

## Part I: 2020: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

**David A. Reingold**  
**Leslie Lenkowsky**  
 Indiana University

# The Future of National Service

**David A. Reingold** is a professor of public policy and executive associate dean in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University. Currently, he is chairman of the Indiana Commission on Community Service and Volunteerism. From 2002 to 2004, he served as director of research and policy development at the U.S. Corporation for National and Community Service.  
**E-mail:** reingold@indiana.edu

**Leslie Lenkowsky** is a professor of public affairs and philanthropic studies in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University. He served as chief executive officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service from 2001 to 2003. His research interest is public policy and the nonprofit sector.  
**E-mail:** llenkows@indiana.edu

*Passage of the Serve America Act in 2009, reauthorizing the nation's national and community service programs, represented an important milestone. It was the first time these programs and its parent government agency, the U.S. Corporation for National and Community Service, were reauthorized by Congress since the early 1990s. While advocates of national and community service have hailed the passage of this bill as evidence that these initiatives work and will play an increasingly important policy role, this level of enthusiasm is not well founded. The role that national and community service will play in public policy in the future is, at best, apt to be a modest one. The authors argue that national and community service will continue to underachieve and fall short of the claims made by advocates until it can gain true bipartisan support, clearly define program goals, and produce rigorous empirical evidence demonstrating the impact of these programs.*

Three months into his presidency, Barack Obama observed that “I’ve always believed that the answers to our challenges cannot come from government alone.” He added,

Our government can help to rebuild our economy and lift up our schools and reform health care systems and make sure our soldiers and veterans have everything they need—but we need Americans willing to mentor our eager young children, or care for the sick, or ease the strains of deployment on our military families. (Obama 2009)

The occasion for these remarks was a signing ceremony for the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, a bill that authorized an increase in AmeriCorps—a national service program created during the Bill Clinton administration that recruits and pays people who want to spend a year or two working for nonprofit groups—from 75,000 to 250,000 members over a decade. The bill also authorized a five-year increase of more than \$6 billion in federal spending on efforts to encourage community service (CBO 2009). Even as he paid

homage to the importance of volunteering, then, the president was approving a law that would sizably expand the government’s role in enlisting and rewarding people to mentor children, care for the sick, help veterans, and perform many other tasks that Americans traditionally have done without government support.

The apparent disconnect between the president’s words and actions illustrates why the use of national service as a public policy tool has been controversial.

Few Americans would disagree with President Obama’s description of the significant role that “willing” citizens have played in the United States. Indeed, Alexis de Tocqueville and many other observers since have viewed the efforts of volunteers and the associations they form as vital for American democracy, developing desirable civic ties and habits, as well as accomplishing tasks that government is poorly equipped to do. Claims that Americans are becoming less inclined to help one another, such as Robert D. Putnam’s argument in “Bowling Alone” (1995), have provoked earnest discussion and calls for corrective action, when necessary.

Yet the role that government—especially the federal government—should play in promoting such activity has been much more contentious. To be sure, through education, encouragement, and recognition by public officials, protections against liability suits, and tax deductions for expenses incurred in helping charities, American government has long contributed to the fostering of volunteering. Numerous federal agencies, such as the National Park Service, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the U.S. Department of Justice, recruit at least as many as 1.5 million people annually to work as volunteers in their programs, official statistics indicate.<sup>1</sup>

But to many of its critics, AmeriCorps stands apart, a threat to the American tradition of volunteering (Brown 2009; Chapman 2003). By paying participants to do the kinds of tasks that volunteers have

been doing, its opponents charge, the program will diminish the incentives to do them willingly and without compensation. Moreover, they add, AmeriCorps gives government the potential to influence the activities of civic groups, possibly for partisan political purposes, by allowing it to selectively assign members to some organizations but not others.

The program's defenders maintain that AmeriCorps is a valuable way of supplementing the efforts of nonprofit groups. By enabling its members to give more time than ordinary (and unpaid) volunteers can, advocates claim, the program helps the nation's charities provide more services and accomplish their missions more effectively. Especially for younger people, they argue, the experience of participating in AmeriCorps also strengthens the commitment to community service, thus enhancing the American voluntary tradition.

