

Re-Invigorating Democratic Participation and Activating an Engaged Citizenry

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The health of our democracy is measured by many things, but no dimension is more important than an engaged citizenry. The American Democratic Experiment is predicated on an educated, active, and engaged citizenry. I believe that while the current condition of our democracy is more anemic than robust, there is an important window of opportunity to re-invigorate citizen action. Philanthropy can play a pivotal role in shoring up the democratic infrastructure that supports and enables effective citizen leadership. In this paper, I propose that philanthropy must invest in holistic approaches to civic engagement that are grounded in local communities and that embrace the reality of a life-time commitment to civic action. Specifically, I envision a network of locally based “Citizen Action Centers” offering “continuing education for citizenship”, where individuals join together to practice the arts of democracy. By supporting a democratic infrastructure where people can acquire the skills for effective citizen action and deliberate together to solve community and national problems, we can revitalize citizen action and American democracy.

DEFINING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

A healthy democracy is dependent upon an engaged citizenry that understands and embraces its capacity to shape our neighborhoods, communities and national direction. Michael Delli Carpini presents the following definition that explains the multidisciplinary element of being “engaged”: “Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy. Civic engagement encompasses a range of specific activities such as working in a soup kitchen, serving on a neighborhood association, writing a letter to an elected official or voting. Indeed, an underlying principle of our approach is that an engaged citizen should have the ability, agency and opportunity to move comfortably among these various types of civic acts.”¹

How do we achieve this type of engagement? The requisite components for a vibrant democracy are an educated citizenry with access to venues for community action, and dutiful participation in political and electoral processes. There is a preponderance of evidence and indicators that point to a diminished current condition of these essential elements for a vibrant democracy.

THE CURRENT STATE OF CITIZEN ACTION

An Educated Citizenry: An educated citizenry is critical to successful self-governance. Thomas Jefferson intuitively understood that the fate of democracy relied upon a “public education that [should be] given to every member of the society as will enable him to read, to judge and to vote understandingly on what is passing.” Although there has been significant interest in service learning and civic literacy, our schools continue to fail in their mission to instill high-order civic skills and the civic dispositions necessary to connect civic facts and concepts to the responsibilities of citizenship. A 1999 Report from the Center for Civic Education found that civic education “overemphasizes the lower-order thinking skills of identifying and describing positions relative to the more challenging skills of explaining and analyzing a position. [While] requiring students to evaluate, take, and defend positions—the highest-order level of thinking—are the least prevalent in most state standards.”²

Although many policymakers and educators give lip service to the importance of civic education in the schools, state policies and school practices often fail to provide students with the civic education they deserve, and one that the future of a vibrant democracy requires.

Community Involvement: The point of entry for democratic engagement is often volunteer and community action. This can be characterized by a wide variety of activities, including church attendance, involvement in social clubs or direct service. Robert Putnam's study of social capital demonstrates declining rates of participation in everything from club participation (down 58% in the last 25 years) to entertaining friends.³ Moreover, confronting a community problem first-hand and experiencing the efficacy of personal involvement to address the concern is another fortifying experience in the formation of the effective citizen. While volunteering rates are high in terms of breadth of participation, the number of volunteer hours per volunteer committed (i.e. sustained and deep commitment) declined 10% from 1989 to 2000 to less than four hours per week, according to the Independent Sector.⁴ The result of the decline in each of these mutually reinforcing areas is a deteriorated social fabric and individuals who both lack the skills to access the benefits of community and the confidence and ethic to meaningfully contribute.

Political Participation: Finally, healthy political and electoral participation is critical to democracy. Despite an encouraging increase in voter participation in 2004, prior voting levels show a 14% decrease in the proportion of Americans who cast a ballot in 1964 compared to 2000.⁵ But, perhaps the greatest alarm bells for our democracy are the dramatically declining rates of trust in government over the last 40 years. For example, in 1958, 73% of Americans reported a trust in government – this declined to 36% in 2003.⁶ When we consider both the longer term view and overall picture, it's hardly the image of a thriving democracy in the DeToqueville tradition.

