

Fostering a More Engaged Citizenry Philanthropy's Role in a Civic Reawakening

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This paper provides a brief description of civic engagement in America, the current civic landscape and specific recommendations to PACE to help foster civic renewal.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN AMERICA: THE BEDROCK OF OUR DEMOCRACY

Since our early history in America, service to community, the provision of charity, the formation of voluntary associations, and involvement in the institutions supporting democracy have been central to our way of life. Some of our earliest communities, confronted with hardship and a weak and distant government, joined together to govern themselves, to organize charities, to build local institutions, and to safeguard their freedoms.

Our subsequent establishment of a government of limited powers, with guarantees of free expression, assembly, and religious exercise, was predicated on the belief that individual citizens had the authority – indeed the responsibility – to organize themselves voluntarily to improve the quality of life. A wide range of institutions sprang up – including schools, hospitals, houses of worship, fire fighting companies and other civic institutions – through the voluntary efforts of private citizens. Philanthropists and foundations were at the forefront of some of our finest civic achievements – such as the creation of schools and public libraries, the development of vaccines and treatments for diseases, successful conservation efforts and cleanups, and innovations in science and technology. Alexis de Tocqueville, a perceptive French visitor to America in the early 19th century, highlighted the fundamental and enduring aspect of life in America called civic participation in his treatise *Democracy in America* and stated prophetically, “if [Americans] are to remain civilized, the art of associating together must grow and improve.” And it did.

During most of the 20th century, the United States witnessed tremendous growth in the number of nonprofit organizations, voluntary associations and informal community networks; in philanthropy, membership in civic and fraternal organizations, volunteering, political participation and public service; and in the other activities that constitute civic engagement. Robert D. Putnam, who exhaustively catalogued civic trends in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, states, “Giving time and money to help others is a long and distinguished tradition in American society. Both philanthropy and volunteering are roughly twice as common among Americans as among the citizens of other countries.”

The establishment of a republican form of government assumed that citizens would play an active role not only in community-based organizations but in government itself. Service to the country, in the minds of the Founders, included service in the government, and some of their greatest contributions to the Nation were made through government service. The health of the Republic was dependent upon citizen participation in government, both in elective office and in the ordinary activities of citizens interfacing with their government, through voting, participating in town hall meetings, writing persuasive pamphlets, and more.

All of these civic traditions were central to the American experience and the health and vibrancy of the representative democracy that was to be created. The Founders viewed service and civic engagement as fundamental to preserving freedom and the system of government that would

support it. As democracies around the world emerged, informed by the American Experiment, civil society would become central to their health as well.

Much attention is given to the first part of the Declaration of Independence that establishes our rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” More attention should be given to how Jefferson ended the Declaration with a claim on us to perform our duties – “We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.” John Adams wrote to Benjamin Rush, another signer of the Declaration of Independence, “Our obligations to our country never cease but with our lives.” Hamilton talked about a “vow of eternal vigilance,” and Franklin about having wrought “a Republic, if you can keep it.” In fact, the Founders knew that future generations would assert their rights, but were concerned they might neglect their duties. They believed that the people would need to be continually reminded about the obligations they owe to serve their communities and country and proposed an active role for the states in teaching civic education and fostering civic engagement.

THE CURRENT CIVIC LANDSCAPE

Levels of citizen service and civic engagement have waxed and waned in America over time. History shows that moments of great national struggle provide opportunities to foster civic renewal. After World War II, for example, levels of service and civic engagement climbed rapidly, creating what is known today as the “Greatest Generation” – a generation of Americans who not only served in war, but served throughout their lives to strengthen communities in the United States and in other countries. Shortly after World War II, the Congress created the National Conference on Citizenship to encourage a more active, engaged citizenry.

