

# Citizenship Without Politics? A Critique of Pure Service

BY KAYLA MELTZER DROGOSZ

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*Politics not only brings many associations into being, it also creates extensive ones. The common interests of civic life seldom naturally induce great numbers to act together. . . . But in politics . . . it is only large associations which make the general value of this method plain. . . . A political association draws a lot of people at the same time out of their circle; however much differences in age, intelligence, or wealth may naturally keep them apart. . . . Once they have met, they always know how to meet again.*

*So one may think of political associations as great free schools to which all citizens come to be taught the general theory of association.*

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Conservatives and liberals both claim to be heirs to the true Tocqueville. To conservatives, his caution against “too much democracy” and the “tyranny of the majority” puts sensible limits on mob rule. To progressives, his emphasis on freedom and the vibrancy of associations serves as a basis for reinvigorating grassroots democracy. It is, however, undisputed that Tocqueville serves as the central inspiration for the present revival of interest in civil society, even though little turns on whether current scholars are faithful interpreters of his life’s work. Two brilliant thinkers have shown that his conception of civil society is inextricably linked to strong national government and politically engaged citizenship.

In *Diminished Democracy*, Theda Skocpol laments what she considers to be an impoverished debate about what is wrong with American civic life. She describes successful associations as those that “expressed broadly shared identities and values, engaged in raucous conflict with one another, and linked local people to state, regional, and national centers of power. Voluntary federations also sought to influence government and in many cases worked closely with it.”<sup>1</sup> Skocpol shows that while association building is far from dead, the associations that now flourish appear less likely than those of the past to foster civic involvement and political participation.

Sheldon Wolin’s magisterial study of Tocqueville’s life and ideas also seeks to revive the political within democracy. Tocqueville’s elevation of the political and the making of the “public self” were deliberate gestures of his opposition to the “privatizing tendencies” in the communities he studied. Wolin writes, “The abiding concern of Tocqueville’s thinking, the referent point by which he tried to define his life as well as the task before his generation, was the revival of the political, in his phrase: *la chose publique*.”<sup>2</sup> The web of relationships and the networks of associational life—much of what later came to be called social capital—grew from the intersection of the heroic and the mundane in politics. So, ultimately, the strength and vibrancy of responsive national institutions and participatory citizenship arise in part from the everyday activities of community life. But these are also inextricably linked to *la chose publique*, a preoccupation with public obligations and political choices that resist the privatizing tendencies of some forms of community life.

About a century ago, L. Judson Hanifan came to the same conclusion and articulated what may be the

earliest formulation of the phrase *social capital*. Hanifan was a social reformer—a self-described Presbyterian, Rotarian, and Republican—who returned to his home in Appalachia to work in its crumbling rural school system. Hanifan struggled to understand why his community had lost its vitality and neighborliness. He concluded that its serious economic and political problems could be resolved only by strengthening community ties, which had weakened over time. In 1916 Hanifan urged the importance of community involvement in sustaining the economically downtrodden communities. “If he comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital.” The “good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse” that results because of stronger community bonds would be the key to “substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community.”<sup>3</sup> From the perspective of democracy, communities, including the networks and associations they create, depend on the stability, continuity, and economic well-being of real places where real people work. And how can goodwill, fellowship, and sympathy transform the public realm? They can do so only through politics.

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### WWTD: What Would Tocqueville Do?

A powerful tradition of social thought has insisted that stable democracies must be grounded in strong communities—the sort that so captivated Tocqueville—that are themselves firmly rooted in civil society and its many mediating institutions. In recent decades there has been what Bill Schambra of the Bradley Foundation calls a “political eclipse of national community.” The challenges facing democracy have been captured by the president’s call to

build “communities of character” and by such phrases as “the decline of social capital” and “the erosion of trust” in nearly all things public.

This explains the outpouring of books describing the need to focus on establishing cultural standards that encourage virtue or integrity. Their titles reflect sought-after virtues: civility, integrity, trust, and “making men moral.” All seek to uncover what is deeply uncivil about us. There is a pervasive sense that our most important civic institutions are unraveling and that we are not in control of the forces that have the greatest effects on our lives. We also know that many forms of political participation, such as working for a political party, are at a forty-year low.<sup>4</sup> And targeting what people do not know about civics remains a favorite pastime not only of David Letterman but also of professors, pundits, and politicians.