In fact, the decline of voter participation is just a small piece of a larger concern around our democratic process. Broader political participation, when it really counts – informing the decisions and actions of elected officials – is even rarer. Levels of participation in political activity show a dramatic drop. Next to voting, the most common form of participation is signing a petition at 28%, while only 10% of Americans report writing to Congress.⁷ A public that does not engage on issues in the electoral off-season will not be given political attention during the campaign. This becomes a cycle of disengagement that leads to a decline of efficacy and an erosion of our democratic processes that is replaced by special interests. Correspondingly, a community that lacks the infrastructure for citizens to exercise their civic muscle will continue to weaken in its representation.

WHAT CAN PHILANTHROPY DO TO INVEST IN ACTIVATING AN ENGAGED CITIZENRY?

Over the next decade, philanthropy can play a significant role in reversing these trends and laying the groundwork for a re-engaged citizenry by focusing on three essential principles:

- Our approach to developing the infrastructure for civic participation must be holistic and well rounded;
- This infrastructure should be locally based, but also take into account the technology that allows for virtual and global community; and
- Philanthropy must capitalize on the seed investments already made in our future citizenry by embracing the civic mission of schools and service learning while building upon that investment to provide “continuing education” for citizenship so that we support a lifetime of service and civic skill—not simply service as a rite of passage.

A Holistic Understanding of Civic Action: Philanthropy should invest in civic engagement strategies that recognize the continuum of citizen engagement. Most individuals need a point of entry for their engagement, for example volunteering at a local hospital or being part of a church committee to support local mission work. Experiencing efficacy through direct service can lead people to a deeper and broader level of civic action. We should build upon the high level of interest in direct service to invite deeper and sustained civic participation vs. parsing out civic action in terms of an abstract hierarchy. Investment strategies that only invest in episodic volunteer mobilization drives or understand civic action strictly in terms of electoral participation at the voting booth fail to embrace the broader possibilities of citizenship. Citizens who understand their role as change agents will vote. If we somehow limited civic participation exclusively to voting, I would argue that there would be tremendous frustration and a sense of limited capacity to contribute. So, why should we limit our investments to activate citizenship exclusively to voting drives?

The report “The Civic and Political Health of the Nation” found that citizens who feel they can make a difference in working to solve problems in their local communities are more likely to vote and follow news about politics and government.⁸ Engaging with community and a feeling of efficacy have very real implications for broader civic behavior. Philanthropy should invest in supporting people to make a difference in their communities through a broad-based understanding of civic participation.

Locally Based Platforms: Philanthropy should look more closely at investing in locally based platforms for citizen engagement. Most individuals begin their civic journeys with local participation (a Brownie troop cleans up a neighborhood playground or a citizen runs for the local school board). Effective citizen action ultimately depends upon people joining together and a community of reinforcement. New technologies can support scaled local mobilization efforts and bring new possibilities to support local organizing capacities. While our support of citizenship should not be limited to local strategies, I believe more investment should be rooted in local support systems.

Creating a Life-Long Platform for Citizen Action: Service learning when incorporated into effective civic education can set the stage for a lifetime of service and civic success. According to a 1996 Independent Sector/Gallup Poll, youth who volunteer are three times more likely to volunteer as adults. Additionally, there are data to support that young Americans who feel a stronger connection to government are more likely to be engaged in civic and political life, demonstrating a strong link between efficacy and political involvement.⁹

While we have begun, rightly, to invest in youth civic strategies, there is little investment in ordinary adult Americans to be active citizens. An analysis of federal investment in service activities provides some insight into our failure to invest in support systems for adult civic participation. Of the \$927 million appropriated to the programs of the Corporation for National and Community Service, 23% is restricted to Americans 55 years old and over through Senior Corps; Learn and Serve America restricts its \$43 million to K-16 service learning *; and the remaining funds (\$430 million) support the participation of 70,000 AmeriCorps members in sustained service programs. While this is a terrific and important investment, less than one third of 1% of Americans participate in full-time service programs such as AmeriCorps or the Peace Corps. The remaining gap is where the vast majority of Americans fall and where significant support is needed to rebuild and harness the civic power of the masses.

In a society in which individuals increasingly have a number of careers with points of transition and many are likely to have several decades of productive years after retirement, we need to re-conceptualize our civic infrastructure. Service and civics should not just be a right of passage but a life-long endeavor.

* These funds typically support service that is tied to the traditional academic curriculum, not civics education.

