

Philanthropy's Role in Building an Effective Citizenry

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I want to thank Jill Blair, and the members of PACE for inviting me to humble myself before my peers. This is a time of great opportunity for PACE as it reaches for a much-deserved, larger role, and I hope I can help usher in the new era.

Have you ever heard the Epebic Oath? This oath of citizenship was taken by young men, aged 18-20, in the city-state of Athens. Each had to pass a two-year course covering military practice and civic duties. At the end of the first year, these teenagers were given a spear and a shield. Then each took this oath:

We will never bring disgrace on our City by an act of dishonesty or cowardice.

We will fight for the ideals and sacred things of the City both alone and with many.

We will revere and obey the City's laws, and will do our best to incite a like reverence and respect in those above us who are prone to annul them or set them at naught.

We will strive increasingly to quicken the public's sense of civic duty.

Thus in all these ways we will transmit this City, not only not less, but greater, better and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.¹

In its time and place (c. 300 B.C.), the Epebic Oath was the rough equivalent of our Pledge of Allegiance. Reading it is stunning. The way it balances individual and group action. How it blends pride and humility. Its respect for the law and the reverence for a culture which made the law possible. Its regard for history. The responsibility of conveying the state in better shape than when they found it.

In fact, Fiorello LaGuardia, New York City's Mayor and true social capitalist, knew this oath well. He took it at his mayoral inauguration and publicly vowed to follow its precepts. LaGuardia reportedly asked his commissioners to pledge to it too, as he handed them their responsibilities.² For those of us who care deeply about democratic participation and civic health, the oath has much to say today.

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¹Tod, Marcus N: A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions, Vol. II, from 403 to 323 B.C., Oxford University Press, 1968.

² Personal communication from Thomas Kessner, Professor of History, Graduate Center at the City University of New York and author, Fiorello H. LaGuardia And the Making of Modern

Most everyone agrees we're in a civic mess. Despite the recent spike in voting patterns - from 54% in 2000 to 59% in 2004, the highest turnout since 1968³ - the challenges seem even larger than when Bob Putnam published his sobering article "Bowling Alone," in 1995,⁴ followed by his book, in 2000.⁵ In fact, he confirmed this view last December in a speech at the National Conference on Citizenship. His words seem plaintive and almost sorrowful.⁶

No one disputes anymore the decline of social capital. Political participation has been in a 40 year slide. Volunteering hours are down, though the number of volunteers is up. As Michelle Nunn notes in her background paper for this meeting, the time spent in sustained and deep commitment fell 10%, to less than four hours per week.⁷ As well, trust in government by all Americans has fallen by 50% over the last four decades, from 73% in 1958 to 36% in 2003.⁸

As if this weren't enough, the data are most upsetting with regard to young people. To cite but two of many examples, CIRCLE (the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement), through its Civic Engagement Index, has pinpointed the apathy of the "DotNet" Generation (age 15-25). Nearly 6 of 10 are completely disengaged from civic life. Only 24% follow government and public affairs "very often." Fewer than 4 in 10 say citizenship entails special obligations.⁹

An equally depressing survey of young people, "The Future of the First Amendment" (a survey of more than 100,000 high school students, 8,000 teachers and 500 administrators and principals in 544 high schools), concludes civic basics aren't being taught. It shows that nearly 3/4 of students either don't know how they feel about the First Amendment or they take it for granted.¹⁰

So, if adults are disengaged and apathetic, most every survey tells us that young people are largely turned off. Politics, political parties and government, in their view, have little or no relevance in their lives. If they choose to participate at all, they see volunteering in nonprofit organizations as the meaningful alternative.

New York, McGraw Hill, 1989.

³ Report by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate.

⁴ Putnam, Robert D, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *The Journal of Democracy*, 6:1, 1995.

⁵ Putnam, Robert D. Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Communities, Simon and Schuster, 2000.

⁶ National Conference on Citizenship, Annual Conference, December 3, 2004, Washington, DC.

⁷ "Reinvigorating Democratic Participation and Activating an Engaged Citizenry," second draft, from Independent Sector data at http://www.independentsector.org/programs/research/volunteer_time.html.

⁸ "American National Election Study, 1958-2002; *New York Times*/CBS News Polls, July 2003.

