Service, Citizenship and the New Generation

E.J. Dionne Jr.
(Not for publication)

Here is the great paradox of this moment in our nation's history: There exists a powerful impulse, especially among the young, toward service to others and engagement in civic life. But this impulse is accompanied by a profound mistrust of the nation's political institutions and a national ethic that – especially in these good economic times – pushes individuals (particularly the young) toward individual achievement, often at the expense of community engagement.

As I'll be arguing, the United States was built on a healthy tension between private striving and community-mindedness, between success in the marketplace and the success of public work carried out through voluntary institutions and political engagement. We are at a moment when Americans are again debating the balance between their public and private commitments.

The rise of the service movement is an important indicator that many young Americans are acutely aware that a successful society depends on both public and private action, on both economic success and civic revival. The current ferment is rooted in a critique of both the public and the private sectors. The failure of government – both real and perceived – has led many among the young toward an engagement with voluntary, one-on-one action as the more promising route to solving social problems. But the persistence of social problems in the face of an extraordinary period of economic growth has led to the insight that certain problems cannot be solved by the economic market alone.

This double-critique and the massive engagement of the young in voluntary service could make the group of Americans under 30 one of the great reforming generations in our nation's history. For that and other reasons, this period resembles the Progressive Era of 100 years ago, when civic, business and voluntary groups committed themselves to the task of social renewal. The private groups interacted with government and the political sphere. What distinguished the United States from many comparable nations was our acceptance that successful government action went "hand in hand with locally and nationally vibrant voluntary civic activism," as Theda Skocpol of Harvard University has put it.

The rise of the service movement is an important indicator that many young Americans are acutely aware that a successful society depends on both public and private action, on both economic success and civic revival.

The current social rebuilding is an effort to revive that tradition of constructive engagement between the private and public spheres. Then, as now, social reconstruction required action by politicians, not only the hard work of volunteers, but also the spread of an ethic within the business community that saw a healthy civic and political life as essential component of a free economy. As Alan Wolfe argued in his important book, *Whose Keeper?*, both democratic government and a successful economy depend on the virtues and values generated neither by the state nor by the market, but by the institutions of that third sector we've come to call "civil society." The service movement can be seen as part of a new effort to revitalize that sector.

I'll be investing large hopes in the new generation, so it's worth emphasizing that this is a generation that is both "civically" (sic) engaged and also turned off to many forms of traditional public action, particularly political action. This was a central conclusion of one of the best studies of attitudes of the young – conducted in 1998 by the pollster Peter Hart for Public Allies[1], and

sponsored by the Surdna Foundation. Two of Hart's conclusions are especially salient here:

1. "In thinking about the types of organizations that will be important in solving our communities' problems in the future, young people embrace the notion that individuals must take an active role in addressing social conditions. In fact, nearly half (46%) of young adults point to schools, universities and colleges—entities that empower, teach, and provide skills to young people so that they can contribute to and become involved in their community—as important in solving future problems.

   Further, about one in four (27%) young people anticipate that "groups of people working together locally" will be the most important organization in addressing the problems that we will face in the future, and one in five (20%) cite partnerships among government, private businesses, and nonprofit organizations as important. Organizations that represent more traditional approaches to improving social conditions, such as government and political leaders, and nonprofit and charity groups are met with far less enthusiasm and confidence from today's young people."

2. "While young Americans display a good deal of initiative in finding ways to serve their community and to assist other individuals, they do not have a strong vehicle to channel or guide this motivation. From government and political leaders to nonprofit and charity organizations, young people do not respond to many of the traditional organizations and institutions that our country has looked to in taking the lead in solving social problems. Instead, young people are looking for a different type of guidance and support for their initiatives—one that values all individuals and emphasizes the importance of people actively working together to solve problems."

> A spirit of civic renewal depends on both public and private commitments to the ideas of service and community.

This new social rebuilding is taking place at a time when our society is emphasizing the rewards offered by the economic marketplace. Many of the most socially minded young people – many of whom, it should be said, come out of college bearing heavy loads of debt – see few rewards for public service and much compensation for private endeavors. A spirit of civic renewal depends on both public and private commitments to the ideas of service and community.

