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Service as a Pathway to Political Participation: What Research Tells Us

Tobi Walker

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Historically, there has been a rich American tradition connecting service to political engagement. To test whether this pathway remains significant, research on the political outcomes of young people's service participation is reviewed. The author argues that most research operationalizes citizenship as a helping behavior, contributing to a perspective that service is an alternative to politics. The article concludes with a set of recommendations for reinvigorating service to support more robust political participation.

I first became interested in the possible links between service and political engagement through work on the Center for American Women and Politics' National Education for Women (NEW) Leadership program, an effort to educate and inspire young women for political leadership and participation. The participants, students from colleges and universities across the country, were actively engaged in volunteer and service learning activities. But any talk of political engagement—voting, running for office, lobbying—and they recoiled with disgust. Service was a friendly, morally pure alternative to the messy, dirty, compromise-filled world of politics.

As a student of women's political history, this struck me as a reversal of years of women's engagement in the public world.¹ Service activity, especially at the turn of the century, moved many women from the private sphere into the public arena in pursuit of any number of social change goals. Some women, frustrated by the limitations of service on the issues they cared about, began to advocate for women's political participation—especially the vote. For a small group of women, service was the entry point to formal positions of power. (For example, several of the women of Hull House took their settlement house experience and entered city and state government.) Yet, that path from service into politics did not seem to exist for students in the NEW Leadership program. Further, there were few models for tapping the idealism, passion, and energy

that motivated these young women and helping them make a connection to the political sphere.

The theories behind service as a citizen education tool painted a rich, and diverse, picture of how service could strengthen democracy by reinforcing the responsibilities, not just the rights, of citizenship and providing practical tools in the practices of democracy, though none used gender as an analytic tool or case study.² The contemporary practice of service, often rooted in social change and social justice, had become institutionalized as a pedagogy. As federal dollars poured into the work, advocates seemed to talk less about social change or community building and more about caring, helping, and personal growth. As a political scientist and as an advocate of women's efforts to claim power, these goals did not strike me as political. While women's history indicated a link between service and politics, there now seemed to be a split between service and politics. By the late 1990s, the research on service had reached a critical mass and it was possible to explore that split.

The Research on Service and Political Outcomes

This article is based on an extensive review of the research on service in an attempt to answer the following question: Does service contribute to young people's political participation? Unfortunately, much of the research on service is not particularly rigorous. There is a great deal of anecdotal evidence, identification of best practices, and discussion of techniques for institutionalizing service as a pedagogy. This analysis is based only on those studies that include a pre- and posttest and a control group. Because the goal is to assess the impact of service on young people (e.g., Did participants respond

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¹See Walker (2000a) for an exploration of this relation.

²See, for example, Barber, 1984; James, 1967; Janowitz, 1983; Moskos, 1988.

to a treatment?), the use of these two methodological devices is a minimum. The literature review was narrowed further by only focusing on those questions related to civic outcomes. It is certainly reasonable to argue that moral development, knowledge, critical thinking, and personal competence are key components of the "good citizen." However, there is a theoretical distinction within the literature between academic and personal outcomes and civic and political participation.

This distinction points to one of the central problems in the research and the practice of service: Conceptual confusion about the meaning of citizenship and politics. What does it mean to be a citizen? Is citizenship more than a legal status? What does the "good" citizen do? What does the "bad" citizen do (perhaps a more interesting question)? What are the values, skills, characteristics, and knowledge that a person needs to fulfill the rights and responsibilities of citizenship? The answers to these questions are contested and lie at the heart of the United States' democratic struggle. Throughout the nation's history—from women's battles for the suffrage to efforts to end legal and de facto discrimination against blacks, from demands for tribal sovereignty to debates about gays in the military—the fight to gain full access to democracy has mobilized, inspired, and shaped the United States.

Definitions of politics and political participation are equally contested. Traditional definitions focus on those activities that involve governmental institutions—voting, lobbying, running for office, and the legislative, executive, and judicial functions of government. Another school of thought, influenced by movements such as civil rights and feminism, sees politics as the way that societies decide about the allocation of limited resources and the development of societal values. Thus, politics is not only the work of governments, but is a power relation inherent in economic, cultural, and civic institutions and even, for some, in family relationships.

The breadth and diversity of the service experience further complicate the researcher's task. First, there are multiple definitions of service, including community service or volunteerism, service learning that combines service with academic study and reflection, and national service, which usually involves extended, full-time service often for a stipend. Second, advocates claim a wide range of outcomes for service. It can help students' moral development, improve academic learning, ease the transition from school to work, and even prevent teen pregnancy. The citizenship outcomes are equally ambitious. Service, proponents have argued, can help inculcate a sense of responsibility to the larger society by counteracting the cultures' focus on rights and individualism. Service can create the bonds necessary for community by connecting young people to new ideas and people. Exposure to social issues can encourage a more engaged, caring citizen, committed to pressing social needs. Further complicating the re-

search process is the range in time that students spend in service. Many studies capture the experiences of the student who volunteers once a year and the student who volunteers once a week. Finally, there are the different contexts in which students serve—through their schools, religious institutions, clubs, with their families, and on their own.

