

An Evolving Relationship:

Executive Branch Approaches to Civic Engagement and Philanthropy



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We are at a moment that many in the civic engagement field see as a threshold. The lengthy economic downturn has in part caused Americans to rely more on philanthropy than ever. Fundamental changes are taking place in the way citizens interact with institutions, demanding a much more individualized approach. The Administration of President Barack Obama has made clear its intent to do what it can to craft a new kind of relationship between citizens, civil society, and government. The field of philanthropy has likewise indicated their interest in supporting the trend of deeper and more meaningful engagement of citizens in this country's public life.

Those who work on and think about civic engagement see the possibility of a more robust engagement unfolding. At a minimum, say many, a new rhetoric can bring with it a different approach. At such a juncture, it is useful to reflect on how the Executive Branch has viewed and interacted with philanthropy and civic engagement over the past few decades.

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Introduction

President George H. W. Bush, in his [1989 inaugural address](#), said:

I am speaking of a new engagement in the lives of others, a new activism, hands-on and involved, that gets the job done. . . . I have spoken of a thousand points of light, of all the community organizations that are spread like stars throughout the Nation, doing good. We will work hand in hand, encouraging, sometimes leading, sometimes being led, rewarding. We will work on this in the White House, in the Cabinet agencies. I will go to the people and the programs that are the brighter points of light, and I will ask every member of my government to become involved.

More than twenty years later, the relationship between government, philanthropy, charity, service and volunteerism continues to be negotiated, renegotiated, and to evolve.

One constant has been the public connection made between civic engagement and philanthropy – made by President Bush in 1989 and restated and acted upon in various ways by successive presidents.

Philanthropy, in this view, is not solely a mechanism for getting money from point **a** (those with funds) to point **b** (those in need). Instead, presidential rhetoric as well as policy have increasingly made explicit connections between civic engagement and the role of philanthropy in public life. (Though, to be sure, presidential administrations have taken specific steps to encourage straightforward private charity too.)

Over the past twenty years, these themes have converged, in part possibly driven by changes in Executive Branch leadership outlook and personality, but also driven as a response to societal and economic forces.

As the general understanding of management and community leadership has evolved, so, too, has the approach taken by the U.S. Government.

This paper provides a brief overview of some of the key ideas and themes in this evolving relationship.

About Civic Engagement

Over the course of the last two decades, there has been a growing body of research and practice on *civic engagement*. This has informed, and been informed by, the changing ways in which the government and others have approached “service” and “participation.”

However, the term “civic engagement” – and its allied terms such as public engagement, civic participation, public participation, and the like – is used differently by different people.

For some, it can mean something as simple as whether or not a person votes. For others, it can describe efforts at doing a better job of informing citizens about plans the government is making. For still others, “civic engagement” means encouraging participation in service and voluntarism.

These aspects, while important, fundamentally view citizens as holding limited roles in self-governance (they can be “voters” or “volunteers”). But effective self-rule depends on a far more robust notion of citizenship. Michael X. Delli Carpini, dean of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, has proposed this definition of the term: *Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern*. This definition, and various versions of it, has become a useful standard.

One key element in this understanding of engagement is the role of the citizen. In this way of thinking, citizens (engaged in self-rule) do things *for themselves* – identifying and solving community problems, discussing and choosing between different possible solutions, making tradeoffs.

Since the 1970’s, public life has become increasingly professionalized. Scholars have noted a tendency for some government initiatives to approach citizens as if government or other institutions are doing the problem-solving, and citizens are receiving the benefits of those solutions. From this standpoint, citizens can best provide “input,” and are ultimately the “customers” of institutional actions, even actions by citizens’ organizations.

However, a more citizen-centric view might be that government and other institutions best come into play in order to do those things citizens cannot do themselves.

This perspective on citizenship and the term “civic engagement” is useful to keep in mind in reviewing different Administration approaches to the relationship between government and civic life.

Honoring Charity: Points Of Light

The National and Community Service Act of 1990 established the Commission on National and Community Service. The enabling legislation includes this statement:

Throughout the United States, there are pressing unmet human, educational, environmental, and public safety needs. Americans desire to affirm common responsibilities and shared values, and join together in positive experiences, that transcend race, religion, gender, age, disability, region, income, and education. . . . Americans of all ages can improve their communities and become better citizens through service to the United States. Nonprofit organizations, local governments, States, and the Federal Government are already supporting a wide variety of national service programs that deliver needed services in a cost-effective manner.

