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Beating Tocqueville: Democratic Implications of National Service


When Alexis de Tocqueville described the greatness of American democracy, he highlighted the important role of civic associations, built by the coordinated and voluntary action of individual citizens. Those associations, he noted,
formed a vibrant civil society, independent of the state, that was able to nourish American political life.

Much later, in the mid-1990s, Robert Putnam (1995, 2001) noted the importance of social capital to building a democratic community. Afterward, Theda Skocpol (2003) added a nuance: whereas many forms of social gathering may create social capital, membership-based associations play a fundamental role in involving citizens and giving them experience and grounds to make democracy possible. She noted how democracy is based on public deliberation and citizen involvement, and she reinforced the very relevant role that associations play. Instead of these, she claimed, large, professionally managed nonprofits were substituting for the former, without active membership but rather with consumer-based supporters who do not participate in the definition of the organization’s goals. The decline of membership-based associations, she asserted, was undermining American democracy.

In a country where associations play such a relevant social role, it is understandable that domestic civilian national service programs have been somehow controversial. These are, by definition, government-driven programs that use voluntary work to do social tasks in exchange for in-kind compensation or even some modest remuneration. Some of the goals of these national service programs have been to fight poverty and to promote social inclusion, labor insertion, and civic values, something that many associations also do.

Although civilian national service programs have been relevant at several moments of America’s last 80 years, there has been a remarkable lack of well-grounded research and policy history about them. This is a gap that Melissa Bass’s book fills, in what is the first comparative policy history of America’s domestic national service.

The Politics and Civics of National Service provides very deep archival and documentary research on the three main domestic national service programs that have existed in America. The first was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. When ended by Congress in 1942, the CCC had enrolled almost 3 million unemployed people in voluntary social work. After that, two other similar initiatives were launched. President Lyndon B. Johnson created Volunteers in Service to America, or VISTA, 20 years later. And in the 1990s, President Bill Clinton incorporated VISTA and a smaller program (the National Civilian Community Corps) into the still-existing AmeriCorps. Neither VISTA nor AmeriCorps, though, reached the size of the CCC.

The book addresses two main topics. The first one is the detailed description of the three programs: purposes, experiences, controversies, and the role the government played in them. It does so in a well-structured comparison in three parts, one per program, containing three chapters each: “Roots and Relationships,” “Purpose and Government’s Role,” and “Tools, Rules, and Targets.” Furthermore, the introduction places the reader in context and sets the purpose of the book, and the conclusion (part IV) summarizes what has been explained, advocating for an institutionalized civilian national service. This last element is actually the second topic that the book addresses: through the comparative description of the three programs, the author aims to comprehend the achievements and weaknesses of domestic national service in the United States and to show the contribution of the policies behind these programs as “public policy for democracy,” advocating for a more active and institutionalized prioritization of national service today.

The first goal of the author is very well achieved, particularly considering the lack of documented policy history about these programs. The description of the programs is rich and detailed, providing a well-structured comparison of their characteristics and showing the controversies and arguments around each one of them. As the programs’ data are presented, one understands their strengths and weaknesses, and it is possible to see their connection to three important moments of American contemporary history as led by Democratic presidents: the fight against unemployment during the Great Depression, the design and implementation of the Great Society social reforms, and the Democrats’ return to the White House after the Cold War.

It is less clear whether the book convinces that these civilian national service programs represent policies and institutions that empower active citizens and strengthen democracy. Very little literature argues that government-driven volunteer programs are able to accomplish this, and although the book shows many examples of how these programs have been beneficial for American society, it does not make a convincing argument for a causal link between the existence of a voluntary civilian national service and the increase of participatory and committed citizens.

The book discusses civilian national service as voluntary and noncompulsory. In some European countries, the debate about a potential national service (as a consequence of the extinction of compulsory military service) has included voices in favor of a mandatory social service for all young citizens. The idea is that if all young people were compelled to join it, the program and its civic goals would reach the whole socioeconomic spectrum, and not only those who are interested in the compensation of a voluntary...
program. Bass’s book, though, only discusses the voluntary option, and therefore the reasons that people join the program become very relevant when analyzing the potential outcomes.

There is no doubt that any work that strengthens civic values, social cohesion, labor insertion, welfare, and a better environment has positive consequences for society. Now, is the national service the optimal tool to promote them? Does it improve democracy, or could it weaken it? Does it generate welfare, or, on the contrary, could it have a negative impact on the labor market? These questions and others emerge when reading the book and must be considered in the context of important ideas about service that the book seems to lack.