Public policy has long provided financial support for American nonprofits through grants and contracts, or through subsidies for consumers of services, such as Medicare or Pell grants. To its advocates, national service gives government one more tool to attain public policy goals: providing people—often with some training or experience—to assist groups that are addressing issues such as health care, education, public safety, housing, and conservation.

This may be why President Obama could extol the virtues of what citizens do on their own, while at the same time signing a bill to significantly expand the number of Americans funded by government to do similar work. Other supporters of AmeriCorps would go even further than the Kennedy bill. Some would require national service of all young people, while others have proposed a government-run academy to educate and train leaders for American civic groups.

Such steps are unlikely. Although AmeriCorps may not have damaged the spirit of volunteering, as its critics claim, making a persuasive case for what it has accomplished 15 years after its creation is difficult. Operational issues, as well as policy ones, remain problematic. Political opposition continues to be as strong as it was when the program first was proposed in 1993; final passage of the House of Representatives' version of the Serve America Act was largely along party lines.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, notwithstanding the expansion authorized by the Serve America Act and the high expectations of some of its supporters (Sagawa 2010), the role that national service will play in public policy in the future is, at best, apt to be a modest one.

AmeriCorps was created in 1993, but national service has been under discussion far longer (Bates 1996). Edward Bellamy's late nineteenth-century utopian novel *Looking Backward* envisioned an army of civilian workers providing public services. A few years later, in an influential 1906 essay, the philosopher (and pacifist) William James called national service "the moral equivalent of war." In the event that nations agreed to stop fighting one another, he contended, it could provide an acceptable alternative to combat for the aggressive spirits of young men who might otherwise have become soldiers.

During the Great Depression, a Harvard student during the James era, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, created the Civilian Conservation Corps, which is generally regarded as the first nonmilitary national service program in the United States. Responding to the problems created by high unemployment, especially among young, urban men, the program recruited an estimated 3 million participants between 1933 and 1942, when it was phased out—despite its popularity—because of American involvement in World War II. Based in rural camps and under military-style discipline, the Corps members completed a wide range of conservation, public works, and historical preservation projects, receiving \$30 monthly, plus food, clothing, and medical care for their efforts.

The next national service program also arose in the context of national struggle: the Cold War. During his presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy asked college students to "contribute" their lives to serving their country as a way of demonstrating that a "free society can compete" with its adversaries (Kennedy 1960). This eventually led to the creation of the Peace Corps, which now enlists Americans of all ages for two-year assignments in developing countries throughout the world, pays participants a living allowance and medical benefits, and gives them a cash award upon completion of their service. Although approximately 200,000 people have participated since the program was created in 1961, congressional reluctance to appropriate additional funds has limited the Peace Corps to around 7,500 members annually, about half the level reached at the high point of the Kennedy-Johnson years and far below original expectations.

As part of the War on Poverty, President Lyndon B. Johnson applied the idea of national service to domestic policy. In 1965, he created Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA). (The Johnson administration also created two programs for senior citizens, Foster Grandparents and Senior Companions, which give small stipends to their members.) Participants were assigned to help organizations in low-income communities and received modest stipends and fringe benefits, as well as end-of-service awards. VISTA, too, has remained small—about 6,500 members are now enlisted each year—and in 1993, it became a component of AmeriCorps.

During the Vietnam War, as opposition to the military draft grew, especially on college campuses, proposals for more ambitious national service programs were made, partly to offer an alternative for draft-eligible students to serving in the armed forces. With the abolition of the military draft and the advent of a smaller, "all-volunteer" force, concerns that young people might be able to avoid shouldering the burdens of citizenship prompted calls for civilian service initiatives from prominent scholars and intellectuals, such as Charles C. Moskos (1988) and William F. Buckley,

Jr. (1990). In other countries as well, civilian service programs developed in the context of military conscription. For example, in Israel, which has a draft, those who are unable to serve in the armed forces—usually for religious reasons—can join Sherut Leumi and work in a variety of organizations that address nonmilitary needs. Similar options are offered in Germany and Taiwan, although the Republic of China plans on eliminating its draft by 2014.

