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# To Save Democracy, America Needs a Mandatory Public Service Program

An ambitious program for young Americans could help heal the country's divides.

By [David L. Carden](#), the first resident U.S. ambassador to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

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OCTOBER 31, 2021, 6:00 AM

Polarization in the United States is well-trodden ground. As the media reminds us every day, the nation has become deeply divided and politically dysfunctional: People in blue states don't talk to those in red states or even live in the same reality; social classes rarely mix; and social, political, and academic tribalism reign supreme. But no one has seriously considered what could be a genuinely transformative solution: a mandatory national service program.

It's become increasingly apparent that something visionary and ambitious will be required for Americans to heal their democracy and transcend their divides. A program of mandatory national service, if designed effectively, would bring together young Americans from across the country and all socioeconomic groups to work on public interest projects and accomplish common goals for the good of the country. The public services a program along these lines could provide are virtually limitless: They could include tutoring and mentoring; participating in after-school enrichment programs; improving environmental conservation; building public housing; organizing youth networks; providing real-time information during natural disasters; assisting small businesses through outreach to young consumers; and helping in the construction, rehabilitation, and maintenance of public parks and facilities.

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precedent for a similarly visionary, transformative, and generous program: the GI Bill passed near the end of World War II that gave millions of Americans returning from the war a free education and a ticket to the middle class. If the U.S. Congress did it then, it can do it now.

**Although some may think this idea is unrealistic, public service programs have been** gaining serious attention in Washington in recent years. In 2016, Congress passed a National Defense

Authorization Act that called for the creation of a temporary federal agency—the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service—to conduct a review of the military selective service process and “consider methods to increase participation in military, national, and public service to address national security and other public needs of the United States.” The commission’s final report, issued in March 2020, observed that “the current moment requires a collective effort to build upon America’s spirit of service to cultivate a widespread culture of service.”

The commission focused its proposals on existing programs of voluntary public service, such as AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps. It recommended expanding these and other existing programs, which historically have not attracted many volunteers. For example, AmeriCorps has approximately 75,000 volunteers and the Peace Corps has 7,300. The commission recommended making Americans more aware of opportunities to serve and increasing the “value, flexibility, and use of service incentives.” Current incentives include Segal AmeriCorps Education Awards, which provide some education benefits for those who participate in certain programs. But these awards are modest, taxable to the beneficiaries, and paid directly to educational institutions, so the commission recommended Congress increase benefits to participants.

The issue also came up in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries. When now-Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg was running for the nomination in 2019, he proposed expanding volunteerism, observing that young Americans shouldn’t have to enter the military to serve their country. He recommended adding new programs, increasing volunteers to 1 million people by 2026, and providing services in predominantly minority and rural communities. In return, participants would be eligible for debt relief under the existing Public Service Loan Forgiveness program. The estimated cost of the program was \$20 billion over 10 years.

Neither the commission nor Buttigieg proposed that programs be mandatory, perhaps believing it was politically unrealistic. Perhaps many more Americans would indeed serve if current proposals were adopted, but the stakes are too high to take this chance. Instead, the country needs a mandatory service program.

The idea of mandatory civilian service is not unprecedented. Countries such as Denmark, Nigeria, and Germany have had such programs at various points over the past few decades. French President Emmanuel Macron has also called for the creation of such a program. Then there is military conscription, which the United States has relied on to protect its national security six times in history. Since every male U.S. citizen between the ages of 18 and 25 must register with the Selective Service System, the system for a military or other draft is still in place.

Despite these precedents, it admittedly would be a great challenge to design and sell a mandatory public service program due to the United States' current political environment. An essential first step is to remind Americans of the precedents for such service and to sell the program as a solution to the country's greatest challenges: partisan divides, alienation, lack of public services, economic inequality, dwindling economic opportunity, and the threat polarization poses to national security. To achieve this, the program would need to have several characteristics.

