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Introduction: National Service as Public Policy for Democracy

In the weeks following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush encouraged Americans to go shopping and to visit Disneyland. At a time when the president enjoyed near-universal support for his handling of the crisis, this bully pulpit directive fell conspicuously flat. It turned out that Americans wanted their president to ask more of them. Several months later, Bush changed his appeal: he stopped telling Americans to shop and started asking them to serve.

The president's call for Americans to engage in service to their communities and country, echoed by presidents who came before and after him, builds on the nation's long and cherished traditions of local volunteering and citizen service in the military. However, the call for citizens to participate in programs such as the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps is both relatively new and repeatedly contested. The American experience with civilian national service—with federal programs that engage participants in work, at home or abroad, that fills a public need, typically done by young adults paid subsistence wages for a year or two—dates back only to the New Deal and has had a rocky, but instructive, history.[1]

In 1933 President Roosevelt created America's first, largest, and most highly esteemed domestic national service program: the Civilian Conservation Corps. Through the CCC, nearly three million unemployed men worked to rehabilitate, protect, and build the nation's natural resources by planting trees, building dams, forging trails, fighting fires, preventing floods, and more. At the same time, the CCC's enrollees benefited from the program's social

environment, job training, and educational opportunities, and contributed to the support of their families. By giving citizens publicly valued and valuable work, the CCC showed what citizens and government could accomplish together. Yet the CCC was America's shortest-lived national service program. Despite its widespread popularity, strong arguments for its continued relevance, and valiant presidential efforts, Congress ended it in 1942. With so much in its favor, why did the program die?

A generation later, President Johnson created America's longest-running domestic national service program: Volunteers in Service to America, or VISTA. Since 1965 and continuing to this day, more than 170,000 VISTA volunteers have fought in the War on Poverty, helping to improve job opportunities, education, health, housing, and more in low-income communities while gaining an in-depth understanding of these communities' needs and capacities. VISTA recruited service- and advocacy-oriented citizens to show what citizens, communities, and government could accomplish together, even in some of our nation's most impoverished areas. Yet VISTA was America's smallest and, historically, least well known and most politically contentious program; in fact, presidents Nixon and Reagan tried to kill it. Lacking many of the CCC's advantages in policy design and development (see box 1-1), how did VISTA survive? And given its hard-won survival, why did it not grow and flourish?

Another generation later, President Clinton created America's current and most wide-ranging domestic national service program: AmeriCorps. AmeriCorps incorporated two preexisting programs—VISTA and the smaller National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC)—and created a large new program—AmeriCorps*State and National—to vastly expand Americans' national service opportunities. Since 1994, more than 775,000 AmeriCorps members have worked to meet the nation's pressing educational, public safety, health, and environmental needs, while learning from the experience and earning money for their higher education. AmeriCorps recruits service-oriented members and instills a sense of service-oriented citizenship to show what citizens, communities, and government can accomplish together. It differs in design (see box 1-1) and history from its predecessors, including incorporating but not significantly expanding two previous programs. Like VISTA, AmeriCorps was threatened by Republican opponents for much of its first decade and beyond. Yet unlike VISTA or the CCC, AmeriCorps lived to be supported and expanded by future presidents, including a Republican, George W. Bush. So although it started in a much less advantageous political position than did the CCC or VISTA, AmeriCorps has done far better. How

Box 1-1. *Domestic Civilian National Service in the U.S.*

	CCC	VISTA	AmeriCorps[a]
Dates	1933–42	1964–93 (joined AmeriCorps)	1993–present
Top enrollment	~500,000/year	~6,000/year	88,000/year[b]
Target participants	Unemployed, needy young men and veterans	College students and graduates; residents of poor communities	Groups mixed by race, class, etc.
Service work	Environmental conservation	Anti-poverty; direct service, capacity building, and community organizing	Education, health, economic opportunity, the environment, and veterans; direct service and local volunteer support
Living arrangements	Residential camps	Poverty communities, at economic level of residents	Independent living (except NCCC)
Structure	Strongly national	National-local partnership	Strongly federated
Remuneration	Room, board, medical care, $30/month (for family)	Poverty-level living allowance, health insurance, modest end-of-service award	Minimum-wage-level living allowance, health insurance, $5,350/year education award
Main understanding of citizenship	Public work (lesser: constitutional, patriotic, service)	Service and advocacy (lesser: constitutional)	Service (lesser: constitutional, patriotic, public work)
Key debates	Permanence: Will we always need national service?	Volunteers' work: Is national service doing what it should?	Validity: Should there be national service? Size: How big should national service become?

a. AmeriCorps comprises VISTA, the National Civilian Community Corps, and AmeriCorps State and National programs. Information current as of July 2012.

b. Some 75,000 members funded through regular appropriations and 13,000 one-time positions funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (stimulus funds).

did it grow in size and support? Further, given this success, why is national service still less available as an option for Americans today than it was at its start, when Roosevelt established the CCC?