From the late 1960s through the 1990s, however, the United States witnessed a 30-year decline in the activities and attitudes that make up such trends, namely joining voluntary and civic associations, political participation, community service, and interest in working in government. During these three decades, membership in civic and fraternal organizations, volunteering for mainline civic organizations such as the American Red Cross and the Boy Scouts, electoral participation, attendance at public meetings on town or school affairs and participation and trust in government all declined steadily. Robert Putnam studied such trends and showed that within a generation most of America’s civic gains had been wiped out.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 helped foster once again a sense of “we” and reminded people not to take their freedoms for granted. The numerous stories of service, compassion and kindness in the aftermath of the attack are well known. What is less well known is that September 11, 2001 continues to be the moment from which we continue to see a civic reawakening.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 59 million Americans regularly volunteered in the year after 9/11, growing to 63 million two years later and increasing even more over the last year. These increases are significant, given the high baseline of volunteering in the year following September 11, 2001. And these numbers do not include those individuals who dedicate a year or more of their lives in service to the United States or other countries around the world through national and international service programs.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, participation in and funding levels for national service programs have received a welcome boost through the new USA Freedom Corps. Peace Corps volunteers are at their highest levels in 29 years; AmeriCorps has grown from 50,000 to 75,000 members; a new Citizen Corps for homeland security is providing an outlet for hundreds of thousands of citizens who are working to protect our homeland; and a new Volunteers for Prosperity

is sending thousands of skilled professionals to help meet urgent needs in countries around the globe. A renewed culture of service and civic engagement is also found in the institutions we occupy – workplaces, schools and local institutions.

Since a new movement called “Business Strengthening America” (BSA) began in 2002, more than 800 CEOs representing 5 million employees have joined and are making institutional changes in their policies and practices to support a culture of service. Many schools are making community service and civic engagement a part of their missions and a criterion for graduation. Efforts such as the Civic Mission of Schools and the Campaign to implement its recommendations are making great progress in strengthening civic education, together with efforts such as CIRCLE, the National Center for Learning and Citizenship at the Education Commission of the States, and the Alliance for Representative Democracy composed of the Center for Civic Education, Center on Congress and National Conference of State Legislatures. Colleges and universities are making innovative changes in their policies and practices that are providing greater access to higher education and fostering a culture of service and civic engagement on college campuses. The country’s more than 400 volunteer centers are on the verge of receiving a federal investment to recruit thousands of additional volunteers to meet urgent community needs. New programs, such as the Rodel Fellows Program at the Aspen Institute, and older programs such as the Sorensen Institute for Political Leadership, have been developed to train young leaders about our founding principles, brief them on our urgent problems and models for success, and encourage them to work on a bipartisan basis to find common ground.

Since September 11, 2001, there are other hopeful signs of a civic renewal. More than 122 million Americans voted in the recent presidential election, representing the highest turnout since 1968 and the largest uptick in voter participation since 1952. The response to the recent plea by two former Presidents to provide aid to the survivors of the Tsunami through the USA Freedom Corps has been so overwhelming that private aid now exceeds \$1 billion. Bellwether organizations such as the American Red Cross are seeing a significant increase in their volunteers and charitable contributions.

Social scientists have commented that once or twice a century you have an opportunity to foster a kind of civic renewal that does not come again, and that September 11, 2001, much like World War II, is such a time in the United States.

The time is ripe for civic renewal. So what is to be done?

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support the Establishment of Civic Indicators.

A renewed effort to strengthen civic engagement and participatory democracy must have a clear sense of what it is trying to achieve. A civic indicators working group should be established to develop leading indicators of our Nation’s civic health, so there are benchmarks for measuring progress over time. One example of a successful and utilized indicator is the Volunteer Service Index that the USA Freedom Corps developed with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau. This index annually measures the number of Americans who regularly volunteer, where they volunteer, and the principal barriers for those who do not volunteer. Another example is the Index of National Civic Health developed by the Nunn-Bennett Commission on Civic Renewal that includes a variety of specific indices that measure our civic strength, ranging from political participation and trust in government to safety in communities and the strength of the family.

While not perfect, having leading indicators for our civic health will have many benefits: 1) individual organizations can see how their specific efforts relate to other efforts to improve civic health; 2) gaps can be identified and filled with renewed and focused initiatives; 3) grantmakers will have another set of benchmarks against which to judge the promise of proposals; 4) the media will cover the release of data relating to the civic indicators, giving the field another public platform to engage more Americans and institutions in these efforts; and 5) Americans will know how we are doing as a country to strengthen our civic life.