First, it would have to be mandatory for all Americans between the ages of 18 and 24. A voluntary program likely wouldn't achieve the geographic and socioeconomic intermingling necessary to bridge the country's partisan and other divides. (Privileged Americans, in particular, would likely opt out.) The program could be phased in over a defined period of time, perhaps by beginning with a robust voluntary approach, but it ultimately should be mandatory.

Second, the work opportunities should be designed to help inform and facilitate participants' career goals as much as possible. This would allow participants to develop real-life skills in their areas of interest. The objective would be balancing this with the need to push participants outside of their comfort zones: That might look like, for instance, letting a participant choose their area of focus but not their geographic location or vice versa.

Third, post-program educational benefits, including tuition and living expenses for trade schools and universities, must be substantial. This would not only make education more accessible but also provide

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placed in programs where they earn a GED during their service.)

Fourth, the program should be designed to minimize disruption in participants' lives. Service could begin after high school graduation (or earlier for those who wish), and individuals could be allowed deferrals for good

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causes. Importantly, participants could be allowed to **not to pay them.** work or go to school while fulfilling the program requirements as long as the programs' principle objectives were achieved. Service would be for a fixed period of one or two years, which allows personal lives to resume without great sacrifice.

Of course, opposition to a mandatory program can be expected. Some would argue Americans should have the right to decide what's in their own self-interest without government interference—and thus should not be required to participate. But this line of thinking, of prioritizing the rights of citizenship over its obligations, is one of the main reasons the program is needed in the first place. Washington can't allow past to be prologue if it's to lessen the country's divides.

Opposition by fiscal conservatives in particular can be expected, as they would likely claim that such a program is unaffordable. Although the program's exact costs would need to be assessed, a rough estimate can be made based on Buttigieg's proposed program of 1 million participants, whose price tag was \$20 billion over 10 years, including some loan forgiveness. There are around 30 million Americans ages 18 to 24. Assuming 1 in 7 people would enter the program in any given year, the annual total participation for a one-year program would be around 4 million individuals, four times the number in Buttigieg's proposed program. Thus, a mandatory program would be approximately \$80 billion over the same 10-year period. By comparison, over that 10-year period, the Head Start Program—the federal program that provides child development services for low-income families—will cost approximately \$100 billion at the rate it's currently funded. Of course, educational expenses would add to a mandatory public service program's price tag.

But whatever the costs would prove to be, the country cannot afford not to pay them. And the government doesn't have to do it alone. Although Buttigieg was right to see the nation's divisions as a national security issue when he called for a National Security Council position to oversee his proposed program, the private sector also has a role to play. Indeed, the private sector has contributed greatly to the country's divisions as many businesses have failed to share the economic benefits of their recent growth. Ironically, the private sector has the government to ensure its success by developing projects that would satisfy the program's objectives and provide job training for tomorrow's workforce. This would also have the effect of helping to sell the program to more fiscally conservative legislators.

**Designed along the above lines, a mandatory public service program would go far to** reducing divides between red and blue states and those grounded in political orientation, race, ethnicity, and gender as well as help assimilate new citizens and immigrants. It also would provide

educational benefits to more young Americans, expose them to places with greater economic opportunity and diversity, and position them for future success.

Meanwhile, the program would contribute to the country's future by building and maintaining public housing, infrastructure, and amenities. It would bring much-needed projects to urban and rural America, much as the Works Progress Administration did during the Great Depression, when it built airports, post offices, court houses, dams, parks, and other public facilities across the country. These projects changed the face of the United States and remain some of the country's most cherished and visited sites. Today's participants could provide similar services that support the efforts undertaken by federal, state, and local governments, including those under the Biden administration's proposed infrastructure bill, which has bipartisan support and is on the doorstep of passage.

Given the domestic and international challenges ahead, the American people will need to collaborate to build a safe, prosperous, and sustainable future. The current partisan divide threatens to make such collective action difficult. It's time for the United States to create a mandatory national service program to help Americans build the future they want—together.

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