AN INNOVATION IN INVESTMENT: CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR CITIZENSHIP

Why are we failing to support adults to be civically engaged in what are, arguably their most productive years? According to the latest Bureau of Labor Statistics 2004 census data, 35- to 44-year-olds are most likely to volunteer, followed by 45- to 54-year-olds. These age groups have the potential to apply their energies, expertise, and professional and personal resources to confront problems through service and civic participation. Moreover, these Americans are providing examples for their children that will set the stage for future generations of citizens.

While individuals go on to practice and hone their workplace skills or develop their hobbies or pursue their interests through a variety of vehicles, where do they go to refresh their understanding of civic institutions, to practice the arts of democracy and civic action? Do we really expect individuals to be equipped to understand how to advocate for the passage of a bill in their state house or the halls of congress, hearkening back to even the most excellent 10th grade civics course? We need a platform for citizens to come together to learn both the technical skills of civic action and the specific how-to's, from how to develop and lead a community-based service project to Navigating City Hall 101. As our governmental institutions become larger and more complex and our local and national issues increasingly complicated, it is vital to give citizens the knowledge and skills they need to make a difference.

Citizen Action Centers can serve as hubs for continuing education for citizenship, helping to navigate the processes of democracy, and serving as gathering points where individuals can come together to learn about the critical local, national, and international issues that affect their lives. By providing common ground for learning and wrestling with issues and platforms for coming together to act upon them, we can raise the caliber of the debate and help shape a revitalized social compact, informed by purposeful choice and participation from the electorate. This stands in contrast to the polarized political debate that dominates the current discourse in which special interests and strongly held views dominate. With space and encouragement for dialogue, compromise and common sense solutions are more likely to emerge.

There are a number of successful efforts that support the idea of investment in our civic infrastructure to encourage greater engagement. These efforts share some underlying principles in common that can provide the operating framework for Citizen Action Centers.

- First, these programs provide an opportunity to demystify the political process by providing easy and unthreatening ways to understand how systems work and how to access them. For example, many municipal governments offer educational forums to learn about what certain departments of the city do and how to access these services, like the City of Milwaukee's Citizen Academy project to educate the public on the inner workings of the police department.
- Second, these centers connect experiential learning (in some cases through service projects) to a more traditional academic or intellectual exploration of the issues. The Constitutional Rights Foundation's City Works Program connects high school students' government course work with service learning projects that apply this knowledge in a real-world context.
- Third, these gathering points provide a forum for people coming together to wrestle with issues. They offer a space for learning about tough issues and hearing and expressing different points of view. Groups like Public Agenda provide content expertise in these forums, which can then be leveraged and integrated with experiential offerings.
- Finally and most importantly, Citizen Action Centers must encourage a bias towards future action: providing the entry points and pathways for people to apply what they learn and

practice in other forms of civic engagement. An orientation toward next steps continues to challenge citizens to exercise the many faculties of a well-rounded contributor to community and democracy.

Hands On Network has developed its own program called Citizen Academy, an umbrella program of many types of forums, educational offerings, trainings, and community venues for Hands On volunteers and others to be intentional in their effort to understand the issues that their community, country and world face and the ways that individuals—alone and as citizens acting together—can solve these problems. Graduates of a Citizen Academy course or program may go directly to lead a service project for other volunteers; they may be trained to start their own small project or program in their community to engage their friends and neighbors; or they may learn the importance of and how to contact their city councilperson to address an immediate concern of their community.

There are many more examples of local and national programs that embody these principles, although the vast majority focus on engaging youth. Citizen Action Centers should be convening places for continuing education and exploration of citizenship for all members of the community. These centers can be the venue for learning the vital skills of democracy and community problem solving, for all generations. They offer the possibilities of an infrastructure to provide continuing education and platforms for practicing citizenship.

ENVISIONING A POWERFUL NETWORK OF CITIZEN ACTION

Imagine a Network of Citizen Action Centers, community-based hubs that serve as gathering points for democratic learning and problem solving. This Network could be both virtually powered and geographically based. There could be Web-based online resources to inform objective deliberations of issues that could be customized to local conversations along with opportunities to organize around these issues within local communities. Whether the concern was how to get a neighborhood speed bump installed or tackling homelessness, these Citizen Action Centers would serve as the resource for learning more about the issue, understanding what action can be taken and how to take action.

