

The Politics and Philosophy of “Serving America”: An Exploration of the Conceptual Basis of Federal Service-Learning and Civic Engagement Initiatives

David E. Meens
University of Colorado at Boulder

INTRODUCTION

On April 14, 2011, I received an email from the director of an organization on my campus that receives funding through a federal program known as Learn and Serve America (LSA). The text of the email contained information regarding the budget proposal for 2012 just released by the Obama administration. On page seven of this document (a link was included), LSA appears slotted for \$39.5 million in cuts; that’s more than the \$39 million designated for the program in 2011— essentially the new budget defunds all LSA programs. In addition, other service-learning and civic engagement initiatives were slotted for substantial cuts — for example, the \$350 million, nation-wide program AmeriCorps, was set for a \$23 million cut. All told, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), which oversees both LSA and AmeriCorps, faced a reduction of \$74.6 million.

LSA was an early legislative priority of the Obama administration. The 2008 presidential election gave prominent place to proposals for national civic engagement and service initiatives.¹ President Obama’s inaugural “Call to Service” and the “Edward M. Kennedy National Service Act,” which was signed into law as the Learn and Serve America Act in 2009, seemed to promise a trend toward increased interest in and support for service-based civic engagement programs. The positive appraisal of such initiatives across party lines seen in the 2008 presidential campaigns is representative of the bipartisan consensus that has attended the passage of similar legislation, especially from 1990 on. The administration’s 2012 budget proposal therefore represents a dramatic turnaround, not only from Obama’s (and McCain’s) call for expanding our “army of national servants” through the funding of civically oriented service initiatives, but from an at least two-decades-old bipartisan consensus.

While many educators and others calling for a renewal of democratic culture in the United States assume that federal support of national service and civic engagement initiatives is desirable, it is worth exploring what conceptions of citizenship, and of politics, are advanced by such programs. In this essay, I ask how we ought to understand this near turnaround in the Obama administration’s commitment, and what it reveals about the deeper meaning of such initiatives within the broader political context. After exploring the historical background of the LSA legislation, I argue that such initiatives can best be understood as an expression of the “radical centrism” that became the hallmark of presidential campaigns in the United States in the 1990s. In *The Democratic Paradox*, Chantal Mouffe highlights reasons we ought to be suspicious of the basic conceptions of politics and citizenship that were

the basis of the “New Left” and its success.² I believe we can extend Mouffe’s argument through an exploration of how “civic renewal” initiatives popularized during this time provide some of the best examples of this problematic conception of politics. This critique, in practical terms, provides reason to suppose that initiatives like AmeriCorps and LSA, at least as currently conceived, promise little in terms of renewing American civic life. This is not to say, however, that a deepening of the concept of citizenship and political participation is not possible; indeed, it may be that such educational initiatives could, with the conscious and concerted effort of those participating in them at various levels, play a part in the very conceptual deepening that I believe the rejuvenation of our civic life requires.

HISTORY OF LEARN AND SERVE AMERICA: FEDERAL INITIATIVES FROM 1967–2011

Within the United States, almost all institutions of higher education include as a component of their mission a statement concerning the cultivation of an informed citizenry committed to the public good and prepared for participation in the civic life of our democratic polity.³ It is less common, but still quite frequent, that such institutions include in their mission claims that the processes of higher education themselves should also involve activities that provide benefits — material, cultural, and social, for example — to the wider communities in which these institutions are situated. Efforts to align curricular requirements and pedagogy with these stated aims have been uneven and sporadic. In 1994, Arthur Levine observed in an essay entitled “Service on Campus” that “student volunteer movements tend to be a passing phenomenon in higher education, rising and falling on campuses roughly every thirty years.”⁴ Such movements have indeed come and gone; they have not, however, always been spurred or supported by federal legislation involving the allocation of tens of millions of taxpayer dollars.