The Reform Generation

The surest indication of creeping middle age is a proclivity toward whiny speeches about what's wrong with the new generation.

Commentary about the alleged flaws and shortcomings of "young people these days" is not confined to any ideological camp. The '60s crowd was as horrified at the young Reaganites of the '80s as the parents of the Woodstockers and the Birkenstockers were at their brood of young rebels. Michael J. Fox made a career of such ironies.

The genius of the generation under 30 may be this: *They are different enough from the earlier cohorts that it's hard for anyone to be cranky about them.* You can see the attitudes of today's under thirties as a synthesis of the dominant ideas of the '60s and the '80s – or as a revolt against both eras. They definitely represent something new.

This is what's emerging from a mound of research now underway on the ideas and aspirations of the young. Much of it is sponsored by the burgeoning "service movement," one of the great untouted developments of the 1990s. It involves many volunteer and community organizations that try to solve social problems a neighborhood and a person at a time.

For example, the Public Allies report concludes that "in contrast to their 1960s

predecessors' focus on changing broad social institutions, young Americans' outlook (today) is distinctly personal with a heavy emphasis on direct, one-on-one individual service."

The Public Allies survey found among young people considerable skepticism toward government-led efforts to solve problems and yet a strong streak of community-mindedness. "They have felt the power of the rhetoric on the failure of government," said Chuck Supple, president of Public Allies, "but they have a lot of experience locally on their own. They've been seeing individuals and communities assume responsibility locally."

The survey of 728 young adults, age 18 to 30, asked the following question:

"Which do you think is a more important value in our country – the value of community and looking out for each other, or the value of individual responsibility and self-reliance?"

Fifty percent opted for community and looking out for each other, while 38 percent opted for individual responsibility and self-reliance.

Here's what the report said: "Contrary to the portrayal of today's young Americans as self-absorbed and socially inert, the findings from this survey reveal a portrait of a generation not searching to distance itself from the community but instead actively looking for new and distinctive ways of connecting to the people and issues surrounding them."

This is not to say that individualism is dead. On the contrary, other parts of the survey found that the under thirties value both community and self-reliance and are juggling the two. After the social gyrations of the past 30 years, this may be a generation in search of balance. You might call it maturity.

The mystery for this generation is whether its communitarian leanings will be expressed primarily in neighborhood work and family life, or whether that work will begin to spill over into politics. For now, says Michael Sanchez, president of "Do Something," another group that promotes service and youth leadership, the generation is "much more civic-minded than politically minded. While there's an idealism, it's less about changing the world than changing our neighborhood."

"The idea of service is framed in terms of altruism, and the young people we've talked to understand community service in terms of helping 'other,' " said Juliette Zener, "Do Something's" research coordinator. "In contrast, they talk about politics entirely in terms of selfishness. There's a middle ground that's missing in the popular language, and that middle ground is engaged citizenship."

The great reforming generations are the ones that marry the aspirations of service to the possibilities of politics and harness the good work done in local communities to transform a nation.

It's possible to hope that this generation will do a better job than its immediate predecessors in sorting out the conundrums of democracy. Politics can involve self-interest understood broadly, not narrowly, and thus be more than a selfish pursuit. The call to service is inspired not only by altruism but also by a desire to build a stronger community for one's self and family as well as for others.

The great reforming generations are the ones that marry the aspirations of service to the possibilities of politics and harness the good work done in local communities to transform a nation. Might this generation be one of them?

The Cycles of Civic Engagement

The sense that the new generation may be special is certainly feeding the enormous amount of work now being done to encourage civic engagement among the young. But this work is also going on for a very different reason: a belief that the new generation may be peculiarly disengaged from civic life, and particularly from politics. The Public Allies study, after all, was typical in finding a disconnection between an inclination toward service among the young, and a desire to participate in political action.

The truth is that the idea of strong citizenship flies in the face of most of the messages young people – and everyone else – receive day after day. The predominant ideas (in advertising but also in the news and in the culture) treat people as consumers, workers, entrepreneurs, investors – in effect as isolated, if often heroic, individuals.

The message of citizenship is different: it emphasizes common bonds and common obligations, the possibility of common action, an attitude of "we're all in this together."

