

Building Democracy through Service

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Even as most of us bemoan the rise of so-called “reality” TV shows, millions upon millions of Americans are eager to reach for their phones each week and participate in choosing the next singing “Idol,” or to have their say in voting an unruly housemate out of the chance at half a million dollars. In the same vein, millions upon millions of Internet users are using the tools of the medium to advocate their views, exchange information, plan activities and get involved in literally everything from pole vaulting to politics. It turns out that Americans’ demand to be participants rather than spectators isn’t declining – in fact it’s increasing, but it sure is different.

Presidential candidates tapped into that different sort of pent-up demand to participate during the last election cycle, and the number of people who responded to new forms of online grassroots fundraising was astonishing. The Republican National Committee added more than a million new donors to its base since 2001 while the Democratic National Committee estimates that over 70 percent of people who gave money in the past three years were first-time donors. And people weren’t just writing checks. They were networking, forming coalitions and connecting to their communities in new and innovative ways.

Yes, this new level of mass civic engagement demonstrates the vast potential of the Internet – but even more fundamentally, it demonstrates that getting more people to participate civically is at least as much a matter of building the infrastructure to support that demand as it is to generate that demand in the first place.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT – SUPPLY & DEMAND

Fundamentally, civic engagement, including service and volunteering, operates according to a supply and demand dynamic. Before now, we have obsessed largely on stimulating demand – that is, on trying to motivate people to get more involved. What has been missing, however, has been a focus on improving the supply side of the equation – improving our communities’ ability to meet the needs of potential participants.

The “billion dollar question” posed to essayists for this project was: “What is the condition of democracy in America, and what is philanthropy doing about it?” Well, I’ve seldom met anyone who doesn’t agree that the state of democracy would be stronger if more Americans were civically engaged. What I wish more of us were “doing about it” is building and modernizing the infrastructure that supports that civic engagement at a community level by, first, modifying the channels of participation to suit the work, time and social preferences of today’s Americans and, second, lessening the barriers to participation.

The Corporation for National and Community Service is putting our money where our mouth is: we give away close to \$1 billion in grants each year to support service and volunteering in the United States and territories – the equivalent to a \$20 billion foundation (except, of course, that we’re really a Federal agency). And we are already making significant progress – or, rather, our partners are – in encouraging others to invest with us. Over the past four years, Corporation grantees have collectively raised nearly \$1.5 billion in non-Corporation matching funds against their grants, significantly more than the terms of our grants require. That equates to about \$360 million a year – an extraordinary testament to the public-private partnership that is national and community service.

However, that partnership will have to become even stronger for several reasons. The first reason is the availability of government resources. It's no secret that financial resources for government and social programs continue to be extremely tight, and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. This economic reality means two things: that it is critically important to increase the level of volunteering in our nation, and that it is also critically important to operate as cost-effectively as possible. As funders, we must find more and better ways to work together to support the nonprofit infrastructure as well as the more than 64.5 million Americans who volunteer each year through formal organizations. The resources of each sector must be leveraged in the most effective way to broaden and strengthen the traditions of volunteering and civic engagement.

SUPPORTING THE DESIRE TO PARTICIPATE

Building the infrastructure to support increasing demands for individual participation – including philanthropy, volunteering, and civic discourse – was an issue that I spent much time pondering when I was at AOL. In an information age, freedom and democracy has a more grassroots feel. There is a greater sense of personalization in all human activity, with flexibility, choice and convenience offering the winning combination to convert people who express a desire to take an action into those who actually take it.

At the Corporation for National and Community Service, the challenge is the same. Let me give you some numbers.

According to estimates from the Current Population Survey, 64.5 million Americans – or 29 percent of the adult population – volunteered through a formal organization in 2004. We also discovered from the 2002 Survey that a staggering 127 million Americans said they would be motivated to volunteer if the opportunity met their needs.¹

The most difficult need to meet for potential volunteers is more time. That's why one key element of the volunteering infrastructure in any community includes strong relationships with the business sector to incorporate time off, comp-time and flexibility to encourage employee volunteering. That's also why effective volunteer infrastructures will increasingly find ways to meet other needs of the volunteers – social, educational, professional, personal, religious – enabling volunteers to meet multiple objectives, and attain higher value from their volunteer time.