The first significant allotment of cash in support of civic/service initiatives in higher education came in the early 1970s, when a Democrat-controlled Congress passed the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (DVSA). At that time, several colleges participated in a program called University Year of Action (UYA). This federally funded program offered college students up to thirty credit hours for one year of service with local agencies or organizations. The explicit rationale behind this program was to invite disaffected, alienated youth to become “part of the solution.”⁵ However, most of these programs ended when the federal money ran out. In the absence of federal money, a couple of important initiatives emerged, most notably the student-initiated Campus Opportunity Outreach League (COOL), founded in 1984, which created a network of 600 colleges and universities in less than a decade. COOL’s stated goal was to “strengthen, through service ... the capacity of students for sustained thoughtful action, and to foster a student voice in the community to address the challenges we face as a society.”⁶ The next major development to influence the prominence of “Learn and Serve” initiatives in terms of federal policy came in the mid-1980s with the creation of Campus Compact. Campus Compact is today the largest and most important organization supporting service-learning and civic engagement on college campuses, boasting a membership of over 900 college and university presidents.

In the late 1980s, Campus Compact was a key player in laying the groundwork and providing the impetus for the most sweeping federal legislation up to that point, the National and Community Service Act (NCSA), signed into law in 1990 by President George H.W. Bush. This legislation allocated \$275 million for service-learning programs at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels of education. Initially, such increased reach by the federal government into the realm of education might seem surprising, approved as it was by a Republican president. However, this service initiative had a double appeal from the perspective of the Bush administration. First, it was actually aligned with the more traditionally conservative goal — most clearly enacted by Bush’s predecessor, Ronald Reagan — of reducing the scope and cost of the welfare state. This is because it shifts the onus for the amelioration of poverty from government agencies to private individuals—volunteers. In the case of NCSA, student volunteers become official agents of social uplift at minimal public expense.

Though the “culture wars” that dominated the politics of the 1990s had, to a large extent, been relegated to background status by the 2008 presidential election (exit polls cited the economy, employment, housing, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as issues of voters’ greatest concern), the political calculation concerning the risk associated with welfare programs and the benefits of appearing sensitive to the needs of poor communities remained the same. Both John McCain and Barack Obama sought to capture the public’s confidence by appearing distinctively (or at least acceptably) responsive to community needs. On March 18, 2009, just months after Obama’s victory over McCain, the legislation that became LSA passed the House by a vote of 321–105, with bipartisan support. At that time, it bore the unwieldy but acronym-friendly title “Generations Invigorating Volunteerism and Education Act” (“GIVE,” H.R. 1388), but was later amended in the Senate and renamed “The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act,” (S. 277) where it passed by a vote of 79–19. This legislation “reauthorizes and expands national service programs administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service by amending the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (NCSA) and the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (DVSA).”⁷

With the passage of LSA, the future of civic and service-learning programs seemed more secure than ever. In April of 2011, however, the president signed a “continuing resolution” for the remainder of the Fiscal Year that specified deep cuts for CNCS programs. This included a \$22.5 million reduction for AmeriCorps (6.4%) and a \$39.5 million reduction for LSA (100%).⁸ Something dramatic seems to have transpired between February and April of 2011, such that the earlier budget proposal, which represented a high-water mark for the federal funding of service initiatives, was followed only two months later by across-the-board cuts and the complete defunding of a major program that was one of the Obama Administration’s first legislative accomplishments.

I would suggest that the “voluntary” or *noblesse oblige* underpinnings of such programs (in the mode of “compassionate conservatism,” which makes redress of social ills contingent upon the voluntary goodwill of individuals interacting with

non-obligatory allocations by the government) make such programs a low-risk proposition, politically — at least in times when broader budgetary woes were not in the foreground of political discourse. It is this same quality that also makes the reduction or elimination of support for such programs politically appealing in the present economic climate. Unlike other federal programs aimed at benefitting poor and underserved communities, the funding does not end up in the hands of the needy “intended” beneficiaries. For example, CNCS’s \$700 million in community service block grants (tentatively slated for a 50% cut) typically go into the coffers of municipalities who host projects, and municipal leaders have relative freedom to use the funds as they see fit.⁹ Similarly, AmeriCorps stipends only benefit communities in need indirectly (and hypothetically). Participants receive a federal grant, and perhaps delay repayment of federal college loans, while simultaneously developing their own résumés and professional skills without incurring any real financial hardship.