The French language has two different words to translate the English term “volunteerism.” One is bénévolat, which means free and unpaid work, such as the work that members of associations do; the other is volontariat, which means noncompulsory work, omitting whether there is compensation or not. This distinction is not minor when speaking about voluntary national service because, in all cases, material incentives (direct or in kind) are central to the success of such programs.

Incentives are central when defining nonprofit activities. Citizens organize themselves in associations to pursue their vision of how society should be. That is why, in a democracy, politics is nourished from these joint actions of citizens. The shared social goals are therefore the main incentives that individuals have for associative life. When adding other sorts of incentives—whether monetary or material compensation, “points” providing more chances to obtain a particular job, and so on—the relevance of the initial goal loses its weight, and bénévolat becomes just volontariat.

If service is compulsory for all citizens (like the military in some countries), the relevance of incentives disappears, and the discussion shifts to other issues. But when talking about a voluntary service, the existence of government-promoted incentives could result in a double-negative consequence that should be noted. First, these incentives may weaken the relevance of the main social goal; second, they could create a need for material incentives in similar work done by associations.

Participation in independent membership-based associations exposes the people involved to experiences that are basic for democracy: social awareness, deliberation, democratic procedures of decision making, and critical view. A government-based program could certainly promote civic values. Nevertheless, it is the government that defines the program’s goals, not the participants. This makes participants program users instead of the democratic mastermind. In contrast, a key characteristic of membership-based associations is that their members choose the purpose, programs, and actions of the organization, and it is there that their model of society grows, as do the members’ commitments as citizens. That is probably why Tocqueville said, “If men living in democratic countries had no right and no inclination to associate for political purposes, their independence would be in great jeopardy” ([1835] 1993, 107).

Bass does not seem to offer a good definition of what she means in implying that a national service contributes to strengthening democracy. It is true that half of chapter 2 (“Citizenship and the Elements of Policy Design”) is devoted to the concept of “citizenship.” But by the time the reader finishes it, there is no obvious sense of the main arguments justifying that a national service makes democracy stronger. The chapter exposes pros and cons on how the national service contributes to five perspectives of citizenship: constitutional citizenship, critical citizenship, patriotism, service, and work. Nevertheless, the reader does not find a clear statement of the position and the arguments of the author about how the national service contributes to democracy from those perspectives. Democracy, citizenship, and civic values are three very different concepts. For example, a national service in a non-democratic country could promote civic values, such as values of coexistence, and could even promote patriotism as a particular idea of citizenship. But to boost democracy, more than the awareness of the problems of society, the experience of participation and a certain critical distance from the official narrative is needed.

Whereas the problem of the lack of democratic experience is not addressed in the book, the references to the needed critical distance from the official vision are even more confusing. At one point, the book implies that the VISTA program promoted critical citizenship. In liberal democracies, being a critical citizen means demanding that the government account for its activities, as Norris (1999) explains. That is why critical citizenship should grow at a certain healthy distance from government. It is interesting that one of the examples that the author highlights of how these programs could promote citizenship is helping people register to vote. It could be argued that American critical citizens would challenge the notion that voting requires prior registration because it creates barriers that decrease the participation of a particular group of potential voters—mainly, the disadvantaged.

Social inclusion, labor insertion, and the promotion of civic values are all important for democracy, but also for any society. In a liberal democracy, as in the United States, making the democratic culture grow stronger certainly requires civic values, but also much more than that, such as real checks and balances, easy access to universal voting, and the broadening of
opportunities to enter into politics—so that it does not require being wealthy to be a congressman or a mayor.

It is not clear, based on the book’s arguments, that an institutionalized voluntary civilian national service would enroll people beyond those interested in the compensation or incentives that are offered. Those incentives could introduce problems into altruistic associational life (because similar work might be compensated if performed within the national service and not compensated outside). But, more importantly, they also might imply that people who are well-to-do would not be attracted to join. Therefore, the program would reach mainly people interested in the compensation, as happened with the CCC.

Certainly, the CCC was probably a good tool to fight unemployment, as President Roosevelt thought. But much has changed in developed countries since the 1930s. The reference to citizenship as work in the book is probably even more controversial than the discussion of whether national service reinforces democracy. Is the national service today a tool to alleviate lack of social integration, poverty, illiteracy, disease, and so on? After World War II, many European countries found the answers to these problems in the development of the welfare state. Is it possible to envision a civilian national service based on incentives in which people with some need work “voluntarily” in social gaps that are covered in other countries by properly paid jobs? If the work were a consequence of not having a better option, would not that be some sort of cheap labor?

_The Politics and Civics of National Service_ allows us to recapitulate the historical discussion about civilian national service in America. It invites us to think about the controversies around its potential contributions to democracy and to a more fair society. And yet, the book does not seem to provide enough reasoning to make up our minds about what is at the core of those controversies.

**References**