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AmeriCorps stemmed from a different rationale. Seeking to project a “kinder, gentler” image than his predecessor, President George H. W. Bush sought ways to help charities—“a thousand points of light,” as he called them—play a more active role in dealing with the nation’s social, health, environmental and other problems. In 1990, that led to the creation of the Commission on National and Community Service, which made a series of demonstration grants to examine the potential of national service as a tool for addressing those needs.<sup>3</sup>

Campaigning against Bush, however, Bill Clinton criticized the incumbent Republican administration for paying insufficient attention to the difficulties facing lower- and middle-class Americans. Among them, in his view, was the rising cost of higher education. To help hard-pressed college and university students, he called for a program that would enable them to work off the expenses of their schooling by making a commitment to serve their country for a year or two. Not coincidentally, this proposal also sought to reinforce Clinton’s efforts to identify himself with John F. Kennedy.

After taking office, Clinton recognized that the costs of a program that could annually enroll millions of young people graduating from colleges and universities would be enormous. College and university presidents also resisted the idea, favoring instead a simple increase in federal scholarships and loans for higher education (Waldman 1996). Consequently, the White House scaled back its proposal, and AmeriCorps was born.

Enacted in 1993 as part of the National and Community Service Trust Act,<sup>4</sup> AmeriCorps is essentially a program of grants to nonprofit organizations that enable them to recruit and compensate people who serve on their staffs. Most of the awards are made by the federal government through the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), but one-third of the program’s funds are allocated by state “service commissions,” appointed by governors. (The grant program is known as AmeriCorps State and National. In addition, there are two smaller components of AmeriCorps: VISTA is operated directly by the CNCS through federal offices in each state. The National Civilian Community Corps is also run by the CNCS through five camps located throughout the United States.) Participants receive monthly stipends to help defray living costs, health insurance, and, upon completion of their period of service, which can last as long as two years, an award that can be used to repay student loans or for further education.<sup>5</sup>

The Clinton administration initially obtained funding for 25,000 positions for AmeriCorps members, but increased the total to 50,000 before leaving office. In 2004, the administration of President George W. Bush expanded the program again to 75,000 participants. Since its inception, more than 500,000 Americans, mostly of college age, have participated in AmeriCorps.<sup>6</sup>

For both program sponsors and members, participation in AmeriCorps is voluntary. Organizations that want to recruit members have to apply, following the guidelines issued by the CNCS, which typically

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specify broad areas of policy interest (such as improving reading skills among low-income children or helping homeless veterans), and, in addition to standard federal grant conditions, must meet a few additional requirements, such as demonstrating the capacity to recruit traditional (i.e., unpaid) volunteers. Awards are made following a review process that usually involves outside experts as well as CNCS staff.

Would-be members likewise have to apply, typically through a website hosted by the CNCS. They are asked to choose the organizations they wish to serve from a list of AmeriCorps grantees, which, in turn, can accept or reject applicants until they fill the

number of positions allocated to them. Apart from U.S. citizenship (or permanent residency) and a minimum age of 17, no other eligibility criteria exist, although particular programs may attach their own requirements, such as educational qualifications.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most important consequence of this structure is that there is not a single national service program or national service experience in the United States, but thousands.

The original statutory goal of AmeriCorps was to “meet unmet human needs.” Such a nebulous goal was bound to create difficulties in measuring whether the program was achieving its desired impact. But as successive administrations and congressional committees sought to leave their marks on the program, a variety of other objectives were adopted, including improving child and adult literacy, bridging the “digital divide,” assisting faith-based organizations, and promoting homeland security. Lacking a clear focus, AmeriCorps became, in effect, a program of support for American charities, limited to allowing them to obtain short-term (and often lightly trained) employees for their staffs. Large organizations such as City Year, Teach for America, JumpStart, Public Allies, and Habitat for Humanity annually win multiple awards from the CNCS or its state affiliates and may enroll thousands of AmeriCorps members.