There is an asymmetry, then, between the two prongs of the “benefit to students, benefit to the community” approach that service programs have touted — benefit to students is primary, with benefit to communities following (to the extent that it occurs) as a kind of happy side effect. The advantage that comes with support for such programs accrues to politicians with little to no risk, functioning like a kind of ideological Rorschach blot: progressives and conservatives alike can plausibly interpret them as serving their favored ends and means. In the next section, I argue that the malleability and, in a pinch, disposability of Learn and Serve programs are best understood as symptomatic of a deeper malady — that is, the facile conception of democratic citizenship that such programs presuppose and promote.

PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS AND THE COST OF CONSENSUS

Writing around the time that Bill Clinton was elected president, Chantal Mouffe warned of the dangers of the Bush-Clinton-Blair strategies that were shifting political discourse toward a “middle way” that proclaimed the dissolution of traditional Left/Right oppositional politics. In her book, *The Return of the Political*, she argues for what she terms “agonistic pluralism,” a view which emphasizes conflict and struggle amongst competing interests and ideologies as a necessary condition for liberal democracy.¹⁰ In *The Democratic Paradox* she restates this argument from the perspective of the end of the Clinton administration.¹¹ In short, Mouffe suggests that the neoliberalism endorsed by Clinton and his British counterpart Tony Blair led to undesirable policies from the perspective of the least advantaged and undermined democracy in the United States and the United Kingdom. This is due to the fact that politics, in the sense of overt struggle between competing interests, were displaced by a new perception (allegedly, the new consensus) that the “Third Way” represented the only viable political position in an era of the triumph of *laissez faire* capitalism and liberal, secular democracy.

As philosopher of education Michael Peters points out, in the 1990s “the Third Way as ‘modernized social democracy’ seemed triumphant and destined to become the most important reform discourse in the European party landscape.”¹² As a “hybrid discourse” — combining elements of “classical social democracy” and

“Thatcherism” or the “New Right” — the Third Way insinuates “the economic into the democratic and vice versa.”¹³ Anthony Giddens articulates the implications of the continued development of this neoliberal paradigm for the concept of citizenship. “The third way emphasizes the active citizen — summed up in the principle ‘no rights without responsibilities.’... We should speak of shared responsibilities, or what some have called the co-production of public goods. That is to say, there should be collaboration between the state and the citizen in the production of socially desirable outcomes.”¹⁴

This recasting of citizenship as a *collaboration* between individuals and government in the “production of socially desirable outcomes” leads to an obvious interpretation of Learn and Serve initiatives: citizens, as a generic category, are positioned by such programs as the agent-providers as well as recipients of government services. This obscures, of course, important distinctions *among* citizens — for example, relatively affluent student volunteers are socioeconomically privileged in comparison to members of communities targeted for their service.

This asymmetrical recasting of the role of citizens in relation to one another may or may not be problematic. What is so insidious about Third Way politics, however, is that this revision of one of our most basic political concepts goes unquestioned and is made, at least in the mainstream, unquestionable. According to Mouffe, the danger represented by a “radically centrist” politics lies in this: with the disavowal of conflict and competition as legitimate forms of political communication, those who are on the margins of mainstream society will be silenced. Elizabeth Anderson also points to this danger, noting that in the United States “civility” has often been defined in such a way that certain groups and individuals, and certain sorts of grievances, are ruled “uncivil” and so excluded from the public sphere (grievances expressed by the black community in the Jim Crow-era South, for example).¹⁵ Consequently, the prevailing views and policies are those advocated by members of the political community whose communication is privileged as the correct and proper form. Mouffe asserts that the “radical centrism” of the New Left operated in precisely this way, and served to exclude marginalized voices in the name of the new Neoliberal consensus. The alleged dissolution of the old, oppositional politics merely masks this new hegemony. Healthy democratic politics, by contrast, affirm the necessity of confrontation, of struggle, of “impolite” discourse. Partisan struggle involving a variety of modes of discourse, from the conventional to the outlandish, far from representing a failure of or a threat to democratic institutions, are democracy’s very condition of possibility.