This book is an effort to answer these questions—to understand the politics of national service—and to capture these programs' lessons as "public policy for democracy"—to understand the civics of national service.[2] I attempt to explain why, after nearly eighty years, domestic civilian national service has yet to be deeply institutionalized in the United States, and what this means for future national service policymaking. Sociologists typically understand an institution to be a stable, structured pattern of behavior broadly accepted as part of a culture.[3] Both army enlistment and "attending college" are commonly recognized institutions, and national service could be a similar institution if it became widely recognized and supported—by government and society—as a feasible, long-term policy option for addressing the nation's needs and a practical life option for large numbers of young adults.[4] For political scientists, institutions have an influence "on social actors—on who they are, on what they want, on how and with whom they organize . . . such that they change the way these actors engage in politics."[5] Just as the military and higher education act as institutions in these ways, so could national service. Broadly speaking, advocates want national service to become an institution in both senses, and this is in large part what its critics fear.[6]

I also attempt to explain how national service has acted as public policy for democracy—that can "empower, enlighten, and engage citizens in the process of self-government"—and how this process has changed over time.[7] Although national service can serve multiple goals, fostering an ethic of active, responsible citizenship is generally high on the list, particularly given the widespread concern over the state of civic engagement in the United States.[8] Coupled with concern about the country's other pressing needs, this goal has led many to call for expanding and reforming national service.[9] Advocates, however, often *assume* that national service will foster citizenship, paying insufficient attention to different understandings of what citizenship means and how policy designs advance or undermine different conceptions or characteristics of citizenship.

I seek to explain the politics and civics of national service with several ends in mind. First, this work serves to remedy the regrettable lack of even basic documented policy history for VISTA and AmeriCorps beyond their first years and of any documented history for national service as a whole. Second, it furthers our understanding of twentieth-century American political development by comparing programs founded during three distinct political eras—the New

Deal, the Great Society, and the early Clinton years—and tracing the programs over time. To a remarkable extent given their relatively small size, the CCC, VISTA, and AmeriCorps reflect the policymaking ethos and political controversies of their eras, illuminating principles that hold well beyond the field of national service. At the same time, the "start and stop, start over, and start over again" feature of national service program building is atypical and deserves explanation in its own right. Third, this work furthers our understanding of policies' didactic functions, especially as they relate to citizenship and also in ways that extend beyond national service. Finally, it draws lessons from this history and analysis with the goal of informing future policymaking. What ideas should policymakers keep in mind as they seek to make national service an even more effective means of civic engagement and renewal?

When studying national service it is reasonable to ask, why domestic civilian programs and not the military or the Peace Corps? Although the military and the Peace Corps encourage responsible, engaged citizenship, I focus on domestic civilian national service because of its unique political dynamic. No one questions whether national defense is properly a federal government responsibility; many question whether civilian service is. Further, unlike the Peace Corps, domestic national service directly affects domestic political interests. So while military and international service have political ends, domestic national service raises greater concerns about politicization—about who is served, how, and to what end. That said, given that both the military and the Peace Corps significantly influence debate and decisionmaking on domestic civilian national service, I do address them, treating them as "shadow cases."

Within the universe of domestic national service programs, why choose the CCC, VISTA, and AmeriCorps? First, when discussing national service in the United States, journalists, scholars, and advocates focus on these three programs; they are our largest and most recognized. Second, they all enroll large numbers of young people, a demographic group whose qualities of citizenship and levels of civic engagement are of particularly acute concern. Finally, these programs can be easily compared across time.