The group could be comprised of academics, leaders of non-profit organizations, foundation leaders, student leaders, and government officials, such as: Robert Putnam, Harvard Professor and author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*; William Galston, former Deputy Assistant to President Clinton for Domestic Policy and Director of the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland; Stephen Goldsmith, former Mayor of Indianapolis and current Chairman of the Corporation for National and Community Service and Harvard Professor of the Ash Institute on Democratic Governance and Innovation; and officials from the General Accounting Office, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau. The group should solicit public input.

2. Create a Permanent Fund to Support Innovative and Results-Oriented Initiatives.

To ensure this effort is reliable and permanent, PACE should work with its alliance of foundations to establish a fund for civic engagement. This permanent fund will send a strong signal to the field that these efforts will be ongoing and sustained for decades to come. The fund could work closely with the Civic Indicators Working Group to ensure initiatives eligible for funding have clear and measurable outcomes that relate to improving the country's civic health. Some silver bullets might be identified over time, as ideas and initiatives are tested. The fund might focus initially on three areas and work to foster institutional changes – strengthening the teaching of American history and civic education, fostering community and national service, and enhancing political and civic participation. Examples of some efforts that might merit closer examination and possible funding and support include:

American History and Civic Education

- ✓ State Action Teams are now working with the Center for Civic Education in 50 states and the District of Columbia to improve state standards, ensure more civics courses are taught, strengthen the content of those courses, enhance teacher training, hold annual summits and change policies and practices at the state and local levels;
- ✓ A network of 50 state summer academies and institutes for American history and civics teachers could be created, building on some good progress that has already been made through the National Endowment for the Humanities and recent Congressional legislation, with historians such as David McCullough leading the sessions;
- ✓ 50 bellwether demonstration schools, testing what works to enhance student understanding, performance and civic engagement could be established; and,
- ✓ American history and culture centers in more than 500 public libraries could be established as civic spaces to train librarians and teachers on the use of the more than 9 million digitized original records from the Library of Congress, to help educate citizens about their past and to provide opportunities for them to serve and participate in the civic life of their communities.

Community and National Service

- ✓ Colleges should be encouraged to adopt policies giving students who take one year off between high school and college to perform community or national service a strong preference in college admissions and increased financial aid, with scholarship support from foundations, to defray the costs of tuition;
- ✓ Organizations, such as Campus Compact, should be supported to work with college campuses to increase the number of quality service-learning courses and to place an additional 4 million students a year in part-time service to their communities;
- ✓ 400 Volunteer Centers working in local communities across America that agree to certain performance standards and volunteer mobilization goals could receive a significant private investment;
- ✓ One key public-private partnership initiative could be developed under each of the five promises of America's Promise – 1) ongoing relationships with a caring adult, 2) safe places with structured activities, 3) a healthy start, 4) marketable skills, and 5) opportunities to serve – so that disadvantaged children have the ability to participate more actively in civic life. One example of such a public-private partnership initiative that falls under the first promise is the USA Freedom Corps' three-year, \$450 million mentoring initiative to provide a caring adult mentor for one million children, including 100,000 children of prisoners, making the transition from childhood to adulthood;
- ✓ Individuals who have served in AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, Citizen Corps or other service programs could be given a preference in private, nonprofit and public sector employment both to increase participation in service efforts and to foster continued civic engagement in communities. Foundations could support the establishment of this initiative; and,
- ✓ The President's Volunteer Service Award could be made financially available to every public school in America, so that children are encouraged to perform and are recognized for their 50 or 100 hours of community service every year, and the connection is made that service to community is service to country.

Political and Civic Engagement

- ✓ Safe, democratic spaces should be created in 10 Centers for the Common Good designed by AmericaSpeaks that once again make authentic the dialogue among citizens, public officials, and other decision makers on issues important to the health and welfare of our democracy.
- ✓ Institutes of Political Leadership could be supported that acquaint promising young leaders with our founding principles, educate them on the pressing issues of our times, and engage them in working on a bipartisan basis to address current issues, including the institutional barriers to greater civic participation;
- ✓ The next generation's interest in public service could be significantly enhanced by expanding the Partnership for Public Service's Call to Serve initiative to more than 1,000 colleges and universities, which makes students aware of, and helps them obtain, outstanding opportunities to make a difference through government service; and,
- ✓ A study of institutional reforms affecting political and civic participation could be undertaken, to assess the impact that various reforms could have on such participation, including congressional redistricting and voter registration procedures.