As we move forward, the challenge will be less about increasing the number of people who want to volunteer, and more about building the infrastructure to connect people with opportunities where they can make a meaningful difference and meet more of the other needs in their lives. President Bush understood this when he followed up his post September 11th State of the Union call to service by launching a state-of-the-art volunteer search engine on the USA Freedom Corps website that more than one million Americans have used to match their interests to local volunteer opportunities. New media companies have also met the challenge of building online communities by creating solid infrastructures – capacity and support – so that whenever people want to speak out, connect, or otherwise engage, there are tools and venues to do so with as little “friction” as possible. That same approach needs to be applied to volunteering and civic engagement in the offline world as well.

I recently learned how mentoring is a terrific example of this. In a meeting with leaders of some of the most significant national mentoring organizations, we were discussing what it would take to get two million more mentors in America for needy children over the next several years. Among several areas of disagreement, I was startled at one assertion that virtually every leader agreed with: finding two million new Americans to step forward and serve as mentors to needy children was not going to

be a problem. The problem is that the infrastructure to screen, train, support and match those mentors and to likewise support the mentee didn't exist. The two million mentor initiative isn't up against finding the mentors – it's up against raising more than half a billion dollars to support them.

SERVICE & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: NOT A ZERO-SUM GAME

So the challenge of strengthening infrastructure to support service and volunteering is this: what do we need to have in place at the community level so that there is NO impediment to capturing the drive to participate and the energy and talent of every American on behalf of our communities and our democracy?

And make no mistake. Much of the infrastructure that will support volunteerism and service at the community level will also support other forms of civic engagement – think of poll-workers, crisis coordination, advocacy workers, petition drives and then imagine the potential role for volunteer centers with each.

And, before going further, let me confront what should be obvious: volunteering and civic engagement are interconnected. In some circles over the past couple of years, it has become fashionable to play down the importance of volunteer activity – or at least to disavow its connection with other forms of civic engagement. Indeed, some observers have taken the view that today's volunteers, especially the rising generation of college students and young working adults, volunteer in relatively large numbers because of their alienation from politics, local civic associations, and other traditional forms of civic engagement. By volunteering, young people are said to be actively seeking an *alternative* to broader civic engagement – one that gives them the flexibility to achieve the results they want in the way they want.

This viewpoint is divisive and deeply hurtful to the larger cause of increasing civic engagement. Robert Putnam makes a more compelling case when he refuses to see volunteering as an alternative to the exercise of the duties and responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society. As Putnam writes in *Bowling Alone*, "Volunteering is part of the syndrome of good citizenship and political involvement, not an alternative to it."²

The 2002 report "The Civic and Political Health of the Nation," produced by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), bolsters the proposition that service and civic engagement are not in a zero-sum game for participants, but rather mutually reinforcing. "Regular volunteers are very active across a host of other activities. Compared to people who volunteer but not regularly, they are significantly more likely to have worked on a community problem, raised money for charity, or served as an active member of a group. They are also more likely to have contacted a public official or the news media, signed a written petition, or worn a button or displayed a bumper sticker or yard sign."³

The early findings of an important longitudinal study of the civic attitudes and behaviors of AmeriCorps national service members clearly shows that the AmeriCorps service experience *strengthens* members' civic attitudes and behaviors, including their connection to their community, knowledge about problems facing their community, and neighborhood obligations. AmeriCorps graduates also were more likely than a scientifically controlled comparison group to choose public service careers, such as teaching, social work, and military service.

Thus, even though service and volunteering are only a part of the broader tapestry of civic life, they are an absolutely essential and pivotal part. More to the point, service and volunteering represent a

very powerful starting place for getting Americans engaged in virtually every other element of being a strong citizen. Rather than asking whether there is a connection between volunteering and other forms of civic engagement, we should instead be asking, “How can we drive that connection deeper?”