The dominant ethic of the United States has always reflected a tension between liberty and community. Individualism has always been tempered by a regard for the whole; community obligations have always been tempered by a regard for individual rights. Historically, the United States has passed through different phases or cycles in which one or the other side of this individualistic/communitarian divide has received the most emphasis. Excess on one side has always called forth a corrective emphasis on the other.

It's worth briefly exploring the cycles of the last 150 years to understand which stage in that process we might be in now and why so much work is being done in the area of civic engagement.

The period of intense focus on public life in the times leading up to, during and immediately after our civil war was followed by the Gilded Age with its emphasis on industrial growth and the individual pursuit of wealth. The individualism of the Gilded Age was, in turn, followed by the Progressive Era. The time of Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson entailed a critique of the excessive individualism that had come before. It led to new rules (against monopoly, for example) affecting the operation of the market; to strong civic action (urban reform efforts and the Settlement House movement, for example); and a general emphasis on public obligations.

A reaction against the First World War and exhaustion with politics led to calls for "a return to normalcy" and the private pursuits of the Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties. The economic collapse of the Great Depression again called forth a critique of individualism. The Thirties and Forties were dominated by two large public enterprises: the New Deal and the effort to win the Second World War.

As Robert Reich has written: "The goals of reviving the economy and winning the war, and the sacrifices implied in achieving them, were well-understood and widely endorsed. The public was motivated less by altruism than by its direct and palpable stake in what were ineluctably social endeavors."

One of the problems in sorting out the requirements of the current moment is that the cycles since World War II have been less clear-cut. The Fifties were, at one and the same time, a great civic period – the public-mindedness of the generation of World War II veterans dominated many aspects of American life – and also an inward-looking period when Americans were eager to build families and tend to their jobs and neighborhood. Americans who came of age in the Fifties were labeled "the quiet generation," yet they were also at the heart of what Robert Putnam has called "the long civic generation."

The paradox of the Fifties led to the paradox of the Sixties: The Sixties involved both an individualistic revolt against the rules and norms that were so powerful in the Fifties; and a communitarian revolt that emphasized public obligations and a concern for others – especially African-Americans and the poor. John Kennedy captured the restlessness and civic longing when he proposed to "get the country moving again" with his call on Americans to ask themselves what they could do, not just for themselves, but also for their country.

> This generation is "much more civic-minded than politically minded. While there's an idealism, it's less about changing the world than changing our neighborhood."

The individualism of the 1980s was just as paradoxical: It was both a reaction against the social programs and social activism of the Sixties; and a continuation and expansion of the individualistic ethos and the libertarian political impulse that were part of the legacy of the 1960s. In the 1960s, the slogan

"leave us alone" referred mostly to personal lifestyle choices; in the 1980s, the same slogan was used with respect to taxation and business regulation. The two eras had more in common than is often admitted.

The last decade or so has been marked by a reaction against pure individualism. Given the mixed parentage of that individualism – a peculiar marriage between the Sixties and the Eighties – it's not surprising that supporters of the current civic revolution include people left, right and center. Conservative critics of the "Sixties Counterculture" join with liberal critics of Reagan Era individualism to assert the obligations of a common citizenship and the paradoxical idea that preserving a free society is necessarily a social and community enterprise.

The success John McCain's presidential campaign enjoyed, despite his defeat, rested in part on his ability to speak to both the liberal and conservative sides of this civic revolution. The language of patriotism and honor that he used is strikingly similar to John Kennedy's (a fact to which McCain himself increasingly called attention).

Where Are We In the Cycle?

It is important to underscore again that the effort to revive effective citizenship is difficult because we are at the end of a long period in which the predominant messages have been mostly about the futility of social and community action, the failures of government, the corruption of the public sphere, and the embrace of the idea that only individuals could achieve real change and innovation.

A student named Stephanie Chen whom I interviewed during the New Hampshire primary this winter captured the pressures and incentives students face this way: "You're sitting on couch drinking your beer, and you see a guy on television say, 'I earned my first million when I was 21 and you say to yourself: 'What am I doing?' "

This is very different from the ethos in other periods when civic and community action were seen as honorable, necessary and potentially effective. Theodore Roosevelt could speak of the obligations of the citizen to "bear his share in the management of the community, to help in carrying the general load" and know that those he was addressing believed that managing the community was possible; that there was such a thing as "a general load" and not simply individual responsibilities.