The book's chapters analyze the programs' policy designs—their causes and consequences—by examining policy debates, the legislative process, administrative decisionmaking, program evaluations, and the content of the policies themselves. In doing so, this work draws mainly upon archival and other documentary research, supplemented by interviews in the VISTA and AmeriCorps cases. This work might be thought of as a large puzzle. For some programs (especially the CCC), in some time periods (such as VISTA's early years and AmeriCorps's founding) and for some issues (such as VISTA's and

AmeriCorps's civic impacts), definitive research already exists: other scholars contribute these pieces, and I gratefully fit them into this larger work. But many pieces remained to be found through original research, including some hidden in boxes not opened in the thirty years since they had been sealed. Thus, this is a work of integration and discovery; its value comes in part from new knowledge and understanding of the individual programs and even more so from the comparisons that multiple cases traced over the span of nearly eight decades allow and the questions that only such temporal sweep allows us to answer.

So, contrary to other types of research, this work is not designed to test hypotheses, although I hope it suggests fruitful avenues for future scholarship of this kind. Neither is it typical policy analysis, measuring the economic costs and benefits of various programs. Instead, it assesses political and civic costs and benefits, and it is my hope that this kind of analysis becomes as standard to policy analysis as economic assessment is. Finally, it draws upon but is not in itself an evaluation of the impacts of different national service programs on participants, communities, and areas of work. Certainly, identifying best civic practices—and further refining how we measure civic outcomes and determine best practices—is critical in designing future policy. However, so is understanding that these practices will be put into action—sanctioned, implemented, and supported over time—only within a political environment that must be accommodated, even if it is to be transformed. Therefore, this work relies on arguments that are not only empirical but also normative and political.

My analysis and explanations principally draw on and contribute to the literature on policy feedback, how policies influence future politics and policymaking. As University of California (Berkeley) political scientist Paul Pierson explains in his seminal article "When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change," policy feedback can operate on multiple levels, in different directions, and through a variety of mechanisms—or may be absent altogether.[10] Pierson differentiates between feedback effects on mass publics and on governing elites, and identifies two major feedback mechanisms—resource and incentive effects, and information and meaning (or interpretive) effects. To give a simple example, through its education program the CCC taught thousands of young men to read, and with this skill these men were better able and more likely to vote. This created a *resource* feedback effect: the program provided a resource (classes that led to literacy) that increased participants' voting rates, which contributed to electoral outcomes and thus to future policy decisions. The CCC's policy of giving its participants time off to

vote also promoted voting, creating an *incentive* feedback effect leading to the same outcome. That the CCC treated its participants well led them to believe that government was responsive to citizens' needs. This created an *interpretive* feedback effect: responsive government is worth participating in. Feedback effects are not limited to voting; they include all types of political engagement. They are not always positive: they include making people less likely to become involved and spurring opposition. They are not focused solely on a program's beneficiaries; they can affect a broader public and a narrower group of policy elites. The types of policy feedback effects Pierson identifies are all relevant for untangling the politics and civics of national service, and I draw on them directly and through the scholars who prompted and have furthered his line of inquiry. When assessing how policy can affect politics at the level of mass publics—what I label the "civics" of national service, including both the general public and national service participants—I draw most centrally on works by public policy scholars Anne Larason Schneider and Helen Ingram, and Suzanne Mettler. In *Policy Design for Democracy*, Schneider and Ingram identify core elements found in virtually all policies and discuss how their design can support or undermine citizenship; I use this work to both organize and inform my program analyses.[11] I also draw on Mettler's model for how policies can affect civic engagement, through resource and interpretive effects on citizens' civic capacity and dispositions—in short, citizens' ability and willingness to engage in politics and public life.[12] In my work, I often label this the "teaching" or "lessons" of national service. Mettler uses her model to explain the positive long-term civic impact of the GI Bill on World War II veterans, elaborated on in her award-winning book *Soldiers to Citizens: The GI Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation*.[13] Although our works differ in method and scope, they share a complementary focus on the civic effects of national service policy in the context of twentieth-century American political development.

Policy can also affect politics and future policymaking at the elite level by influencing elected officials, administrators, and interest groups, as well as the larger institutions in which they work. In seeking to explain the fate of national service programs, I draw on Pierson's general policy feedback work and on the specific policy feedback concept of path dependence.[14] Path dependence is evident when the costs of reversing an established policy grow over time, making major policy redesign increasingly difficult—even in cases where the established policy is suboptimal, or even dysfunctional. That said, redesigns do happen, and a critical question is, what happens then? This is what the University of Virginia's Eric M. Patashnik investigates in *Reforms at*

Risk: What Happens after Major Policy Changes Are Enacted.[15] Patashnik develops a policy feedback model for understanding the outcome of major reforms based on different levels of investment and changes in group identities and affiliation. Although the politics of new programs and of modest reforms to them—the dynamics I study here—differ from the politics of major reforms, the variables and range of outcomes he identifies are highly instructive.