In light of Mouffe’s analysis, some important features of Learn and Serve legislation shift to the foreground. As noted above, in the 1970s, University Year of Action (UYA) was explicitly casted by its supporters as an effort to reintegrate young people who were disillusioned with the “establishment,” and critical more generally of prevailing social and political realities. Through service-learning courses and initiatives, it was thought that students would become more altruistic, more “other”-centered (as opposed to self-centered). The goal was not merely to co-opt critical young minds (a somewhat cynical interpretation of UYA’s stated goal),

but to cultivate a less self-interested citizenry, arresting what was perceived to be a disturbing decline in civic virtue among the young. An interest in “private materialism” was seen at the time as an undesirable consequence of liberal democracy, which is said to emphasize individual rights at the expense of civic responsibility.¹⁶ Service learning, therefore, was seen as an instrument for the recasting of individual identities in the mold — though this is rarely acknowledged explicitly — of a conception of democracy informed by civic republicanism.

The connection between democracy and civic republicanism in discussions of civic engagement and service learning is made explicit by the British philosopher of education John Annette:

The current “New Labour” government has espoused a programme of civil renewal that is informed by a set of beliefs and values involving faith traditions, ethical socialism, communitarianism and more recently civic republicanism. In civic republicanism freedom consists of active self-government and liberty rests not simply in negative liberty but in active participation in a political community.¹⁷

Such a program of “civic renewal,” here identified with Blair’s New Labour government of the 1990s, relies upon a “thick” conception of civic identity, which is to say, it depends upon a shared conception of the good life among citizens. In this regard, there is a continuity between the “set of beliefs and values” based on “faith traditions, ethical socialism, communitarianism” and civic republicanism. A common critique of civic republicanism is that it, like communitarianism more generally,¹⁸ elevates the needs of the community over the rights of the individual, and so supports a politics of repression and intolerance.¹⁹ If the individual is a product of the community to which he or she belongs in virtue of residence or birth, and parasitic upon it, then it becomes unclear what claims he or she might have against the community in instances that seem to be violations of justice.²⁰ The priority of individual rights was posited, in part, as a solution to precisely this problem. Yet in an era of “civic renewal,” this historical development has been turned upside-down and placed (precariously?) on its head.

The increasing influence of civic republicanism in the context of modern liberal democracies leads to a contradiction, which, I argue, ends up hollowing out the conception of democratic citizenship itself. An anecdote illustrates this point. I teach in a program for undergraduates who devote a significant number of hours to internships and other community-based service work. Students in the program are typically eligible to receive funding through AmeriCorps for their efforts in non-profit and educationally oriented organizations of various kinds. This past semester, one of my students was informed by an AmeriCorps liaison that the service she had completed (at this point over 100 hours) would not count toward receipt of an AmeriCorps Education Award. The rationale provided was that the student’s work involved participation in voter registration drives on campus. The salient point here is that, although the work of the organization in question is explicitly non-partisan and well within the bounds of its tax-exempt 501(c)(3) charter, in the context of federally supported civic and service learning, voter registration is deemed too political and is listed among prohibited activities in the AmeriCorps manual’s “terms of service.”²¹

So while the explicit aim of this legislation is the cultivation of civic virtue, also explicit is the assertion that “partisan political activity” is beyond the scope of supported (and hence, legitimate?) civic activity. On the one hand, AmeriCorps offers a limited endorsement of religious and civic organizations, a nod toward principles of civic republicanism; simultaneously, we see the separation of public and private spheres and the prohibition of political activity one would expect from the secular liberalism that Scott Myers-Lipton and others blame for the ascendancy of “private materialism” in the United States, especially among the young. The picture of civic life enshrined here is contradictory. This contradiction is suppressed and, as a result, the conception of “civic virtue” that such legislation aims to cultivate among student volunteers is drained of any substantive political content. Hence, the prohibition of political (read: partisan or interest-based) activity reveals the vacuous nature of the underlying conception of citizenship promoted by the radical centrism of the Bush-Clinton-Blair era. During the presidency of George W. Bush, and especially now in the era of Obama, such a thin conception of citizenship is striking in its inadequacy as the political sphere is increasingly dominated by seemingly intractable disagreement and the full-blown antagonism of partisan struggle.