Moreover, the twin goals of the program—serving communities and creating a new generation of civic leaders—led to repeated differences over the intended end beneficiary. Some programs were designed to change the lives of people receiving service from AmeriCorps members, others to shape the lives of AmeriCorps members themselves, and still others to strengthen communities and the local charitable organizations in them. Many tried to do all three.

Advocates of AmeriCorps originally likened the program to a Swiss army knife because it could serve so many different purposes. Yet apart from diffusing the program’s focus, this lack of agreement on what it was supposed to be doing made determining whether AmeriCorps was really “getting things done”—the AmeriCorps slogan—harder.

National service grantees differ not only in what they are trying to do, but in also how they use national service participants. Some engage them in directly providing services, such as tutoring or staffing health clinics, while others involve them in managing community volunteers and building the capacity of nonprofit organizations.

Some grantees target specific communities or populations, including faith-based ones, while others deploy national service participants to multiple locations or populations for brief periods of intensive activity. Some are run in a quasi-military manner, while others operate informally. Some have in-service training programs for members, while others do little to develop the skills of participants.

National service advocates frequently claim that this extensive flexibility and variation represent an advantage because participants can be deployed to best meet the needs of local communities and organizations. But the downside is that AmeriCorps members rarely have common experiences in the program, or even an appreciation that they are part of the same program.

The range of abilities among participants is also vast. Some programs focus on creating service opportunities for disadvantaged groups, particularly low-income individuals who might be able to use a structured service experience to get back on track in the labor market. Others, such as the best-known AmeriCorps program, Teach for America, target high-achieving college graduates who see an extended service experience as an important milestone in career or personal development. As a result, the kinds of impacts that programs have on those who take part, no less than what they are able to accomplish, can be expected to vary considerably.

Not only do national service participants have different kinds of experiences, but also they commit different amounts of time to service. Responding to congressional criticisms of the per-member cost of the program, the Clinton administration relaxed the requirement that AmeriCorps participants make full-time commitments (defined as 1,700 hours) for a full year. As a result, only about half now do so (CNCS 2010). The rest have varying obligations, including some that may be as limited as quarter-time over several months, and typically work or go to school during the remainder of their time. Although the living expense stipend and the award they receive at the end of their period of service are reduced proportionately, the quality of their experience may change as well.

The upshot of this considerable variation in what AmeriCorps members do and who they are is that demonstrating that the program is achieving its two principal aims—providing valuable services to communities and creating a new generation of civic leaders—has proven difficult. That, in turn, has made the arguments of those who would like to see the program play a larger role in public policy harder to accept.

Both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations sought to ensure that national service would “get things done” by establishing priorities for funding, such as programs aimed at improving literacy among disadvantaged young people or assisting the efforts of faith-based groups. They also took seriously the idea that participation in the program should have a life-long impact and invested in training programs and other efforts aimed at giving AmeriCorps members not only a sense of common purpose, but also skills that would enable them to work effectively with civic groups after their period of service was over.

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At first, the results seemed promising. Early studies suggested that AmeriCorps could indeed have positive effects on both communities and program participants (Thomson and Perry 1998; Tschirhart et al. 2001). Despite concerns expressed by its critics, AmeriCorps did not seem to be operating in a politically biased way or inculcating particular political viewpoints among its members (Simon 2002). Managerial challenges loomed larger than programmatic ones in the initial years after the CNCS was created (Lenkowsky and Perry 2000). However, these studies involved small samples of AmeriCorps members who were enrolled in a program that was relatively small and homogenous. As an overview concluded, evidence of the program’s effectiveness was “not definitive.” More research was needed “before policy-makers and citizens can determine AmeriCorps’ productivity” (Perry et al. 1999, 225).

The initial efforts of the CNCS to conduct this research focused chiefly on counting inputs (e.g., number of hours served) and outputs (e.g., number of children tutored), rather than outcomes (e.g., what children actually learned). These studies were designed to establish that AmeriCorps involved more than “feel-good” activities, and they produced a series of reports purporting to show that it actually did “get things done” (Aguirre International 1997, 1999). Critics claimed that these measurement efforts did little to establish the impact of national service programs, deriding them as doing little more than demonstrating that AmeriCorps was about “just doing things” (Walters 1996).