⁹ "The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait," a report by Scott Keeter et al, CIRCLE/The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, September 19, 2002.

¹⁰ "Future of the First Amendment," a study sponsored by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 2005, found that half of the young people surveyed think the government can censor the internet, and many do not think newspapers should publish freely.

But before we hang it all up and turn off the lights, before we give up on the goals of the Ephebic Oath, we need to ask if there are any data which give cause for optimism. The main point I want to make today is that there are. And two other points. First, that philanthropy can do a lot better in building an engaged citizenry. Second, that the Administration is pulling us in two very different directions at the same time: One direction holds the promise that the civic engagement of the nonprofit sector, often spurred on by government funds, can flourish. The other direction, however, will so degrade civic engagement that lasting damage will be done.

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The picture of civic ignorance and popular withdrawal hung over my head during these few weeks as I thought about what philanthropy can do to build civic engagement. I found cause for optimism in two places. First is direct action to create social change. This approach, supported by foundations, is a regular feature of our collective work. Surdna offers a very strong example of such efforts. Second is what I would characterize as “pure service.” To me that connotes service to address private needs, where government is a major player. Here, changing or making policy is not the goal; it’s meeting needs right now. The two parts are, I believe, complementary.

I reviewed more than a decade of Surdna grantmaking, which has totaled over \$350 million since 1990. What I found surprised me. The thematic coherence around civic engagement was remarkable. In rough numbers, Surdna has made more than one thousand grants, totaling well over one hundred million dollars, in support of civic engagement. A large majority of these grants has followed the charge given us by Harry Boyte and Nan Kari to do “public work.”¹¹ We’ve done it all over America, often with great consequence.

Here’s a brief sample of six Surdna projects and what they accomplished. Most of them were made collaboratively with other foundations.

Nationally, we’ve supported local land trusts that arrange for conservation easements, or the outright acquisition of property, for the public good. There are now more than 1,500 of them. About half are run by volunteers. The total acreage conserved by land trusts has more than doubled in the last five years to 9.4 million acres (in 2003).

Second, in Los Angeles, The Labor/Community Strategy Center has been our partner for a decade. Through its Bus Riders Union, LCSC has fought for 12 years for a modern and efficient bus system for 400,000 low-income bus riders in the city. This bus system is their lifeline -- for employment, education, recreation and family. Yet the Los Angeles MTA wanted to shrink the system drastically, and raise fares, which would make regular travel both uncertain and unaffordable. LCSC took the Authority to federal court. It won a landmark civil rights Consent Decree which compelled the MTA to improve the bus system and make it its first priority in funding. Now, under a 10-year contract,

¹¹Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work by Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, Temple University Press, 1996.

overseen by the Bus Riders Union, hundreds of millions of dollars in improvements is being pumped into low-income, mass transit dependent communities.

Third, in 1992, Surdna created a seven-year-long, comprehensive community revitalization program. It covered a large section of the South Bronx. It was run by five community development corporations representing thousands of neighborhood residents. We bought into their plans. Twenty-one funders, banks and the City government provided more than \$12 million and assisted the CDCs in raising about \$44 million more. Numerous health, employment and economic development programs were set up.¹² This collaborative model has spread to other cities, like Chicago and Kansas City.

Fourth, the Ella Baker Center and the Youth Justice Coalition, two organizations in California, helped build a coalition of 55 community and youth-serving nonprofits. Many of the groups in the coalition are run by young people. They have compelled the state to completely reform its horrific treatment of young people in California's juvenile justice system. Their work has forced the California Youth Authority to stop placing young people in adult facilities and to ensure that kids who are pepper-sprayed get legally-mandated medical treatment within 15 minutes. Because of their actions, youth now sit on committees that review all discipline and grievance procedures. Under mounting citizen pressure, last December, the Governor agreed to a systematic overhaul the entire juvenile detention apparatus of California.

Fifth, in technology, one of our many projects has been to help fund the start-up of YouthNoise, a website that now engages more than half-a-million young people a month. More than half the content on the site is actually created by these young people. Large numbers use it to find volunteer work, to engage in on-line policy debates and to contact legislators to express their concerns. (This is a specific case that fulfills many of the recommendations in the "Pushing Power to the Edges" background paper that was recently distributed.)