Understanding Citizenship

How are citizenship and participation conceptualized in the service research field? The predominant understanding is that of "citizen as helper." This approach measures citizenship as largely individual actions that help people in need.³ These actions should in turn inculcate social and community responsibility among the young people who serve. The outcomes are largely individualistic, focused on young people's growth and personal development. Nearly all the research seeks to assess whether the service experience increases the likelihood that young people will serve in the future.⁴ There is very little focus on those activities that involve working with others to influence (or alter) societal institutions.

Given this conceptual model, what is known about the impact of service on citizenship? Most clearly, research shows that service has a significant positive impact on young people's attitudes toward service itself. A longitudinal assessment of Learn and Serve American Higher Education (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999) found a small but significant relation between volunteerism in high school and college and the propensity to volunteer in the future. Melchior's (1998) evaluation of Learn and Serve America School and Community Based Programs (LSASCB) found that the most significant difference between service learning participants and a comparison group was on service leadership, "the most direct measure of students attitudes toward service itself" (p. 25).⁵ Melchior's follow-up study a year later found that the only lasting ef-

³Service as a form of altruism is a primary motivator for young people seeking to volunteer (Astin & Sax, 1998; National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999; Serow, 1991).

⁴Loeb (1994) quoted a Stanford student involved in service: "I hope that one day my grandchildren will get to have the same experience working in the same homeless shelter that I did" (p. 237). In many ways, the research focus on the likelihood of future service, while an understandable preoccupation, reflects this same shortsightedness. No researcher asks the question, "Do you think your service solved a social problem (and therefore you never need serve again)?"

⁵One note of caution: This study concentrated on the best LSASCB programs (programs that that were well established with higher than average number of service hours) and that utilized regular reflection techniques. Thus, the author writes "this evaluation was not designed to address the average impact of all Learn and Serve programs, but rather to identify the impacts that can be reasonably expected from mature, fully-implemented, school-based service-learning efforts" (emphasis in original, Melchior, 1998, p. 3).

fects of service learning were "marginally significant positive impacts on service leadership, school engagement, and science grades." Markus, Howard, and King (1993) also found that students enrolled in courses with a service requirement were significantly more likely to rate volunteering as personally important.

Most studies that find that service affects civic participation combine measures of service participation and measures of political participation. In other words, there is no conceptual or analytic distinction between service activity and political activity. Gray et al.'s (1999) study is one of the few to differentiate community service activity and political activity. They concluded,

political activity is least associated with service learning, while campus activity and involvement in societal problem solving are moderately associated. The expectation of participation in future volunteer work or community service shows the strongest association with service learning. (p. 42)

Newmann and Rutter (1983), in their study of high school students enrolled in eight "exemplary community service programs," also explored the relation between service and expected political participation. The authors measured whether service effected students' feelings of responsibility for their school and community, their feelings of competence and efficacy (Did the students feel able to work collectively to address issues?), and their anticipated participation in adult groups and politics. On questions of civic responsibility, the authors found that both the service-learning students and the comparison group showed an increase on measures of social responsibility, future social affiliation, and political participation. Interestingly, the comparison group increased in measures of political efficacy, while the service-learning students' measure of political efficacy declined.

Traditional measures of political participation—voting, lobbying, and contacting elected officials—are surprisingly under-evaluated in the research literature. There are only a few studies that look specifically at the impact of service on political participation. Most measures of political engagement are so amorphous that they provide little insight into how young people understand or participate in politics. Thus, we see such categories as follows:

1. Current level of involvement in campus activities or politics (Gray et al., 1999).
2. Current level of participation in national, state, or local politics (Gray et al., 1999).
3. Knowledge and attitudes about local government (Hamilton & Zeldin, 1987).
4. Anticipated participation in adult groups and politics (Gray et al., 1999).

5. Current level of involvement in activities addressing social problems (Gray et al., 1999).

These measures are open to a wide range of interpretations and can capture the experiences of the student who gives his leftovers to a homeless person, the student who organizes a food drive on her dorm floor, the student interning for a local city council member, or the student on the board of the local soup kitchen. These are all very different acts, each of which can be understood as civic engagement, each of which engages civic and political life in different ways, with different consequences, and, most significantly, each of which teaches different things about political life and responsibility. Without a clear definition of political engagement in the research, it is difficult to differentiate between these acts or decipher a student's political understanding.