The lack of serious program evaluation to accompany the growth of national service reflected a concern on the part of the leadership of the CNCS and their congressional allies that negative information might weaken support for these nascent—and still politically controversial—efforts.<sup>8</sup> The relative newness of most national service grantees created a sense that it would be unfair to assess their efforts before they had a chance to be fully developed into a coherent program. As a result, statutory evaluation requirements and other expectations around the measurement of these programs were pursued without much rigor.

In any case, evaluating a grant program such as AmeriCorps has its own challenges. While each grantee is required to administer its program under the legislative and regulatory framework established by Congress and the executive branch, each also operates a program that is in many ways distinct from other grantee programs. This type of federally administered initiative, in which each grantee is, in effect, a franchise of a larger conglomerate organization, means that each program site can have a unique design, goals, and administration. In view of the substantial variation that exists within programs and grantees, efforts to aggregate these distinct efforts into an assessment of AmeriCorps as a whole that can be rigorously evaluated present a substantial problem.

Despite these challenges, research on the implementation and impact of AmeriCorps, as well as other programs developed under the National and Community Service Act, has continued to grow. Driven by the needs of program managers and supporters, most

of these studies have focused on single grantees, rather than trying to evaluate AmeriCorps as a whole. Nonetheless, they are often—if improperly—cited as evidence of the effectiveness of national service generally (e.g., Brown et al. 2008).

Still, it is important to note that some grantee-level evaluations have demonstrated the effectiveness of individual national service programs (e.g., Jastrzab et al. 1996; Raymond, Fletcher, and Luque 2001). While grantee-level evaluations tend to lack scientific rigor, focusing more on outputs and less on outcomes, and lack sufficient controls to properly measure the counterfactual (i.e., what would have happened in the absence of the service intervention), some evaluation work at the grantee level is carefully done and points to the efficacy of some AmeriCorps programs.<sup>9</sup> But most programs remain inadequately evaluated.

As a number of literature reviews have been produced summarizing the evaluation literature on the impact of civic service generally on participants, another is not necessary (Perry and Thomson 2004). However, three studies deserve special attention because they focus specifically on participation in AmeriCorps and their scope and use of random assignment evaluation techniques are exemplary.

First, a longitudinal study of AmeriCorps has been following a cohort of AmeriCorps members and a comparison group who applied but did not serve in the program since 1999. Approximately 5,000 individuals are a part of this study, and have been asked to report on their lives before and after their service experience, including a third phase of data collection that was completed in 2006–7.

Even though the study suffers from some limitations (e.g., it focuses only on the impact of the program on AmeriCorps members and does not attempt to measure the impact on end beneficiaries or local communities; it only includes full-time programs in the study design, ignoring part-time positions; and it suffers from self-selection bias, making for difficulties in determining whether the outcomes observed are the result of participation in the AmeriCorps program or characteristics of the particular individuals who chose to serve in it), this study represents the most comprehensive effort so far to measure the impact of AmeriCorps on its members.

Across several waves of the study, the results have been mixed. Some evidence exists to suggest that full-time AmeriCorps members acquire valuable civic attitudes, such as cultivating respect for others. However, there are only minimal or no differences between those who served in the program and those who did not in future employment or wages, educational attainment, or civic activities (Frumkin et al. 2009; Frumkin and Jastrzab 2010). Because this study includes only full-time programs, it is likely that these effects overestimate the impact of AmeriCorps, as many of the part-time and reduced part-time programs involve less commitment by participants and thus have less opportunity to have an impact.

A forthcoming study by Doug McAdam of Stanford University reaches a similar conclusion. It finds that Teach for America participants are less likely to remain involved in civic activities, such as voting or charitable giving, after completing their service than a comparison group who were accepted for the program but declined to serve or dropped out (Fairbanks 2010).

The challenge that these programs face is that many national service participants enter AmeriCorps as highly engaged citizens with solid labor market skills. Therefore, AmeriCorps frequently winds up taking good citizens and trying to make them into supercitizens. Standard techniques for measuring changes in human behavior and attitudes are not good at capturing this type of nuanced change in human behavior.