Finally, we've been one of many supporters and advocates of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. RTC is the only national group devoted to preserving abandoned railroad corridors by converting unused rail lines to multi-use trails for all, for walking, exercising, etc. RTC has catalyzed the preservation and building of more than 1,100 rail trails covering 12,000 miles of open trail.

All these efforts have a special, similar footprint. They are issue-based, place-based and usually locally-focused. Most are overtly "political" in the sense that they mobilize citizens to create change and, when necessary, take on government. They navigate the messy democratic process of sifting and sorting competing interests. They take action to fix local problems. In other words, to create change.

You can be sure that none of the participants thought they were building social capital, let alone rescuing democracy. But these nonprofit groups, and thousands like them, exist in countless places – rural, suburban and urban. They give the strong and

¹²Gerri Spilka and Tom Burns, "Final Assessment Report: The Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program in the South Bronx," The OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, March 1998.

clear message: a real fire is burning under the civic engagement embers many of us have written off as nearly extinguished. Something important is going on here.

E.J.Dionne and Kayla Drogosz have written:

“Public work entails not only altruism, but also enlightened self-interest – a desire to build a society in which the serving citizen wants to live. Service alone cannot build a stronger sense of citizenship. Citizenship is meaningless unless citizens have the power to achieve their goals and to change their communities and the nation.”¹³

Philanthropy’s role here has been central but not formative. Most foundations don’t go at systems change frontally. Some funders are allergic to it. For some, “advocacy” is still a hot button. Further, within the world of civic engagement, funders choose to work on a large swath of issues, from curriculum design to campaign finance reform. All have their place. But regrettably, we don’t communicate, or collaborate very well. My personal view is that actions do speak louder than words and they teach better than words too. As I’ll note below, there’s more we can and should do.

Now what about the second category, “service alone”? These are the nonprofits that deliberately focus on training individuals to do or to practice civic improvement. They often address a need when the public system has failed. Here, the reverse is the case; government is a supporter of this kind of service, not an antagonist. The work is often individualized, from aiding an elderly citizen to serving food in a soup kitchen. In its reach and scale, this approach is enormous.

Many of the nonprofits doing this work are funded under AmeriCorps. There are thousands of them. They are forbidden by law to engage in politics if they accept AmeriCorps money. Some get foundation funds too. Among these nonprofits are national organizations like City Year, Public Allies, Teach for America and YouthBuild.

I believe pure service is an important part of the mix. For a long time many of our colleagues have dismissed this approach as episodic and too divorced from the political fray to have much civic meaning. But I think we can’t react so negatively.

Here, we can say, without hesitation, these groups are producing engaged citizens. While the data are just coming in, the story here is remarkably positive – especially for young people.

For example, the first rigorous, scientific study of alumni of AmeriCorps has just been released by the Corporation for National and Community Service. It covered more than 2,000 randomly selected former AmeriCorps members. It finds that:

“Effects of participation were especially strong in the area of civic engagement....There were statistically significant increases in: members’ connection to community, knowledge about problems facing their

¹³ E.J.Dionne Jr. and Kayla Drogosz: “The Promise of National Service: A (Very) Brief History of an Idea,” *National Civic Review*, Winter 2003, p.25.

community, participation in community-based activities [like attending public meetings and writing to newspapers] and personal growth through service.”¹⁴

This is good news, and more research is underway. Since AmeriCorps’ inception, more than 380,000 men and women have gone through the program. Their average age is in the early 20s.

There’s more. Public Allies has found almost 60% of their alumni continue their careers in public service. More than half work in education and youth development and they volunteer twice as much as a comparison group. They vote at a level of more than 90% and retain a deep interest in public affairs.¹⁵

City Year is completing three independent studies and early indications are that continued, deeper civic engagement has happened among its graduates.

