracting more applicants than they have places, as evidence that these programs were truly desirable and voluntary. But I hope they would not pick the most academically successful applicants; more important is each candidate’s likelihood of benefiting from participation in service.

Public Servants and the Rest of Us

The opportunity to engage in the kind of high-quality, rigorously evaluated service envisioned by Kennedy-Hatch has the potential to close what we might think of as an identity gap between citizens and employees of the government. I believe this gap is a major cause of the civic disengagement that Stengel and others bemoan.

Consider the diminishing involvement of parents and other community members in public education. Belonging to a PTA is about half as common today as it was in 1960, and those parents who are still involved in schools are often asked to provide money or low-skilled labor rather than input on how the schools should be run. In the 1970s, according to the DDB Life Style survey, more than 40 percent of Americans said they worked on community projects, many of which involved education; that percentage is now down to the 20s. There are many explanations for these changes, but surely one reason is the growing monopoly over education by credentialed, professional experts, especially state and district administrators and test-writers.

Elinor Ostrom has shown that in the mid-twentieth century, a substantial proportion of American households had members who served on elected public bodies, such as school boards, at some time in their lives. But consolidation of governments and heavy use of professional managers has reduced such participation to a trivial level. Today, some Americans are in “public service,” and the rest are not. Meanwhile, the all-volunteer

Government Support for Service: A Brief History

The federal government has funded voluntary civilian service at least since the 1930s, when the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) became a signature program of the New Deal. The original purposes of the CCC included relief for the unemployed, economic stimulus in the depths of the Depression, conservation, and democratic education that might dissuade Corps members from becoming communists or fascists.

After Franklin D. Roosevelt launched the CCC, other administrations added new federal service programs, for diverse purposes. The Kennedy administration founded the Peace Corps, and the Johnson administration founded VISTA, to address poverty in developing countries and in the United States, but these programs had other objectives as well—to promote the diplomatic agenda of the U.S. and to give highly motivated and talented Americans skills that would strengthen their careers in public service. The administration of George H. W. Bush launched the Points of Light Foundation with the goal of enhancing privately funded volunteer services for needy people.

In the 1990s, the Clinton administration created AmeriCorps, which became a partial funder of independent nonprofits that provide intense, voluntary, full-time service experiences for younger Americans. Most of these independent programs had developed during the 1980s, inspired in part by the federal service initiatives. City Year, for example, recruits young people with fairly diverse backgrounds in a year of service work in a team environment, complete with uniforms and daily calisthenics. YouthBuild (see page 3) is another AmeriCorps grantee.

AmeriCorps also includes a program called Learn & Serve America, which funds service learning in schools, colleges, and universities. Its main purpose is to strengthen students’ academic performance by offering them engaging and challenging experiences in their communities. The administration of George W. Bush created USA Freedom Corps as an official advocate for these various service programs.
military, for better and for worse, separates civilians from professional warriors in a way that was not true under the draft.

I believe we need to weaken this distinction between public servants and the rest of us—to help people move in and out of public service so that each side learns more about the other. National and community service can be a powerful tool to achieve this goal. It doesn’t require universal participation, because the purpose is to generate opportunities for interested individuals to move between the private and public sectors, so that they can learn and contribute in both sectors and create models for others.

Teach for America (TFA) provides a vivid illustration. TFA recruits top graduates from the nation’s colleges and universities and places them in public schools—usually low-performing schools—for two years. It differs from federal service programs in that local school authorities employ its teachers directly, but it resembles the Peace Corps and City Year in that it places young people temporarily in full-time public service work. Although many of its recruits have stayed in education (TFA’s alumni include many influential school reformers), that was never the program’s overriding goal. The idea was that TFA members who left the classroom after two years would become advocates for educational equality. Their experience would motivate them to “continue the struggle” as informed citizens, community activists, school board members, and political leaders.