The third study that deserves special consideration is the National Evaluation of Youth Corps. This random assignment study is designed to measure the impact of one of the CNCS's largest grantees: the Corps Network (formerly known as the National Conservation Corps). While the Corps Network's programmatic activity has a number of unique dimensions (e.g., it targets disadvantaged youth to serve in its AmeriCorps programs, service participants work primarily on projects related to natural resource management, and most of the programmatic activity is concentrated in the Western United States), other AmeriCorps programs have similar program designs or goals. More importantly, this study is the largest and most rigorous evaluation of an AmeriCorps program conducted to date.

While the results of this evaluation are still being analyzed, the preliminary findings are not encouraging.<sup>10</sup> Compared to a control group, participants in the Corps Network were less engaged in their communities or politics in the aftermath of completing the program. No behavioral changes were observed in labor market outcomes or many other indicators designed to capture changes in material well-being. Only modest positive changes were observed in participants' goals for the future. While these findings are preliminary and may change upon further analysis, the effectiveness of the Corps Network appears to be limited, at best.

When combined with the results of the longitudinal study and the smaller-scale, less rigorous evaluations of the work of AmeriCorps grantees, these results hardly amount to an endorsement of the accomplishments of national service in the United States, at least as it currently operates. If AmeriCorps was meant to be a means by which public policy could help nonprofits better accomplish their missions, while also fostering long-term civic involvement by its participants, 15 years of research suggest that it has yet to prove itself capable of effectively doing either, let alone transforming American civic culture, as the program's most enthusiastic supporters had hoped.

Nonetheless, for advocates of national service, the reauthorization of the CNCS and the expansion of AmeriCorps authorized in 2009 represented a validation of their efforts and a sign that national service would become a permanent—and growing—feature of the American public policy landscape.

However, whether Congress will appropriate the funds necessary to meet the commitments in the Kennedy Serve America Act remains to be seen. The 2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act, signed by President Obama at the end of 2009, contained funding to increase the number of AmeriCorps positions by 10,000, half the amount needed to remain on course to reach 275,000 members by 2020.<sup>11</sup> (An additional 10,000 participants were supported through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.) The White

House's 2011 budget proposal called for adding 22,000 full- and part-time members, but its prospects in Congress are still unclear, as both Democrats and Republicans grapple with competing priorities, including for more traditional types of human service programs (CNCS 2010).

Although AmeriCorps may enjoy more political support than it has throughout its history, this is most likely because it has become a source of support for thousands of nonprofit groups, spread throughout virtually every congressional district in the United States. Political and civic leaders at every level of American society have been enlisted in support of the program. A variety of lobbying groups seek to advance and defend its interests, including a large national coalition, which hosted a conference featuring the first joint appearance of both the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates during the 2008 election. Importantly, more than 500,000 people who have served in AmeriCorps make up a sizable grassroots base and, judging from CNCS "member satisfaction" surveys, generally regard their involvement with the program as a positive experience.<sup>12</sup> Despite continuing partisan and ideological objections to the idea of national service, organizations willing to oppose it are few and far between.

In other words, AmeriCorps has succeeded politically, not because of what it has accomplished, but by establishing multiple constituencies on whose support it can rely for continued operations and growth. Many of its advocates see the future of national service as essentially "going to scale," a euphemism for expanding existing programs and activity with little or no change in the basic strategy for creating opportunities to serve country and community. Making national service a common and expected rite of passage for all Americans, they argue, will help address pressing national problems and strengthen civic engagement. But even if it reaches 250,000 positions annually (as the Serve America Act contemplates), AmeriCorps will be enrolling only about 10 percent of the students graduating from high school in the United States each year, a far cry from a shared generational experience. A much greater proportion of this age group takes part in traditional voluntary groups (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009).

It is even unclear whether demand exists to expand AmeriCorps without weakening the entire effort. Although its advocates claim that interest in the program is high, no accurate data exist on the number of individuals applying to AmeriCorps programs. Applicant data generally come from inquiries made of grantees, often through websites, and reflect interest more than a serious intention to serve. Highly publicized programs, such as Teach for America, report demand that greatly exceeds the supply of AmeriCorps positions they have to offer, but this is not typical. In any case, demand usually fluctuates with the state of the economy and the nature of labor market opportunities for college-age students, with the result that recent peaks (in 2008 and 2009) are not likely to be predictive of future applications, when the number of positions to be filled is expected to be greater.