This established the current arc of government support for civic aspects of philanthropy, and placed it in a particular context. This view of the nexus between philanthropy, government, and civic life is pointedly Tocquevillian: Private charity is not only an intrinsic good, but there is also something quintessentially American about it. Thus, for government to “affirm common responsibilities” so that Americans can “become better citizens” makes sense.

This period saw the establishment of the Points Of Light Foundation, a nongovernmental organization that picked up the mantle of encouraging private acts of civic service. (This organization has gone through several transformations. In 2007 it became the Points of Light Institute, formed through a merger of Hands On Network and the Foundation.)

Pragmatic Philanthropy: The Rise of Service and The New Economy

In September 1993, the National and Community Service Trust Act created the Corporation for National and Community Service and located three programs (among others) there: Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America. The efforts to stimulate – and *facilitate* – civic service became more robust and took on a generational character as well. Service Learning began to be seen as a key part of curricula, and the natural connections between the service of young (college) people and service learning (in secondary education) were obvious.

Meanwhile, in the business and philanthropic worlds, this period saw profound changes in the way organizations managed themselves and their work. New paradigms for strategy began to emerge, in direct opposition to traditional strategic planning models. Tightly-planned models were discarded in favor of more *ad hoc* partnerships, nimble organizational tactics, and “creative destruction.”

The philanthropic sector began to concern itself much more deeply with proving impact. Some of the new rhetoric and thinking of organizational development began to be picked up by the Administration, and philanthropy began to experiment with funding portfolios in a variety of ways (a number of large foundations developed extensive networks of investments in the civic engagement and good government fields during this period).

By the end of the 1990’s, the Administration’s rhetoric had picked up much of the experimentation that was changing management theories. The “new economy” had changed the language of public leadership.

In October, 1999, a bit more than ten years after President Bush’s “points of light” speech, the Clinton Administration convened a summit, the [White House Conference on Philanthropy: Gifts To The Future](#). This conference, believed to be the first of its kind, featured participation by the First Lady as well as the President. It also featured Justin Timberlake (youngest member of N’Sync, who had recently formed a foundation), and Steve Case (who was chairman and CEO of America Online), among other important philanthropic figures.

This conference is notable in part as an illustration of how many of the broader changes in business and management discussed above had begun to enter broad sector policy discussions. A significant portion of the conference was devoted to exploring ways that technology was changing philanthropy – especially ways that technology could bring philanthropy to a more individual level. From the report:

The Internet cannot by itself generate the impulse to give. But for individuals who want to get involved, it can make the process faster, easier, and more convenient. Moreover, it puts more active power in the hands of aspiring donors – enabling them to find information about charities that support the interests they care about, rather than waiting to be contacted by direct mail or over the phone, and speeding the process through which they can contribute or volunteer. . . . At its best, the new generation of philanthropists can bring not only tremendous resources and talent, but a sense of commitment and the collegiality that characterizes many new start-up companies to the work of hard-pressed nonprofit organizations.

One outcome of the conference was the establishment of an interagency task force on nonprofits and government. This from the [memorandum that created the task force](#):

The nonprofit sector is an integral component of our national life, encompassing more than one and a half million organizations with operating expenditures in excess of \$600 billion. But more telling than the dollar figures is the new spirit of service and civic activism that nonprofits of every kind are now exhibiting. We are today in the midst of a nonprofit boom, a time when the activities of this sector are becoming ever more creative and entrepreneurial.

Nonprofits are uniquely able to identify problems, mobilize fresh thinking and energy, care for those in need on a human scale, and promote social change at the community level. As this sector grows in size and importance, there is an ever greater opportunity to forge partnerships that include Government, nonprofit groups, businesses, and citizens to address pressing public problems. . . . Our challenge in this time of burgeoning social entrepreneurship is to encourage Government, nonprofits, and others to work together more meaningfully.

Community Altruism: Faith Based and Community Initiatives, Emerging Partnerships

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Taking on the challenge of encouraging “Government, nonprofits, and others to work together more meaningfully” has been one theme of the past decade. The practical result of this has been a growing reliance on partnerships between government and the nonprofit and private sectors. In a [statement on the work](#) of the Interagency Task Force described above, President Clinton said:

The role that nonprofit/government partnerships play cannot be overstated: They make Government work better, and in turn, nonprofits are strengthened by these relationships. As a result, they are an essential part of our safety net for citizens in need, and when all else fails, nourish and protect the most vulnerable among us. . . . In these ways and many more, they strengthen and sustain our civil society.