To sum up, federal initiatives supporting volunteerism and civic renewal are based on a kind of philosophical contradiction. Indeed, this contradiction is the basis of the ambiguity that allowed political candidates to exploit Learn and Serve legislation to their advantage. The pragmatic expediency of endorsing civic engagement and service-learning policies ignores and covers over the deep philosophical tension between civic republicanism (which posits a particular shared conception of the good life) and secular liberalism (which posits the priority of the right over the good). To put the problematic in the terms of John Rawls’ seminal *Theory of Justice*, political liberals would hold that education for citizenship ought to be about the priority of the right over the good and about teaching tolerance and respect for difference.²² For civic republicans, by contrast, such education involves the inculcation of loyalty based on affinity, of the development of “civic character” that prioritizes a shared conception of the good life. In the face of apparently intractable disagreement rooted in this basic philosophical contradiction, bi-partisan consensus on service-learning and civic engagement initiatives has only been achieved through a kind of conceptual bloodletting. The notion that civic engagement can be apolitical depends upon a conception of citizenship that is dangerously anemic. In this sense, Learn and Serve legislation distills the problematic of the “middle way” and the new “radical centrism” that has, over the past decade, broken down into virulent partisan politics that now seem to threaten to reduce the American political scene into balkanized, warring ideological factions and interest groups.

I agree with Mouffe that any attempt to resolve this contradiction by demonstrating the primacy of one ideal over the other is misguided. I also agree with Barbara Thayer-Bacon, however, when she suggests that the emphasis of Mouffe’s critique of this politics sounds outdated today, in light of what seems to be the fairly dramatic breakdown of the alleged consensus of the middle way.²³ This limitation in Mouffe’s analysis could be easily corrected through greater emphasis on and

development of an element of her account to which she gives too little attention. What is needed is a more explicit recognition that democracy *is* a shared form of life, and that agreement on certain substantive values is constitutive; more specifically, it is a form of life based upon a shared commitment to the possibility of the reconciliation (or at least the adjudication) of different conceptions of the good life, of pluralism, through procedures that are procedurally just.

It is important to note that Mouffe's criticism of democratic theory — particularly in her characterization of its *deliberative* form — as offering an endorsement of the kind of bloodless “politics” described above, is in important respects incorrect. She seems to argue that a mere emphasis on rational discourse and a mere *aspiration* toward consensus entails endorsing the “radical centrism” of the New Left. Mouffe herself emphasizes conflict and struggle as a condition of possibility for democracy. Consequently, she prioritizes factions based on competing interests and ideologies as the very meaning of the political.²⁴ While Mouffe's point provides an important corrective to the movement she critiques, her treatment obscures the fact that democratic citizenship, and the process of deliberation itself, can only be understood when struggle is contextualized within a *polis* that is also a *demos* — that is, without some kind of overarching and inclusive democratic identity in place, struggle between competing interests cannot be construed as *democratic* struggle. A full-blooded conception of education for civic life highlights the interdependence of these distinct elements, of divergent and convergent interests, ideologies, and value commitments. Mouffe's critique of New Left centrism provides us with a useful jumping-off point in the search for a more robust account of the requirements of democratic politics. Moving beyond it helps us begin to rethink education for citizenship in a way that might actually revitalize democratic politics.