The online component could serve as an action-oriented forum for citizens to explore service, civic participation, and social issues on a deeper level through such diverse information as “The Architecture of City/State Government,” “Working with Your School Board,” “Appalled by the Sprawl” and “Be A Social Entrepreneur.” The information would provide users with a greater understanding of issues they can affect through volunteer service and broader civic involvement, and could facilitate online information sharing so that those interested in these issues could share their thoughts, challenges and ideas for solutions with individuals in other parts of the country. Imagine also, an online “Civic Transcript” tracking document that allowed individuals to record their civic contributions and experiences throughout their lives. As citizens become re-activated and as the perceived value of an active citizenry increases, this “Civic Transcript” could become a recognized standard that is an expected complement to any educational transcript or job application.

On the ground, there could be a curriculum for skill-based learning that would be conducted in the Citizen Action Centers. This programming could take a variety of forms from how-to workshops to political “party” forums to issue-based service projects, all designed to help people discover and actualize their community leadership potential and transform that first taste of success into a long term commitment to make the world a better place. These centers might be located or incubated in local community-based nonprofits, like Hands On organizations, community colleges or United Way organizations.

Now, further imagine that the larger nonprofit sector becomes the infrastructure for life-long citizen activities. In addition to this Network of Citizen Action Centers, imagine the possibilities if the nonprofit sector truly became the architecture to support citizen learning and action. What if every nonprofit incorporated a program for civic action? What if nonprofits and their volunteers were focused not only on keeping their doors open to fulfill their missions, but on fostering a broader democratic discourse and agenda for public problem solving? The nonprofit community should be encouraged through tools and resources to explicitly integrate the cultivation and activation of an engaged citizenry into its work. As David Bornstein wrote in *How to Change the World, Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*, “People who solve problems must somehow first arrive at the belief that they CAN solve problems.”¹⁰

Key indicators of successful implementation of these strategies could be tracked around both the resulting investments and indicators of an engaged citizenry outlined earlier. The field would see greater funding for holistic approaches, locally based platforms, and life-long service that supports continued education for citizenship. Our nation would see systemic change in civic engagement of all forms, including increased community involvement and greater political participation.

DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL – AN EDUCATED AND ENGAGED CITIZENRY

Can we activate the latent energy of our citizenry into new generation forms of engagement that reinvigorate our democracy? I believe that we can. When our citizens are invited to participate and when they sense their own efficacy, they do engage. The latest election turnout, volunteer interest, and new technological tools for learning and organization promise great possibilities. We need to re-conceptualize forms of civic involvement and invest in strategies that respond to holistic and community based citizenship efforts that include but transcend voter registration drives. We need to continue to invest in youth service and civic learning, but follow up that commitment with strategies that create an invitation for life-long citizen engagement. This should include gathering places and curriculum that allows people to hone their skills for citizenship and to learn and share strategies for critical problems that face our communities and nation. With an invigorated citizenry, we can achieve more responsive and less polarized political solutions that can create a virtuous circle of involvement, encouraging still greater participation, an enlivened civic discourse and a renewed social compact for a new century.

BIOGRAPHY & CONTACT INFORMATION

Michelle Nunn is the President and CEO of Hands On Network (formerly CityCares). Hands On Network expands and supports an innovative alliance of volunteer organizations working to build community through service and civic engagement, and serves as an umbrella association for the 42 "Cares" and "Hands On" volunteer organizations across the U.S. and internationally. Michelle was the founding director of Hands On Atlanta, a non-profit organization that helps individuals, families, corporate and community groups find flexible volunteer opportunities at service organizations and schools. Under her leadership, the organization grew from a grassroots startup in 1989 to one of the nation's largest community-based volunteer organizations with 25,000 volunteers. Michelle currently serves on the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation has received a variety of awards and was recently named by Georgia Trend Magazine as one of the "100 Most Influential Georgians." She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Virginia in 1989 with a major in history and a minor in religion. She has studied at Oxford University and in India, was a Kellogg National Fellow, and earned a Master's Degree in Public Administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

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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

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⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000." Washington, D.C. February 2002.

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⁹ Council for Excellence in Government and CIRCLE, *Trust Matters: Is Anyone Listening?* 2002.

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