Only one study, The New Millennium Project, pays particular attention to the relation between volunteering and voting (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999).⁶ It is important to note that this study did not assess the effects of service on voting; rather, it explored whether there was a relation between the two activities. The researchers found that voting and volunteering

are not statistical predictors of one another, nor are the two variables significantly statistically correlated. Voting-age youth who have volunteered are only slightly more likely than non-volunteers to have voted in November 1998—39% of volunteers voted, compared to 32% of non-volunteers. (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999, p. 23)

The authors concluded that young people's civic activity is largely "individualistic and apolitical" (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999, p. 22).

Where Is the Problem?

Of course, one could justifiably ask what is wrong with encouraging more helpful and caring attitudes and a sense of responsibility toward others? Certainly, these are social goods and they make for compelling arguments to justify service as pedagogy to skeptical parents and policymakers. The problem with the helping model is that it can encourage students to think that

⁶Whereas voting is often criticized as a shallow measure of citizenship and a poor indicator of participation because it does not necessarily require deep engagement with others or even any real understanding of issues or problems, it has long been considered the most basic measure of political participation. Further, voting remains a significant indicator because it is the key "currency" for groups organized around interest (e.g., environmentalists, pro-lifers) and demographics (women, African Americans) who are seeking to influence institutions of representative democracy.

their individual actions are enough and that focusing on larger structural issues is not necessary. As Barber (1994) has written,

The thousand points of light through which the lucky serve the needy may help illuminate our humanity, but they cannot warm or nurture our common soul, nor create a sense of common responsibility connected to our liberty, nor provide integral solutions to structural problems. The model is compassion or charity and thus can never be the subject of political duties. (Quoted in Kahne & Westheimer, 1996, p. 597)

Kahne and Westheimer (1996) argued that the focus on service as altruism or charity can be used to back "a conservative political agenda that denies a role for government" (p. 597). Paradoxically, at various points in its history, AmeriCorps, a major federal initiative, has tried to position itself as an alternative to government (at least to its conservative critics). Writing in *Policy Review*, Wofford and Waldman (1996) contended that "Service programs also provide a non-bureaucratic alternative to traditional government" (p. 30).⁷

The focus on service as charity or as an alternative to government can position social problems as individual concerns needing individual solutions rather than systemic problems that need sustained society-wide attention. Concluding that homelessness is due to one person's failure to live up to social norms results in individual solutions that address that person's specific needs. However, a worldview that sees homelessness as the result of interconnecting systems of economic, racial, and educational inequalities would posit an approach focused on social change and meeting individual needs.

The central question that civic educators must ask is whether the focus on individual actions and helping behavior can contribute to young people's understandings of an increasingly complex and diverse society. In a culture of disengagement and distrust in politics, where government is often seen as the problem, not part of the solution, encouraging activities that promote individual action to the exclusion of political action has the potential to deny the complexity of the very social needs that service seeks to address.

The Breakdown Between Service and Politics

Assessing whether service achieves civic outcomes depends on how *citizenship* and *politics* are defined. If the learning goal is more responsible, helpful young

⁷For an interesting discussion of how the Corporation for National Service has changed its public rhetoric to counteract critics, see Perry, Thomson, Tschirhart, Mesch, and Lee (1999).

people who are more likely to serve in the future, then service is a good strategy. Most of the outcome studies found a statistically significant commitment to further service among those engaged in service learning (Astin et al., 1999; Gray et al., 1999; Melchior, 1998). Service also appears to have an impact on students' feelings of responsibility and desire to help others (Astin et al., 1999; Gray et al., 1999; Markus et al., 1993; Melchior, 1998).

However, if the learning goal is to educate young people about politics and the complex nature of social problems and social change, then service does not appear to meet theoretical expectations. None of the studies that focus specifically on the impact of service learning and political participation found a statistically significant relation (Gray et al., 1999; Newmann & Rutter, 1983). Rather, the New Millennium Project (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999) seems to indicate that there is no statistical relation between volunteering and voting, the most basic measure of political participation.

Why, despite the theoretical potential and the promise of advocates, doesn't service seem to encourage political participation? There are a variety of hypotheses. Newmann and Rutter (1983) argued that changes in political participation cannot be expected because students do not work in political organizations or study political change in their classroom. They wrote,

While the programs emphasized service in the community at large, they did not dwell upon the need for organizational affiliation as a way to discharge service. Instead, programs conveyed a more individualistic conception of service—each person would find a way to volunteer his/her interests; this would not necessarily require active participation in churches, clubs, unions, or civic associations. (p. 36)

As the authors argue, when program organizers envision service as a means to affect an individual student's growth and development rather than his or her participation in the public sphere, it should not be a surprise that there are no changes in measures of political engagement.

