Investing in Civic and Political Pluralism

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David Meens critiques federally funded service learning programs on the grounds that if these are designed to be a form of citizenship education, then they present far too narrow a version of citizenship — one that is all service and not at all political. Meens argues that the political origins of these programs help explain why the view of citizenship is defined so narrowly. I am not going to address that issue here. Instead, I sort out some of the concepts in the argument and then address Meens' critique of the model of citizenship promoted through service learning programs directed at college-bound and college-attending young adults.

Meens uses the terms "civics" and "politics" somewhat interchangeably and it would be helpful to make a distinction between these two ideas and where they fit within the aims of citizenship education. Within the social science literature "civic" actions usually include things like volunteering, participating in a social group (like bowling leagues), attending religious services, or joining the PTA. As Robert Putnam shows in *Bowling Alone*, these activities contribute to the development of trust and fellowship that are necessary (but not sufficient) for democracies to flourish — what he and others have called social capital.[1] Political activities, on the other hand, include voting, writing to representatives, protesting, community organizing, and attending public meetings. Certainly, these are not perfect distinctions, and when the PTA takes on a school board policy or when a religious organization acts against U.S. foreign policy (or argues against access to contraception) the civic becomes political. That said, I think some distinction here is important for assessing these programs.

One way to think about democratic citizenship is to imagine a single normative ideal. Another possibility is to think of citizenship as a relevant feature of pluralism and to identify the allowable ways of being a citizen. I would like to take the latter approach and add a typology of citizens into the discussion. In a national study of high school civics programs Joel Westheimer and Joe Kahne[2] found that teachers differed in their views about what type of citizens democracies require and consequently taught toward very different ends. The researchers found that curricula clustered around three different conceptions of the good citizen. One is the *personally responsible citizen* who votes, obeys the law, pays their taxes, and possesses character traits like honesty and self-discipline. The second is the *participatory citizen* who volunteers, participates in community events and is civically engaged. Third, and least common, were teachers who taught toward the *justice-oriented citizen* who understands the structural causes of social inequalities and seeks systemic change. The authors give examples of these differences in the responsible citizen who contributes to a food drive, the participatory citizen who organizes the food drive, and the socially just person who wants to address the causes of hunger. This typology, though important, does not capture other types of citizens

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that we see in the U.S. public sphere. There are also what I call *conservative activists* who pursue the preservation of (or return to) "traditional" social values, like defining marriage as being strictly between a man and a woman and reinstituting prayer in schools. In addition, there are *purely partisan citizens* who deeply identify with one of the major parties, stay informed about issues, participate in campaigns, and perhaps run for public office. Finally, there are the *civically and politically disengaged/disenfranchised*, who by choice or circumstance have little to no political or community involvement.

We now have two public domains (civic and political) and at least six allowable, but not all ideal, views of citizenship. What Meens has identified is that policies around federally funded service learning programs are structured to narrowly promote activity in the civic domain for the development of the participatory citizen. There are several ways to evaluate this. One response could be that the participatory citizen is a good-enough citizen — more active than the disengaged and less self-motivated than the personally responsible. We might also think that as the participatory citizens serve their communities they will encounter political issues and may be inspired to participate. Additionally, when these programs bring together young people from across the country, participants are likely to benefit by interacting with peers from different political, religious, ethnic, and social backgrounds, and this will widen their perspectives about current and future political issues.

While these are good reasons to be supportive of service learning, Meens importantly identifies some areas of concern. Specifically, Meens wonders about the costs of crowding out (by design) political participation. Given that most college students are at a rare moment in life where they are forming their political views and have time to engage civically and politically, it may be an abuse of government power to incentivize the development of one type of citizen — particularly one who is not likely to be an agitator. This is a reasonable objection, but if funding were broadened to include political participation a new concern arises: should the federal government use public money perhaps to support students who occupy Wall Street *and* students who protest abortion clinics? Meens draws upon the work of Chantal Mouffe, who, I believe would answer "yes." Mouffe critiques models of deliberative democracy that seek to identify a set of values most can adhere to and then use this as the starting point for decision-making.[3] She argues that this is a flawed model because, as we see in the current example, if everyone can agree that participatory citizenship is the most agreeable of the competing options, then policies start to eliminate discussions of other important ways of being a citizen. Mouffe argues for what she calls "agonistic democracy." That is, democracy should be understood as a lasting struggle between adversaries (which she differentiates from "enemies"). This, she argues, keeps the public sphere open to competing views of citizenship. As she explains:

> Ideally such a confrontation should be staged around the diverse conception of citizenship, which correspond to the different interpretations of the ethico-political principles: liberal-conservative, social-democratic, neo-liberal, radical-democratic, etc. Each of them proposes its own interpretation of the "common good," and tries to implement a different form of hegemony. To foster allegiance to its institutions, a democratic system requires the availability of those contending forms of citizenship identification.[4]

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Under this model of democracy, if the federal government is interested in promoting political engagement then it would need to be agnostic to competing views of citizenship. This might then mean that the government should have money available for civic and political programming, but not actually design the programs. Meens and I would likely agree that this would be an improvement upon current policy, though as the story in the first part of his essay shows, this is not likely to get political support from the purely partisan in Congress.

I conclude by offering a different policy suggestion, which is that if civic and political renewal is the aim, then current programs misdirect their funds. The Learn and Serve America (LSA) program that Meens focuses on is mostly directed at college-attending or college-bound students, and these are the young adults least in need of "renewal." The research on the political and civic participation of early adulthood shows that compared to their non-college-attending peers, college students are twice as likely to vote, are far more civically and politically engaged, and this engagement gap persists into early adulthood.[5] In part, this is because colleges and universities already encourage civic and political participation for the admissions process and then provide more opportunities once students arrive. Further, college students usually have come from families with higher incomes that have spent more money on enrichment activities for their children.[6] Meens notes that these programs often become résumé padding for the already privileged, which means that federal dollars are being used to help well-positioned families better position their children. If the federal government is going to spend money on civic education it would be far better, in my view, to focus attention on the politically disengaged/disenfranchised, who are more likely to come from the lowest end of the socio-economic spectrum and where there is a noticeable engagement gap. In previous generations unions were places where non-college-bound youth were socialized to be politically engaged and where they learned democratic skills like how to run a meeting and how to organize collectively around important issues.[7] Given the dismantling of these organizations, if federal money is going to be spent on "renewal" it should directly target young people who are not likely to have these opportunities.

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1. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*: *The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

2. Joel Westheimer and Joe Kahne, "What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy," *American Educational Research Journal* 4, no. 1 (2004): 237–269.

3. Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism," *Political Science Series, Institute for Advanced Studies*, 72 (2000): 1–17.

4. Ibid., 16.

5. Constance Flanagan and Peter Levine, "Civic Engagement and the Transition to Adulthood," *The Future of Children* 20, no. 1 (2010): 159–179.

6. Greg Duncan and Richard Murnane, eds., *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, and Chicago: Spencer Foundation, 2011).

7. Flanagan and Levine, "Civic Engagement and the Transition to Adulthood,"165.

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