INVEST IN THE VOLUNTEER INFRASTRUCTURE

Grant makers and donors who are interested in civic engagement can play a critical role in doing just that by helping reinforce for the nonprofit sector the urgency of the need to strengthen the infrastructure that supports effective, meaningful and deepening participation.

Unfortunately, among nonprofit organizations, we know there is currently a *cognitive disconnect between valuing volunteers and investing in volunteer management*. In 2003, the Corporation and the Urban Institute, with funding from the UPS Foundation, conducted the first national study on Volunteer Management Capacity. While charities reported that volunteers significantly increase the quality of their services, reduce costs, and increase public support for their organization, we also found that nonprofits do not invest in the necessary tools to maximize organizational benefits or to provide individuals with the high-quality volunteer experience necessary to retain them.

We also know that the benefit an organization receives FROM volunteers is directly tied to the benefits it provides TO its volunteers. For example, we found that volunteers produce greater organizational benefits and continue volunteering for an organization when they are offered a variety of work assignments. We also identified three management practices correlated with higher volunteer retention rates: screening volunteers for their interests and aptitudes and matching them to organizational tasks, providing volunteers with training and professional development and recognizing volunteers for their contributions. Regrettably, 90% of organizations do not regularly practice all three of these techniques.

While executives do not need to be convinced to dedicate staff, policies and systems to fundraising, they seldom employ the resources needed for even minimal volunteer management. That is true even though we *also* know that having a staff member who can devote 30 percent of his or her time to volunteer management is essential to an organization’s taking on more volunteers, adopting best practices, retaining those volunteers and producing greater benefits for the organization and the community. What’s more, the report clearly shows a correlation between the amount of time a staff member can devote to volunteer management and the organizational benefits that charities report in terms of improved services, cost-savings, and public support.

Today, funders face low-hanging fruit in the opportunity to strengthen civic engagement through supporting volunteer management. A micro-example: a funder could help an organization it is already supporting to hire a volunteer manager, or to enable a staff person to devote significant time to that activity. Since one-third of paid volunteer managers have never had any training in volunteer management it is also critical to sponsor professional volunteer management training and development opportunities. These approaches will multiply the value of a grant by increasing an organization’s efficiency and effectiveness in using volunteers. For funders interested in the macro level, the new Fund for the Advancement of Effective Volunteer Resources Management offers great promise. With \$1 million in seed money from the UPS Foundation, this pooled fund will provide competitive grants to support sector-wide volunteer management priorities identified in the landmark Volunteer Management Capacity study done by the Corporation and the Urban Institute last year.⁴

On a larger scale, we need to push the needle further in promoting volunteering and other forms of active civic engagement. Consider volunteer “connector” organizations – such as the Volunteer Center National Network, Hands On National Network, VolunteerMatch.org. These and other organizations are dedicated to meeting the needs of volunteers and nonprofit groups by matching individuals with the appropriate opportunity to serve. These organizations also train nonprofit organizations on how to deepen the engagement of individual participants. For civic engagement levels to increase, those organizations must be strong and well funded.

There is also the need to support a vigorous research agenda around volunteer management, volunteering, and the right methods for leveraging volunteer activities into broader civic participation. The UPS Foundation has stepped up to the plate in the important area of volunteer management, and others are needed to generate the additional research that is needed on effective management and extension strategies and there are many other topics in the areas of volunteering and civic engagement, such as youth volunteering, that warrant further examination.

BABY BOOMERS IN RETIREMENT, 77 MILLION STRONG

The need to expand capacity and thinking in the connection between volunteering and broader civic participation will become even more critically important in the next couple of decades, as some 77 million baby boomers reach retirement age. There is a tendency to regard this coming wave as a huge drain on Federal and State budgets and hence a diversion of resources from other critical needs. Many of us see it differently. The boomers are a highly educated, highly motivated group who could drive solutions to some of our most intractable social problems. Capturing their talents and experience, and engaging them in helping to solve critical social issues, must become a high-priority for the nation in the coming years.