Gray et al. (1999) argued that the problem is one of definitions. Most programs, they find, define teaching civic participation as teaching about service and increasing students' commitment to volunteer, with the hope

that the service experience will have "spillover" effects on other forms of civic involvement, such as political activism or professional activities directed toward solving social problems. (p. 13)

In part, the authors argue, this relates to confusion about what citizenship responsibilities entail other

than obeying the law and voting. In turn, this conceptual confusion is reflected in the measures that most service researchers use.

Service has been conceptualized in public rhetoric, and perhaps by students, as an alternative to politics.⁸ For young people eager to make a difference, but living in a culture that regards politics with distrust and disgust, service may present a welcome way of "doing something" without the mess and conflict of politics. Such perspectives both perpetuate a negative view of politics and promote the myth that service itself is not a political activity. It is telling that AmeriCorps, the most prominent service initiative, legally prohibits members from most forms of political activity, including lobbying, electoral activity, policy advocacy, protests, and even registering people to vote. As private citizens, AmeriCorps members can participate in these activities, though "on their own time, at their own expense, and at their own initiative. Members may not wear AmeriCorps service gear in such instances" (Corporation for National Service, 2000, p. 39). Thus, it can be argued, their service experiences are effectively cut off from their political engagement. Some might argue, recalling an era of machine politics, that government should not be involved in supporting political participation. However, as recent debates about electoral reform indicate, government does play a pivotal role in enabling (or impeding) political participation. It is possible to imagine government dollars supporting AmeriCorps members engaged in political activities under the same terms that govern 501 (c) 3 organizations.⁹

The focus on consensus and helping implies that citizens should get along because of a shared base of interests and needs. But, in a diverse, pluralistic society, citizens often do not share similar interests or needs. Democratic institutions exist not to level out differences between citizens, but to find ways to bring competing needs to the table and make difficult decisions about the allocation of resources and the production of values. Democracy does not demand that citizens like each other. The process is supposed to be messy, conflictual, and difficult. Making choices about the allocation of scarce resources should be hard work. This is a very different message than the one that is conveyed by most of the service rhetoric and research, and by a culture that seeks to avoid or denigrate politics.

⁸Unfortunately, there has been no research on this question from the students' perspectives. For two different perspectives, see Long (2002) and Walker (2000b).

⁹Unlike VISTA volunteers, AmeriCorps members are not federal employees and therefore are not governed by the provisions of the Hatch Act.

Thoughts on Next Steps

At the center of this article is the assumption that civic educators should encourage young people to participate in politics. Despite a rich theoretical tradition and a history of service leading citizens to political engagement, those connections seem to be derailed. Research shows that service encourages positive social values and attitudes, and it appears to be an activity that participants enjoy. Further, it is supported in this nation by a strong institutional infrastructure. Following are several recommendations on how service might be repositioned as a way to encourage political participation.

1. Change the AmeriCorps legislation to allow participants to participate in political activity, particularly voter registration, under the same constraints that govern 501 (c) 3 organizations involved in advocacy work. Not only would this support the participation of the 50,000 current AmeriCorps participants, it would send an important symbolic message that service and politics are not separate activities.

2. Support qualitative studies that assess how students, policymakers, and educators understand the relation between service and politics. Is service positioned as an alternative to politics? Why? How do students understand the differences between community service and community activism?

3. Support research that explores whether service and political experiences have different outcomes for different kinds of young people. For example, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2000) argued that community service programs at historically Black colleges, tribal colleges, and "Hispanic-serving colleges" often have a social change mandate, as opposed to a "citizen as helper" approach, potentially making for different outcomes.

4. Develop more nuanced measures of civic outcomes and political engagement, including, for example, protest and advocacy activity, attentiveness to political issues and current events, voting, union organizing, working with community decision-making structures (e.g., nonprofit boards), registering voters, and working on political campaigns.

5. Utilize the existing service learning infrastructure to formulate programming that makes the service-politics connection explicit. One example might be a faculty or teacher training institute that works to explore ways to politicize the service experience.¹⁰

6. Create an alternative national service program that seeks to make explicit the connections between service and politics. One example could include a service-politics corps where students rotate through a variety of approaches to a social issue, including direct service, non-profit advocacy, as well as working in a

¹⁰See Battistoni (2001) for a rationale and curricular examples.

state legislature and with a government agency charged with implementation.

7. Build more opportunities for young people to engage directly in politics as a part of their formal education.

Service clearly meets young people's need to express idealism, hope, and engagement. But service, particularly when it is understood as individual action to meet individual needs, does not address systems of power. That is the role of politics. Young people's disengagement from politics reflects a culture that seeks to avoid or dismiss politics as dirty or pointless. Imagine what a different world it could be if the next generation of policymakers brought their hope and idealism, and direct experience with social problems, into the public arena. As the research demonstrates, this can only happen if the connections between service and politics are made explicit, if service is seen as the kindling that sparks a larger commitment to social change and political action.

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