Similarly, the total number of nonprofits and other eligible organizations applying for AmeriCorps grants remains relatively small. For example, the state of Indiana has more than 60,000 not-for-profit organizations, but fewer than 15 of them typically apply to the

state's national service commission for an AmeriCorps grant.<sup>13</sup> Even adding local chapters of AmeriCorps grantees funded directly by the CNCS would not change the very low profile that the program has in the state. Without enough grantees who can offer well-designed opportunities to serve and the ability to attract sufficient numbers of people (including those who might not otherwise have been inclined toward service), "going to scale" could reinforce concerns about the purpose and effectiveness of the program.

The challenges of expanding national service as it is currently operating have led some, including a key staff member who helped establish AmeriCorps in the Clinton administration, to favor making it mandatory (Galston 2004). That is how national service generally works in other countries in which it exists: everyone eligible (usually just men, but sometimes women as well) is required to spend a period of time in either a military or civilian assignment, approved and overseen by public authorities. Because such a program would be universal, those who are not disposed toward serving, no less than those motivated to do so, would have to participate. (In practice, national service programs typically provide a variety of ways through which exemptions can be granted.) Moreover, although participants might work with a variety of public and nonprofit organizations, such as schools or hospitals, priorities could be set nationally and job standards, training requirements, and evaluation guidelines established centrally so that all involved have comparable experiences.

Yet such a program would face opposition not only from current national service grantees, but also from the armed forces. Unless manpower requirements substantially increase, the military is not likely to have a need for conscripts, who, in any event, are regarded as more challenging to train and supervise than those who enlist voluntarily. (This might also be the attitude of many organizations expected to provide nonmilitary positions.) Establishing comparability in pay, benefits, and working conditions between those drafted into military assignments and those who get civilian ones presents a variety of difficult problems. Not least important, the cost of a universal service requirement is apt to be substantial, raising questions about whether these funds could be better spent on professionals—either in civilian or military occupations—instead.<sup>14</sup>

A less costly alternative that has attracted bipartisan political support is a proposal to create a "United States Public Service Academy," the equivalent of West Point for educating future leaders in government and national service programs.<sup>15</sup> It seeks to ensure that as the number of AmeriCorps members increases, a larger supply of talent would be available for the program's grantees, as well as for civic groups generally. The result presumably would be an increase in the ability of nonprofit organizations (and government) to have an impact on public concerns and to engage more people in their work.

However, just what kind of education and training is best suited to developing such leaders is by no means clear. Indeed, public policy and administration schools, as well as a variety of other academic programs, have been seeking for many years to prepare future executives in government and, more recently, the nonprofit sector. A wide variety of approaches still exist. Given the scope and diversity of tasks that government and the nonprofit sector address, having a large menu of ways to become prepared for public service may be an advantage.

In any case, creating an organization to develop an elite cadre of civic leaders seems an unusual and counterintuitive way to increase the involvement of the average American citizen in his or her community. Whatever its current state of health, the nation's civic tradition emphasizes the desirability of widespread responsibility for participating in public life, not leadership by carefully selected and trained citizens. Rather than expanding opportunities for community service, the proposed academy could wind up reducing them.

This was also the concern that greeted AmeriCorps when it was first created. There is no sign that any weakening of civic traditions has occurred. According to an annual Bureau of Labor Statistics survey (2009), volunteering rates in the United States have fluctuated little while AmeriCorps was growing in the last decade. (By the same token, no reliable evidence exists that AmeriCorps members have recruited large numbers of traditional—i.e., non-stipended—volunteers, as some of its proponents hoped it would.) However, demonstrating that it does no harm (and even brings government funds to usually hard-pressed nonprofit groups) may not be enough to give national service a more prominent place in public policy, if it continues to have problems showing that it is effective in energizing Americans to address important national problems.