3. Support Dialogues on How to Strengthen Civic Philanthropy.

Amy Kass from the University of Chicago and the Hudson Institute is just starting to lead an effort called “Toward a More Civic Philanthropy: Perfecting our Grants.” With important support already in place from the Council on Foundations, the Association of Small Foundations, and the Bradley Center on Philanthropy and Civic Renewal, this effort will hold dialogues with prominent philanthropic leaders throughout the country that aim to: 1) promote and sustain more civil and thoughtful discourse about fundamental issues facing the philanthropic sector today; and 2) point a way toward a more responsible, responsive, and civic-spirited philanthropy.

4. Philanthropy Should Not Act in Isolation – PACE Should Make Common Cause with the National Conference on Citizenship.

The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) is a federally chartered, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization whose mission is to encourage a more active, engaged citizenry. Founded in 1946 to sustain the spirit of cooperation that bound citizens together during World War II, the NCoC was granted a federal charter as a “national and patriotic organization” by a unanimous Act of the Congress in 1953. The NCoC is working to strengthen citizenship in three key areas – through American history and civic education; community and national service; and political and civic engagement. A copy of the report on the 2004 Annual Conference of the NCoC will be available at the PACE conference on May 2.

PACE and NCoC working together could:

Build a National Network

The NCoC is well underway in building a national network of leaders and institutions to work in common cause to strengthen citizenship, to share information among them, to make them aware of grant and other resources that may be available to support their work, to develop and announce new initiatives to strengthen the civic health of our nation, and to measure progress over time. The network includes educators, non-profit organizations, federal, state and local officials, corporate executives, associations, and many others working throughout the United States to strengthen citizenship and participatory democracy. The NCoC’s national network currently has every major sector represented, **except foundations.**

The NCoC interviewed more than 75 leaders, including a U.S. Senator, a federal judge, top Administration officials, student leaders, and directors of institutes and organizations working to strengthen citizenship. Every interview highlighted the need to create a national network on these issues and to develop common agendas to propel this work forward in an integrated fashion. The need is clear.

There are innumerable studies, reports, and resources relating to civic engagement that are not well known or are underutilized. A report of the American Political Science Association’s Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement, “Democracy at Risk: Renewing the Political Science of Citizenship” was released in September 2004 and includes many good recommendations relating to the tax code; nonprofits; schools; faith-based institutions; community, national and public service organizations and more. Many leaders working in the fields of civic engagement are unaware of this excellent report and the recommendations that are currently buried on page 143 of that report. The Nunn-Bennett Commission on Civic Renewal developed the Index of National Civic Health, which advanced the knowledge of what the country might measure to track its civic health, yet this report sits on a shelf and has not

been the subject of subsequent work. The former Executive Director of this Commission believes the NCoC should utilize these civic indicators to help measure our progress and mobilize organizations to have initiatives that relate to them. These are two examples of a wealth of research that is outstanding but unused.

The problem runs deeper. Groups are not making common cause as they should be. In the course of our research, we found that one organization that has been working for years to strengthen the teaching of American history and civics in the schools was not even aware of the outstanding resources of a prominent Institute whose mission is to provide such resources to American history and government teachers. Another organization working in the same area was not aware of the 9 million digitized original documents and other records of American history and culture available through the Library of Congress' National Digital Library. Organizations that have established ways to chart progress that is being made in civics education often find that their work goes unnoticed. The field is atomized and diffuse and is seeking a national organization that has the stature to shine a light on their efforts, share information among them, hold a prominent annual conference that brings leaders together, give organizations a sense of how their efforts fit into the larger national landscape, bring organizations together to work on common agendas, hold regular interactive website chats with national leaders and ensure that organizations focus on and produce results. These are the challenges that the National Conference on Citizenship is working to address.