Policy feedback certainly cannot account for all of the nearly eighty-year history of national service policymaking. Both within and across programs, political influences not generated by the policies themselves (or policy more generally) as well as larger changes in modes of governance and political culture play a role, and sometimes take the lead. I explore and explain these dynamics, especially those that highlight changes in norms of policy and policymaking over time. That said, policy feedback dynamics loom large, and one cannot make sense of national service policy history in their absence.

To gain a better understanding of the choices that policymakers have in crafting national service policy, in chapter 2 I explore their options with regard to the role for government, the purpose of national service, the work supported, educational opportunities offered, participants recruited, and requirements and inducements mandated and provided, paying particular attention to their civic and political implications. I also present five aspects of citizenship—constitutional citizenship; critical citizenship; and citizenship as patriotism, as service, and as work. While neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, these approaches suggest different goals and designs for national service. It is important to note that I do not offer or use a set definition of *citizenship* when assessing programs. Instead, I have tried to uncover how policymakers, administrators, and others understood citizenship in their times and its relationship to their programs, and to assess the programs against these understandings.

Chapter 2 provides the conceptual background for the empirical case study chapters that follow, on the Civilian Conservation Corps (chapters 3–5), VISTA (chapters 6–8), and AmeriCorps (chapters 9–11). In the first chapter on each program, I explain the program's philosophical and programmatic antecedents and discuss how they fit in (or failed to fit in) with contemporary definitions of national service. In the following two chapters, I explain the program's policy design, how it changed over time, and with what civic and political consequences. In each program's second chapter, I focus on the program's purpose and government role, and in the third on the program's remaining policy elements—more broadly, its "tools, rules, and targets."[16] With this understanding of the programs' histories and development, in the

final chapter I explain the paradoxes of national service policymaking and draw lessons for future policymaking.

Regarding the politics of national service, why have programs been so difficult to create and institutionalize, and why have they not built upon one another? Conversely, how do we explain and what can we learn from the hard-won survival of VISTA and AmeriCorps? Answering these questions requires that we look at factors that consistently influenced national service policymaking over time and the larger political dynamics that changed over time. Factors that influenced national service policymaking time and again include national service's centrist appeal and lack of deep, broad-based support; the strong association between specific programs and their founding presidents and parties; and the changing definition of national service itself. These factors typically complicated program creation and growth, and worked against continuity between programs. Larger political factors that influenced national service policymaking include changes in the size and scope of government action, the nature of federalism, the civic experience of government and community organizations, the organization of interest groups, and the meaning and influence of liberal and conservative ideologies. Combined with time-bound events, these factors account for the CCC's demise and the other programs' survival, and AmeriCorps's relative success. Building on these strengths, as well as improving the match between members and their service placements and increasing AmeriCorps's visibility would aid its institutionalization. Expanding the program so that every young adult is able and encouraged to enroll would also accomplish this, but only in the context of forsaking a national service mandate. Paradoxically, the best way to encourage national service and make it an option for all who want it is to abjure the goal of making it a requirement for everyone.

Regarding the civics of national service, why has the connection between national service and citizenship been so variable and frequently so tenuous? And what can we learn from the programs' civic lessons? Changes in civic norms and program priorities largely account for variability, while inattention to the civic, policy, and political lessons of participants' program involvement and service helps account for the programs' weaknesses as civic education. As the CCC and AmeriCorps cases show, national service can make its participants' civic development a priority; they also reveal the limits of making it a priority in add-on fashion. Connecting AmeriCorps's civic education to members' actual service work, emphasizing the many ways people can work to address public problems and thus act as citizens, and more strongly identifying the program with the government that created and funds it can all

help AmeriCorps better fulfill its citizenship mission. At the same time, it is critical to recognize the limits of fostering political participation through the program itself, for instance by allowing members to register voters or engage in policy advocacy, given what supporting this type of work would be likely to cost the program in political endorsement. Any effort to improve AmeriCorps as a civic program should not jeopardize the civic lessons it now teaches, by making its survival and growth less likely. In sum, the book concludes with a discussion of the possibilities for, and limits of, crafting a civilian national service policy that strongly supports participants' civic development and is itself strongly endorsed by politicians and the public.