For all the hopes of its proponents that AmeriCorps would be a different type of government program, one that “cracks the atom of civic power” as Harris Wofford (2005), a longtime champion of national service and the second director of CNCS, put it, the program's survival and growth so far have depended on appealing to traditional political and constituency interests. The question that AmeriCorps faces in the future is whether it can more seriously try to realize its policy aspirations, even if that risks jeopardizing its political support by, for instance, ceasing to fund ineffective programs. If not, American government will continue to pay homage to the importance of volunteering and “willing” citizens (to recall President Obama's phrase), but will not justifiably see national service as a fruitful way of encouraging it.

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and constituency interests.

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## Notes

1. Data gathered from websites and telephone calls for the following programs: Citizen Corps Community Emergency Response Teams, Fire Corps, Medical Reserve Corps, Volunteers in Police Service Neighborhood Watch, National Park Service, Youth Civilian Conservation Corps, Troops to Teachers and Spouses to Teachers, Veterans Corps, Volunteers for Prosperity, the Corporation for National and Community Service (AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve America), Peace Corps, Teach for America, and several mentoring initiatives. This list does not exhaust the number of federal programs that engage volunteers.
2. The motion to accept the Senate's amendments to H.R. 1388, the Generations Invigorating Volunteerism and Education (GIVE) Act, was carried on a 275–149 vote, with 149 of 175 Republican members of Congress voting against. At 79–19, the margin of passage in the Senate was greater, but nearly half of the Republican Senators voted no. Moreover, at least some of the Republican vote was meant as a tribute to Senator Edward M. Kennedy, who was then undergoing treatment for brain cancer. Voting record compiled by Govtrack.us, <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h111-1388&tab=votes> (retrieved May 11, 2010).

3. The Commission on National and Community Service was created by the National and Community Service Act of 1990, P.L. 101-610, enacted November 16, 1990.
4. P.L. 103-82, enacted September 21, 1993. The act also authorized support for service-learning programs (Learn and Serve America) and programs for retirees (Senior Corps).
5. The cost of a full-time AmeriCorps position is the amount of the living expense stipend, health insurance payment, child care (if needed), and end-of-service award. Grantees may also receive funds for administrative and training expenses, but also have to provide a portion of the total costs from nonfederal funds. The costs vary considerably by program, and they are prorated for positions that are less than full time. Some programs only provide end-of-service awards and not living expense stipends, health insurance, or child care.
6. Program information can be found on the AmeriCorps website, <http://www.americorps.gov/>.
7. The CNCS offers a search engine for AmeriCorps applicants that shows programs seeking members, organized by state and interest area.
8. In a widely watched 1994 Senate campaign, Republican Rick Santorum referred to AmeriCorps—which his Democratic opponent, Harris Wofford, strongly supported—as “a program for hippie kids to stand around a campfire and sing ‘Kumbaya’ at taxpayers’ expense.” Initial CNCS studies were aimed at refuting such charges. Santorum ultimately became an AmeriCorps supporter (Dionne 2006).
9. These findings are not without critics. For example, research by Linda Darling-Hammond and others (2005) has questioned the effectiveness of Teach for America, which is generally regarded as one of the best evaluated and most successful AmeriCorps programs.
10. One of the coauthors is a member of the evaluation's technical working group.
11. P. L. 111-117, enacted December 16, 2009.
12. Although both the CNCS and its grantees regularly survey “member satisfaction,” these surveys are not released to the public.
13. For data on Indiana nonprofits, see the Indiana Nonprofit Database, compiled by Kirsten Grønberg, at <http://www.indiana.edu/~nonprof/searchabledatabase.html> (accessed May 11, 2010). Information on applications for AmeriCorps grants came from the Indiana Commission on Community Service and Volunteerism and the Indiana Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.
14. The CNCS estimated the living costs per member service year for AmeriCorps in fiscal year 2009 at \$8,880 (CNCS 2010). With approximately 3.5 million high school graduates that year, a universal service program would have cost more than \$30 billion, not including administrative expenses, postservice awards, and other items.
15. See <http://uspublicserviceacademy.org/> (accessed January 22, 2010).

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