The first decade of this new century was marked by experimentation with such partnerships (true not only within the government but also between organizations in the private and nonprofit sectors).

Indeed, one of President George W. Bush's centerpiece efforts, the Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives, saw the development of such partnerships as part of its mandate. In a forum convened in early 2001 by the Pew Forum on Religion And Public Life, director Jon Dilulio described the three-part mission of the Office:

There are essentially three things the office is attempting to do. First, we're trying to increase charitable giving. Not just charitable giving in terms of dollars, although that is very important. But also charitable giving in terms of volunteer hours and time, and the human element, without which all the money in the world really can't make a difference. . . . The second thing – after increasing charitable giving – that this office is about is really removing the barriers, ending the discrimination, leveling the playing field, so that community-based groups, whether they're religious or secular, that are not now part of the government funding loop in the area of social services, can get a better shake, can be better advised. . . . The third and final goal . . . is the prospect for finding effective models of public-private partnership and cooperation where you can have institutions, both sacred and secular, working across the usual racial and denominational lines, the usual urban-suburban divides, on particular civic purposes.

One simple example of such a partnership is the President's Volunteer Service Award. In January 2003, President Bush created the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation, administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service. The Council bestows the award to recognize significant volunteer contributions. This award is a wide-reaching partnership between 80 leadership organizations and 28,000 "certifying organizations" (which certify that individuals merit the awards).

The award is not unique in its partnership aspects. Indeed, the Corporation for National and Community Service uses partnerships in many of its initiatives. On a macro level, AmeriCorps participants are not going to work for the Government, they are working *in* communities.

Another substantive partnership-based initiative is A Billion + Change. This is a partnership between the Corporation and the Taproot Foundation. It activates and directs \$1 billion in skilled volunteering and *pro bono* services from the corporate sector.

New Directions: Getting More Serious With New Innovations

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While it is early days, the administration of President Barack Obama shows clear signs of a new energy behind service, civic engagement, and the partnerships that can make this tangible. Some of the themes of the last twenty years are coming together into a more integrated whole, including:

- Recognition of service as connected with civic engagement and healthy civil society
- Leveraging technology to drive innovations
- Focus on emerging generation of Millennials
- Use of partnerships to carry out initiatives

President Obama's famous "first day memo" specifically articulated an agenda that sees civic engagement as a fundamental piece of governance:

Government should be *participatory*. Public engagement enhances the Government's effectiveness and improves the quality of its decisions. Knowledge is widely dispersed in society, and public officials benefit from having access to that dispersed knowledge. . . . Government should be *collaborative*. Collaboration actively engages Americans in the work of their Government. Executive departments and agencies should use innovative tools, methods, and systems to cooperate among themselves, across all levels of Government, and with nonprofit organizations, businesses, and individuals in the private sector. (*Emphasis added.*)

While two other facets of the presidential memorandum (openness and transparency) have gotten a great deal of attention, when it comes to civic engagement it is arguably participation and collaboration that are key.

Of interest is the separate articulation of these two elements: participation being the engagement by government of citizens in order to make better decisions, and collaboration being citizens and government working together. These twin notions go far beyond the simple idea of "service" as an American ideal and would appear to place the citizen in a much more substantive position. Not a "customer" of government, but a citizen. This is in line with a robust definition of "civic engagement" and runs counter to the professionalization of public life mentioned in an earlier section of this paper.

“Service” has received a shot in the arm with the April signing of the 2009 Edward M. Kennedy [Serve America Act](#). This important law has renewed the notion of service (at least in terms of legislation) and built it into a broader vision of participation and collaboration. The Act not only increases the concrete opportunities for service (important in itself), but it also supports innovation and strengthening of the nonprofit sector (notably including a Social Innovation Fund to identify and support promising new ideas), and improving internal management processes as well as establishing an annual “civic health assessment.”

Conclusion: An Ecosystem, Potential, And Risks

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This paper attempts to make a broad case that some of the themes in the 1990’s are now poised to come to a kind of fruition. The new energy behind participation and collaboration is making that possible in concrete ways. For example, the Social Innovation Fund is granting up to \$50 million through intermediary organizations to “promote private and public investment in effective and potentially transformative portfolios of nonprofit community organizations.” This approach is specifically taking into account a varied civic engagement ecosystem that includes multiple actors.