Teach For America now has more than 9,000 alumni. More than 60% are still working in education and more than 90% of those are working in low-income communities. This year TFA got a record 17,000 applications for 2,000 slots – a 39% increase over 2004.¹⁶

YouthBuild, which engages disadvantaged young people, produced wonderful numbers too. In a survey of 900 of their 27,000 graduates over the last 12 years, they found 68% vote regularly and 48% still participate in community organizations or do voluntary work. Fourteen per cent serve on community councils or neighborhood boards.¹⁷

Something important is going on here too. I don’t for a minute pretend to have discovered a movement all of us have somehow overlooked. But I do believe that we can “connect the dots” of these and other efforts happening around the country. If we do, we can discern a true counterweight to the sour and depressing conventional wisdom about citizen engagement.

Philanthropy hasn’t yet found a useful way to tote up the good examples the way we tote up the bad ones. Neither have we mapped out the linkages and contours of the work. We haven’t consciously built networks. We haven’t broken out of our program-based, often hermetic, silos, to see the larger picture.

One of PACE’s goals in its new phase is to connect these dots. When it does, and when we do, much good will result. We will be more realistic in our assessments, more accurate in our views and more effective in our grantmaking, alone and in collaboration with others. Our glass is a lot fuller than we recognize and the two approaches to service, properly accounted for, may make up the core of a rebirth of effective citizenry. I suspect a national network is ready to come alive.

¹⁴ Serving Country and Community: Longitudinal Study of Service in AmeriCorps, Early Findings, Executive Summary, p. 1, December 2004.

¹⁵ 2004 Public Ally Results, in-house document.

¹⁶ Wendy Kopp, CEO of Teach for America, e-mail, April 11, 2005.

¹⁷ Dorothy Stoneman, CEO of Youthbuild, personal conversation, April 28, 2005.

This year, President Bush submitted a budget request to Congress for \$921 million for the Corporation for National and Community Service. The request, if enacted for FY06, will enable the Corporation to continue to support 75,000 AmeriCorps members (including VISTA), as well as participants in the Senior Corps and Learn and Serve programs. David Eisner and John Bridgeland have been staunch supporters of these national service programs. In a time of severe fiscal stress, the Corporation seems to be holding its own.

Well, then what motivates my deep concern? It's this: On the macro level, the federal government seems intent – directly or indirectly – on dismantling the institutions that our engaged citizenry have built, piece-by-piece, throughout this nation's history. It may gravely damage the good work cited above.

Imagine trying to implement Ruth Wooden's call for enhanced public deliberation or Ian Rowe's plea for college scholarships for all, against this backdrop:

First, is the federal budget. The domestic budget, if enacted, will plunge the country further into debt while cutting aid to families that need it most. In order to provide tax cuts for the top 1/2 % of the population, the President has proposed reducing education and training dollars by 14%, environment and natural resources by 23%, health by 12% with a total domestic discretionary cut of 14% -- all by 2010.¹⁸ Cuts would be made in entitlement programs as well, including those that provide basic life supports for low-income families, and the cuts will grow every year. The middle class will feel the pinch too.

The reductions will put yet more pressure on an already over-worked and underpaid nonprofit sector. The Administration's unspoken belief that voluntary service providers and nonprofits, supported by foundations, can pick up the slack, is a dangerous fantasy. As Brian O'Connell, the founding Chair of Independent Sector, has written:

“I am a great believer in voluntary initiative, but we make a terrible mistake if we exaggerate what voluntary activity can do, particularly if it allows us to exaggerate what government need not do. The mistake is compounded seriously when citizens sit on the sidelines as cynics and critics of government, forgetting that in a democracy we are the primary officeholders of government.”¹⁹

My second concern is federal tax policy. To take just one example, the cuts in the estate tax will, in the view of the Brookings Institution and the Urban Institute, reduce philanthropic giving by perhaps \$10 billion annually.^{20,21} Indeed, the formation of new

¹⁸ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities data, compiled March 30, 2005.

¹⁹ Brian O'Connell, “Citizen Participation and Influence in America: Impressive Performance and Alarming Shortfalls,” *Public Integrity*, Spring 2003, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 159-170.

²⁰ Jon M. Bakija and William G. Gale, “Effects of Estate Tax Reform on Charitable Giving,” Report by the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, No. 6, July 2003.

²¹ That is roughly the equivalent of all the grants made by the country's 82 largest foundations in 2003. Stephanie Strom, “Charities Are Silent on Loss of the Estate Tax,” *New York Times*, April 24, 2005, p.28.

foundations dipped last year and the loss to philanthropy will grow as the wealthy lose their incentive to be charitable. That translates into less money to support civic engagement as funds for such projects decline.