TFA illustrates another principle as well: the impact of service on volunteers’ civic commitments and beliefs is more diverse and unpredictable than the paens to service typically acknowledge. Many TFA teachers go to work in profoundly dysfunctional school systems—an experience that is hardly likely to strengthen their trust in the public sector. One TFA alumna, Michelle Rhee, has brought controversial corporate efficiency measures to the public schools in Washington, D.C., where she was appointed chancellor in 2007. Traditional liberals, libertarian-leaning conservatives, good-government reformers, efficiency experts, and others will have different hopes about what a stint in public service may teach. In my view, we should be willing to learn from the young people who have had that experience.

Expanding the Agenda

Service has the potential to restore Americans’ civic engagement, but it also has limitations. I have already noted the difficulty of providing excellent learning opportunities on a large scale. To make matters worse, federally funded service programs cannot engage in political activities, which narrows the scope of participants’ civic action.

The very word “service,” moreover, can send a message contrary to the ideal of respecting individual agency that I described above. A recent survey by the National Conference on Citizenship found that, for many people, the word “service” connotes episodic charitable or “helping” behavior. The word can suggest that some people are helpless and therefore need to be served, which is the opposite of the idea that everyone can be a moral agent and a contributor.

We need to find ways to encourage deliberation, problem-solving, the creation of public goods, and other roles for citizens that go beyond service. No one tool will reverse the disengagement of Americans from public life. But several policies, undertaken in a coordinated fashion, could make a substantial difference.

• Civic education. There is evidence that teaching young people about civic and political issues increases the odds that they will discuss such issues, join groups, volunteer, and vote later in life. Moreover, the impact of such teaching is enhanced when students engage in community service projects that include research or reflection.

• Deliberation. In addition to “serving,” citizens should also deliberate, which involves real decision-making. The recent National Conference on Citizenship poll (see graph on page 7) found strong and bipartisan support for a proposal, developed by the nonprofit AmericaSpeaks, to involve more than one million Americans in a national deliberation on an important public issue. Although it has never been tried, a national deliberation might improve public policy and also provide a valuable model of organized, meaningful public involvement.

• Influence on local institutions. A comprehensive reform agenda would include efforts to increase local citizens’ influence on everyday public institutions, such as schools, local governments, and police forces. One promising model is the elaborate series of Study Circles that encouraged broad discussion of education in Bridgeport, Conn., and gradually built public support for school reform while raising the level of parental volunteering in the city’s schools. In Hampton, Va., youth involvement in boards and committees has improved education and policing in that city.

• Public service reform. Finally, a civic engagement agenda would include changing the nature of
Proposals tested:

- Tuition for service: “offering every young person a chance to earn money toward college or advanced training if they complete a full year of national or community service.”
- A national deliberation: “involving more than one million Americans in a national discussion of an important public issue and requiring Congress to respond to what the citizens say.”
- Service learning: “requiring all high school students to do community service as part of their work for one or more courses.”
- Civic education: “requiring high school students to pass a new test on civics or government.”
- Federal support for nonprofits: “providing federal money to support nonprofit, faith-based, and civic organizations that use volunteers.”
- Local control over education: “changing the law so that local citizens must take the lead in setting standards and choosing tests for students in their local schools.”
- Expanding overseas programs: “funding and promoting overseas service as a way of improving our relations with other countries.”

Source: National Conference on Citizenship survey (“America’s Civic Health Index”), conducted by CIRCLE (the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement), July 2008.
careers in public service. The imminent retirement of roughly one million federal employees offers an opportunity to rethink public service so that jobs in the public sector become more rewarding and creative—to flatten hierarchies and promote collaboration, including partnerships between the government and community groups. Paul Light calls on the next administration to “reverse the federal government’s well-deserved reputation as a last resort for young Americans. The government’s antiquated personnel system must be modernized to reward performance, not time on the job, and give new recruits the career paths to make a difference faster.”

It appears, then, that service is the politically easy part of restoring active citizenship in America. With enough money, we can enroll 250,000 Americans in activities that we call “service,” most of which will involve uncontroversial helping behavior such as mentoring children and planting trees, conducted in the volunteers’ own communities. On balance, I believe this is a worthy cause. But it will be much harder to use volunteers to define and plan solutions to hard problems, to increase public participation in deliberative decision making, or to redesign the civil service. I support Kennedy-Hatch as an element of the reform agenda. But success on these other fronts will be just as critical to strengthening civic engagement in the United States.

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