First Lady Michelle Obama, in a [June 2009 speech at a Greater D.C. Cares event](#) briefly described this emerging ecosystem:

We need foundations and philanthropists to provide the integral support for our community organizations. But we also need those community organizations to provide support for all these volunteers we’re recruiting now. We need to harness this amazing amount of goodwill that we’re generating through this administration in a way that ensures that we serve all Americans to the best of our ability.

The ecosystem described by the First Lady views a range of actors working in complementary ways, but not in lock step. It is not centrally controlled, but there is a common purpose, bringing together both the participation and collaboration aspects of President Obama’s memorandum.

This approach to civic engagement is nascent. At the same time that there is a new energy behind collaboration and participation, there is also new energy behind more negative social forces. Partisanship and polarization are high. Rhetoric in public life is heated. Trust in institutions (not just government) is at all-time lows, as is trust in one another.

As many recent studies of social attitudes have discerned, people are “hunkered down,” and not just because of the poor economy.

For those who care about civic engagement and participation, this is a time that holds both potential and risk — the potential for mutual partnerships between public and private actors to unleash complementary public action, and the equally powerful risk that broader forces will isolate individual citizens and make the family unit the only one that matters in the minds of citizens.

However, some of the very conditions that drive people inward (for instance, the economy, or other difficult times in communities) can provide impetus to work together to overcome them. If the Administration, along with philanthropy and the broader social sector, can capitalize on the urge to work to make things better, we may well look back on this period as the time that civic engagement began to be embedded in public life.

Questions To Consider

Here are some questions that funders might consider when reflecting on the shift towards embeddedness:

- How might funders support the structures, the spaces, the conversations needed to support authentic collaborations?
- How can funders continue to emphasize a robust definition of civic engagement?
- What implications are there for supporting “bridging” relationships (as opposed to direct programs) given the short time horizons of many funders?
- How do such relationships fit into the impact metrics many foundations are interested in?
- How can funders support the embedding of civic engagement into organizational processes – both government and the independent sector?

For Further Reading

These readings are meant to suggest further areas for thought and provide a snapshot of where things stand.

1. [America’s Civic Health Index 2009](#), by the National Conference on Citizenship

This organization will continue to partner with the Corporation for National and Community Service in issuing similar yearly reports, under the Kennedy Serve America Act.

2. [National Service And Youth Unemployment](#), by the Center for American Progress

An exploration of how service can spur youth job creation as the economic recovery begins to gain speed.

3. [President Obama, Public Participation, and an Agenda for Research and Experimentation](#), by Thomas A. Bryer

This article from The International Journal Of Public Participation raises questions to keep in mind as the ecosystem of civic engagement and service plays out in the Administration setting.

4. [Chapter One, “Government As Enabler”](#), of *Investing In Democracy: Engaging Citizens In Collaborative Governance*, by Carmen Siriani

Siriani identifies an erosion in public life and proposes a number of ways that effective policy design can combat this trend. (This link is to a Google Books entry where the chapter can be read.)

5. [Changing the Ecosystem of Change](#), Blueprint Research + Design

A report funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation that explores ways in which the landscape – the ecosystem – of funders and programs are changing, driven by new technologies. The report highlights a number of emerging ideas that will be at play in the ensuing years.

About PACE

PACE is a learning community of grantmakers and donors committed to strengthening democracy by using the power, influence and resources of philanthropy to open pathways to participation. PACE's mission is to work within the field of philanthropy to inspire interest, understanding and investment in civic engagement, broadly defined.

PACE was founded in 2005 with an intent to bring new philanthropic focus to the issues of civic engagement, democratic renewal and citizen activism. Formerly known as the Grantmakers Forum on Community and National Service, PACE was created to take a broad approach to educating grantmakers about effective civic engagement strategies that strengthen communities and improve our democratic practice.

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Brad Rourke is president of [The Mannakee Circle Group](#), a firm that helps organizations engage better with their publics. He is an associate of the Kettering Foundation and has over a decade of experience working with many of the key organizations in the civic participation field. He [blogs regularly](#) about new media, participation, and ethics and is the founder of [Rockville Central](#), a hyperlocal community-based news source that has grown to become the second most-read local blog in Maryland.