Elizabeth Anderson offers a more adequate discussion of democratic citizenship, more adequate in precisely this regard.²⁵ She emphasizes that democratic politics necessarily involves the struggle, particularly of marginalized individuals and groups, for opportunities to participate meaningfully in the political life of the community. Such a struggle can only be considered democratic if it allows, supports, furthers, or even generates a “superordinate” democratic identity, a “we” that encompasses the subordinate racial, ethnic, economic and political identities which citizens possess. This is what political discourse in the United States seems poised to undermine, with pundits promoting and candidates pursuing a “win at all costs” strategy that construes opponents as enemies, thereby forgoing Mouffe's “agonistic pluralism” for an antagonistic version of political life which, in its principle, is hardly distinguishable from a Hobbesian state of nature as a “war of each against all.”

Education, and the initiatives that set educational agendas, can play a role in forestalling the demise of anything in our political life worthy of the descriptors “civil” and “democratic.” The constructive avenues suggested here for re-conceptualizing democratic participation are cursory, but promising. While they cannot be adequately pursued within the confines of this essay, I would like to offer some recommendations for educators and university administrators who are serious about

making the civic mission of the university more than empty rhetoric, and supporting democratic identities deeper than those judged politically expedient by national political figures. First, we must work, in our own minds, in our classrooms, institutions, and communities, to deepen the conception of democracy that motivates our calls for and efforts at increased civic participation. Neither the civic republican conception, which aspires to the creation of a hegemonic, in-group identity as a condition of citizenship, nor the liberal conception, which risks inadvertently cultivating an ethos of “private materialism,” will do. Second, we must aim to instantiate the civic mission of the university in a meaningful way throughout the curriculum: we must work to get away from the additive/enrichment model of service learning and argue for the meaningful inclusion of substantive political discourse across subjects and disciplines. The university must become a site not only of service but also of civic deliberation, with all of the controversy and conflict this activity entails. In sum, we should aim to help prepare our students to begin shouldering the civic responsibilities that we all share in a diverse, unequal, and irreducibly political world.

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 2. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).
 3. John Annette, “Character, Civic Renewal and Service Learning for Democratic Citizenship in Higher Education,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 53, no. 3 (2005): 326–340.
 4. *Ibid.*, 330.
 5. Scott Myers-Lipton, “Effects of a Comprehensive Service-learning Program on College Students’ Civic Responsibility,” *Teaching Sociology* 26, no. 4 (1998): 243–258.
 6. *Ibid.*, 244.
 7. Corporation for National and Community Service, <http://www.nationalservice.gov>.
 8. *Ibid.*
 9. Sam Stein, “Obama’s Budget Pits Him Against His Own Life Story,” *Huffington Post*, February 14, 2011.
 10. Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993).
 11. Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*.
 12. Michael A. Peters, *The Last Book of Postmodernism: Apocalyptic Thinking, Philosophy and Education in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 126.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. Anthony Giddens, “Neoprogessivism: A New Agenda for Social Democracy,” in *The Progressive Manifesto: New Ideas for the Centre-left*, ed. Anthony Giddens (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2003), 16; cited in Peters, *The Last Book of Postmodernism*, 127.
 15. Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
 16. Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).
 17. Annette, “Character,” 327.
 18. For a noteworthy and interesting attempt to qualify and overcome illiberal tendencies associated with communitarian thought, see Mark Olssen, *Liberalism, Neoliberalism, Social Democracy: Thin Communitarian Perspectives on Political Philosophy and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

19. For a good, comprehensive account of several critiques along these lines, see Kenneth R. Howe, *Closing Methodological Divides: Toward Democratic Educational Research* (Norwell, MA: Kluwer, 2003).
20. For a classic statement of this position, see Plato's dialogue *The Crito*.
21. AmeriCorps Members Handbook 2011, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/27847120/AmeriCorps-Member-Handbook-Guide>, 19–20.
22. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971).
23. Barbara Thayer-Bacon, *Beyond Liberal Democracy in Schools: The Power of Pluralism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009).
24. See Mouffe, *Return of the Political* and *The Democratic Paradox*.
25. Anderson, *Imperative of Integration*.