But boomers are different from the population of older Americans who are currently active in their communities. For one, they generally will come to retirement age with prior civic involvement, either as volunteers or as participants in other forms of civic activity. For another, they tend to respond differently to calls to participate; they are less swayed than current older Americans by appeals to their sense of duty or civic responsibility and respond more positively to articulations of the benefits to them – from personal fulfillment to excitement, and from social opportunities to opportunities to learn something new. Likewise, they will generally respond more favorably to greater customization and personalization of their participation and to stronger reporting back to them on the positive results their activities have generated. Consequently, funders must support programs and institutions that effectively reach out to and engage newly retired boomers, as well as organizations conducting research in this area.

By funders, I do not mean just the private sector. Government as well will need to do a better job of finding ways to engage the boomer generation in their communities. The Corporation and other Federal agencies are actively exploring new ways to engage boomers. As we envision what the community-based infrastructures that will power civic participation in the future will look like, the ability to meet the special needs of this population is critical.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

There is another reason why we must strengthen that public-private partnership. The paradox of our age is that top-down solutions (read: government) don't work, while bottom up solutions (read: private) don't scale. One of the most difficult issues facing every one of the Corporation's programs is making that program actually meet the specific needs of the communities that utilize them, while at the same time retaining sufficient unifying character to be able to describe them and their results in a way that is compelling on a national basis. All of us know of pilot programs in specific communities that are doing phenomenal work – if only we could bring them to scale. Ultimately, broadening and deepening the public-private partnership in the area of strengthening civic engagement offers the most workable solution to marrying top-down resource deployment and bottom up community need in the area of civic engagement.

In partnership, we can reinvigorate an ethic in our society where every individual at every stage in his or her life feels compelled to get involved, perhaps by going to his or her local volunteer organization and registering to participate in some aspect of improving their community. As funders, we need to work together to ensure that the resources of the public and private sectors are used to the best advantage to support the health and well-being of every community.

It is also critically important, as the members of PACE are aware, that we take advantage of the amazing window of opportunity that is open before us *now*. When President Bush issued his call to service in early 2002, the echoes of the explosions of September 11 were still ringing loudly in our ears. That year, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 60 million Americans from all walks of life served their communities through volunteer activities with nonprofit organizations. The next year, the number of Americans volunteering increased to nearly 64 million, an increase of seven percent. And in 2004, the level rose yet again, albeit by a much smaller amount.

This post-September 11, multi-year climb in civic engagement is extremely unusual. All other spikes of this kind have faded after months. An opportunity like this – to sustain a long-term growth of our civic engagement – comes along only once or twice in a century, and we need to support and nurture it. Opening the door to civic engagement and responsible citizenship – and getting as many Americans through it as possible so that it becomes a long-lasting phenomenon – is the job of all of us who care about engaging our citizens and strengthening our democracy and our communities.

To be sure, support for the volunteer infrastructure is not the only road to increasing levels of civic engagement. But thoughtful investment in this area will lead to greater and greater levels of meaningful involvement by the American people in their communities and in the work of the nonprofit sector. And that is good for the development of active and engaged citizens, and the continuing strength of our democracy.

BIOGRAPHY & CONTACT INFORMATION

David Eisner is Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which administers the Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America programs. He was appointed by President Bush and began serving in December 2003. David is a nationally recognized leader on nonprofit capacity-building, infrastructure, and organizational effectiveness. From 1997 until 2003, he was a Vice President at AOL Time Warner and directed the company's charitable foundation. Before that, he was a Senior Vice President of Fleishman-Hilliard International Communications, and prior to that he managed public relations at the Legal Services Corporation. He started his career on Capitol Hill, serving as press secretary for three Members of Congress. David has served on the boards of several national nonprofit organizations, including Independent Sector, the National 4-H Council, and Network for Good. A graduate of Stanford University, he received his law degree from Georgetown University Law Center.

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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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ENDNOTES

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS), 2004.

² Putnam, Robert. (2000) Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: Simon & Schuster.

³ Keeter, Scott, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina, and Krista Jenkins. (2002, September) The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

⁴ Hager, M. and Brudney, J. (2004) *Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations: A Briefing Report.* Urban Institute. Washington, D.C.