Third is the systematic degradation of government and its public servants by this Administration. It should be clear by now that the Administration doesn't want to wring efficiency from a bloated government, it wants to kill off much of government itself. The way it does it is to so under-fund federal agencies they become enfeebled and increasingly ineffectual. When that happens, they can privatize services or kill off agencies completely (like bus service in low-income communities, or the proposed fate of the Department of Housing and Urban Development). And by enfeebling government agencies, the Administration signals that it would rather confront than collaborate with citizens groups.

A policy which belittles public servants not only hurts government and the public it is sworn to serve, it also makes public institutions – our institutions – increasingly unattractive places to work. Why should talented young people enter professions that are systematically ridiculed and shrunken by many of our most senior leaders? What kind of an incentive is this for public service? We've seen this trend clearly in the recent, inflammatory calls for the removal of judges. We've seen it in the degradation of the judiciary at all levels. Judges uphold the culture of law that makes effective citizenship possible. That idea is central to The Epebic Oath.

Finally, there is the hysterical level of communication throughout politics and the commercial media. This current wave of shouting and bashing began with the impeachment of President Clinton and has gotten more vicious through the recent, sad, desperate case of Terri Sciavo in Florida. How can we foster effective citizenry with this intolerant, even threatening, language that now passes for discourse? This language has even infected members of Congress.²²

Can we model public participation, especially for young people, when most of what they see and hear are politicians so polarized that they tear down the concept of thoughtful deliberation and compromise? Can you blame so many young people for turning away from political engagement?

A positive, sometimes contentious, connection between government and its citizens has been essential throughout the history of this country. They depend on each other for protection and service, and for some modicum of respect and recognition. We need to build this up, not dismantle it. As Theda Skocpol, an astute observer of American democracy, has written:

²² For example, Senator John Cornyn of Texas, who recently said, "I don't know if there is a cause-and-effect connection, but we have seen some recent episodes of courthouse violence in this country. . . . And I wonder whether there may be some connection between the perception in some quarters, on some occasions, where judges are making political decisions yet are unaccountable to the public, that it builds up and builds up and builds up to the point where some people engage in, engage in violence. Certainly without any justification, but a concern that I have." From "Senator Links Violence to 'Political' Decisions," *Washington Post*, April 5, 2007, pg. A07.

“Organized civil society in the United States has never flourished apart from active government and inclusive democratic politics. Civic vitality has also depended on vibrant ties across classes and localities. If we want to repair civil society, we must first and foremost revitalize political democracy...Re-establishing local voluntary groups alone will not suffice.”²³

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So there you have it. On the one hand, a government that preserves the finances of a small but important corner of civic life. On the other, it simultaneously undercuts the idea and reality of democratic engagement, our sense of a shared, larger purpose, and our responsibility for the poor and needy among us.

And what is the role of philanthropy here? Possibly the most important step to take is to claim the high road of citizenship, to speak out and demand the civility, respect and funding that enable an effective citizenry to grow. Here we have a poor record. Foundations leaders, at some risk, have to speak out on critical public issues – not just pay nonprofits to speak and act in their stead.

But speaking out isn't enough. We need to put more of our money where our mouths are. As you heard, we can identify engagement strategies we know build effective citizens. We must build a countervailing force to these destructive trends. That means more foundation collaboration and policy engagement.

No other institution in our society has so much leeway, so much access to information, so much public purpose – and so much need to sustain the elements that make democratic participation possible. We shouldn't forget that philanthropy, too, can be weakened in various ways, by legislation or regulation. There are some among us who say that it's only a matter of time until the pendulum swings toward us.

Nonprofit organizations, foundations and governments will either recognize the importance of respecting each other and working it out together, or they will fall apart together as well. This is the ugly scenario, one we have to prevent, at least so that we can go back to the ideals of the Ephebic Oath and revive and grow an effective citizenry.

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²³ Theda Skocpol, “Unraveling From Above,” *The American Prospect*, no. 25 (March-April 1996):25 or <http://epn.org/prospect/25/25-cnt2.html>.