This, in turn, helps explain the central findings of so much of the good research now being done about youth service programs: Many young people chose to carry out their community obligations in individualistic ways. Many among the young clearly have more faith in the immediate results achieved through one-on-one programs (mentoring, work in homeless shelters, volunteering with the elderly) than in action aimed at organizing communities or reaching goals through political action.

This view is neither irrational nor, in principle, objectionable. But it may be different from the idea of citizenship. This is Juliette Zener's point when she called "engaged citizenship" the "missing middle ground" in the discussions over the relationship between service and politics.

Many young people chose to carry out their community obligations in individualistic ways. This view is neither irrational nor, in principle, objectionable. But it may be different from the idea of citizenship.

This is not a simple matter. It's clear that the service movement is helping to feed another social movement of our time, the rise of neighborhood activism around issues ranging from crime control to economic development. In this sense, service itself is linked to activities that are certainly civic and build a stronger sense of citizenship and civic obligation. And to the extent that the service movement is building a revolt against cynicism, despair and selfishness, it is certainly laying the groundwork for a richer and more demanding sense of citizenship.

Nonetheless, there is a danger that in much of the good work being done, the definition of citizenship, and therefore the purpose of

citizenship-building programs, has been kept fuzzy enough as to encompass almost any altruistic action. But a rational evaluation of this work requires a much clearer and more rigorous definition of what is being sought.

Does a full definition of "engaged citizenship" require openness to and a willingness to participate in formal political action? If it does – and I believe this to be so – should service programs have a much stronger component of civic education?

Should one test of the success of service programs be whether those who participate eventually devote significant time to public, including political, pursuits? If this is not the purpose of such programs, what kind of citizenship are we talking about? Are these programs more about problem solving at the local level or about a richer sense of citizenship?

These questions, in turn, raise others:

- Do civic engagement programs pander to the young or challenge them? Pandering is the problem. A challenge is the solution.

- Do they develop not just "problem solving" skills, but actually convey honest and useful information about civic and political life?

- Do they underscore that civic life is rooted not only in consensus – which is what we like to believe – but also in democratic conflict?

Argument and disagreement are an essential part of democracy, given that free societies encompass a broad range of interests and people with widely differing ideas, values and commitments. Democratic conflict, when it is successful, can lead to practical remedies and lay the groundwork for compromise. Service programs are often rooted in consensual values, yet they need to teach that both conflict and consensus are natural aspects of democratic public life.

Is it inevitable that civic messages be drowned out in a consumer society? Are there new ways to convey civic messages? Can businesses foster civic engagement among their employees?

- Are the programs based on a coherent sense of what "engaged citizenship" is? Is the role of politics being fudged or pushed aside?

- Is there a conflict between what makes for effective citizenship on the local level from what makes for effective citizenship on the national level?

- Does the service movement make the link between service and civic activism?

- Do participants in service programs develop a richer sense not only of their obligations to others but also of their roles as citizens whose task is to shape their communities and the society and to bear, as Theodore Roosevelt said, their share of "the general load?"
- Is it inevitable that civic messages be drowned out in a consumer society? Are there new ways to convey civic messages?

- Do businesses foster civic engagement among their employees? Is civic engagement rewarded? Is it made easier through flexible work rules? What incentives do nationally- or internationally-based companies give their local branches to encourage local service?

- Are locally-based companies more active in civic life than companies based elsewhere? If so, what are the implications of this in an economy where companies necessarily think globally and not locally?

- Are the incentives given the young so powerfully tilted toward the economic market that they find it foolish to aspire (in McCain's terms) to "something larger than their own self-interest" or (in Kennedy's terms) to "ask what you can do for your country?"

- Are the themes articulated at least in the early stages of the 2000 election campaign –

with an emphasis on patriotism, voluntary service, "compassion" and "responsibility" – promising signs that the era of civic engagement really is beginning?

To this last question, at least, I believe one can answer a cautious but hopeful: Yes.

[1] Public Allies is a national nonprofit that sponsors leadership training and community service programs for young people.