Build an Interactive System

The NCoC and PACE could create an interactive website, which enables people working in these areas around America to interact with one another on a regular basis. The interactive function could be downstream and upstream, from national to local and local to national. For example, one interactive function might include an online chat such as "Ask Robert Putnam" that will enable leaders in the field to interact with the author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* to discuss their work in the context of historic trends.

Participants were excited by the quality of the speakers and panelists at the 2004 annual conference of the National Conference on Citizenship and expressed interest in having a more regular dialogue. Cokie Roberts might host a discussion and debate about the state of American democracy and the role of citizens in it, which could be webcast to communities and schools throughout the nation. Conferences such as the annual conferences of the National Conference on Citizenship and PACE should no longer be confined to audiences of less than 1,000, but should reach citizens and communities throughout America.

As local institutions unveil new initiatives or studies, the website could be a live portal to help those institutions communicate their good work to a much larger audience.

Host Quarterly Forums on Citizenship and Democracy

Leaders in the field of community and national service asked the NCoC to convene regular meetings to discuss a common agenda and how the vast networks could work together to support common ends. The first meeting in February demonstrated how much potential these efforts hold and how little organizations are working together to achieve their objectives.

Ideas are being generated to "crack the atom of service and civic engagement" – from creation of a modern GI bill to more incremental steps to reawaken our civic sentiments. A similar effort is unfolding in the area of education relating to citizenship and a functioning democracy.

Leaders from the National Conference on Citizenship are currently identifying key organizations to bring together in a forum to discuss a common agenda, perhaps under a banner of “An Alliance for Democracy.” A similar effort could be undertaken for the third plank of the agenda – civic and political participation. The NCoC and PACE should work together to sponsor these discussions and to facilitate common initiatives and alliances.

The National Conference on Citizenship is already working on its 2005 Annual Conference, to be held during Constitution Week in September. The NCoC wants to work in partnership with PACE to craft an interactive, action-oriented conference that inspires and produces results. The NCoC contemplates that it will produce a post conference report, similar to the 2004 conference report that will be available at the PACE conference on May 2,, but will use its new technology to ensure this and previous reports reach millions of Americans.

CONCLUSION

John Adams and George Washington shared a favorite quote from Addison’s *Cato*, “We cannot ensure success, but we can deserve it.” PACE has an opportunity to help create an important, reliable and national platform from which to mobilize millions of Americans to engage in civic life and to continually generate new ideas to spawn civic renewal. In turn, it can help strengthen our democracy, protect our freedoms, and reawaken a sense of responsibility among the people.

BIOGRAPHY & CONTACT INFORMATION

John Bridgeland is President & CEO of Civic Enterprises, a public policy firm that helps corporations, nonprofits, foundations, universities and governments develop and spearhead innovative public policies to strengthen our communities and country. He recently held a Teaching Fellowship at the Institute of Politics at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, where he offered a class on Presidential Decision Making. John served as Assistant to the President of the United States and the first Director of the USA Freedom Corps. In that role, he coordinated more than \$1 billion in domestic and international service initiatives and worked with non-profits, corporations and schools to foster a culture of service in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. His prior positions include Deputy Assistant to the President and Director of the Domestic Policy Council at the White House. John graduated with honors in government from Harvard University, studied at the College of Europe and the Universite Libre de Bruxelles in Belgium as a Rotary International Fellow, and received his J.D. at the University of Virginia School of Law. He currently serves on advisory boards for the American Presidents Foundation (Chairman); Center for National Policy; Coalition for a Drug Free Greater Cincinnati; Earth Conservation Corps; Hands On Network; Aspen Institute, Rodel Fellows Program; National Civic Literacy Board; National Conference on Citizenship; and the Partnership for Public Service.

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PACE INVITES YOUR COMMENTS

This essay is one of a set of eight essays that **PACE** commissioned in 2005 for our first national gathering, titled *The Condition of Democracy in America and What Philanthropy Can Do About It*. **PACE** - Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (www.pacefunders.org) is an emerging community of donors and grantmakers committed to strengthening democracy by supporting pathways for individual participation in civic and community life. We hope this and the other essays in the series will stimulate productive conversations across different groups and different philosophies about how to unleash the power of individual participation in solving the problems of our communities and nation.

I welcome your comments and questions about this essay.

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