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Liberal and conservative communitarians continue to remind us that individuals are more than autonomous actors with bundles of rights. They are embedded in families, faith communities, associations, ethnic groups, and political parties, and these flourish only as the larger communities to which they belong are prosperous in the widest sense of the word. (It was also necessary that democratic theory expand, thus opening up to include broader perspectives such as social theory as well as the powerful analysis of a handful of sociologists such as Robert Bellah, Seymour Martin Lipset, Amitai Etzioni, Michael Schudson, Robert Wuthnow, and others.)

There is little doubt that sociological and communitarian analysis has gained ground, but too often the

perspectives of political economy have been eclipsed or disaggregated from the public conversation. Whether because of Marxism's fall from grace with the collapse of the Soviet empire or because of what Benjamin Barber has called the "rising hegemony of neoliberal theory," it is certain that far less thought has been given in recent years to how economic inequality defines the very "civility" of civil society.<sup>5</sup> Some of the political dimensions of citizenship have also been denigrated and what is at stake is the vibrancy of both community and democracy.

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Others have voiced important critiques of communities formed on exclusive notions of race or class, especially in the context of highly diverse populations. This has led scholars (such as Iris Marion Young, Stephen Macedo, Nancy Rosenblum, Michael Walzer, William Galston, Seyla Benhabib, Ira Katznelson, and Robert Putnam, among others) to specify that truly desirable communities must be places in which citizens recognize their mutual obligations and inclusive relationships, but also places that preserve the norms of toleration and nonexclusion. Several others, whose ideas have not been taken seriously enough, have argued that well-functioning state institutions are necessary to contain social conflict and turn aside the tendencies of civil society that encourage disengagement from or ambivalence toward politics and economic reform.<sup>6</sup> And Benjamin Barber has called attention to the often overlooked fact that, "given these new realities, democracy clearly depends not only on local social capital but also on local economic capital." It depends, he continues, "not only on the kinds of social trust engendered by civic relations but also on the kinds of economic loyalty spurned by global corporatism, not only on enunciating a market rationale for civics but also on developing a civic rationale for markets."<sup>7</sup>

### **Social Capital and Inequality: Toward Municipal Citizenship**

The ideas of fostering national service and strengthening the mediating institutions of civil society seem contradictory in their respective emphases on the national and the local. But both efforts are part of the quest for what Michael Sandel calls a "new public philosophy," one he hopes will resurrect a vision of civic republicanism. This tradition, Sandel says, "reminds us that politics is not only about the size and distribution of the national product. It is also about bringing economic power to democratic account and equipping men and women with the habits and dispositions that suit them to self-rule."<sup>8</sup> This view emphasizes not only revitalizing but also altering political arrangements and economic policies that directly contradict the goal of community-building.<sup>9</sup>

Stephen Goldsmith, former mayor of Indianapolis, current chair of the Corporation for National Service, and special advisor to President Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, knows this well. In *Putting Faith in Neighborhoods*, Goldsmith explains how Indianapolis invented a national model for creating vibrant cities by encouraging citizenship and engaging community organizations. He argues that social pathologies are best confronted by productive partnerships between citizens and public officials. He also claims that community engagement for its own sake may well miss the point if it focuses, as Robert Nisbet wrote, only on "principal moral ends and psychological gratification" without recognizing the crucial need for these associations to have a direct influence on government institutions.<sup>10</sup>

The implication of Goldsmith's argument is bold. When localized civic engagement encourages only "bonding" social capital—which strengthens social solidarity within one group—then it can fail in its public purpose. If, however, it reinforces the ties *between groups* that may have different motivations but a common purpose, it can create a workable

partnership with public agencies and strengthen what Goldsmith calls “municipal citizenship.”

Like others before him, Goldsmith describes the importance of self-governance and personal responsibility. But he also insists that public agencies must create responsive partnerships in which “each member is stronger as a result of the partnership.” He writes: “It is a challenge to involve citizens in a way that mediates between differing views and results in effective, practical solutions—especially if indigenous participation is to be real and not after-the-fact window dressing.”<sup>11</sup>

Municipal citizens work to develop habits of democracy, strengthen civic virtues, and cultivate personal responsibility. They are oriented to solution-focused thinking and open to broader civic obligations beyond their own personal interests. Goldsmith recognizes that many groups have a stake in the way government does its business, and that these groups may have very different motivations. Nevertheless he remains committed to the idea that citizen and public official are mutually obligated to foster arrangements that leave both parties better off for their engagement with each other.

We cannot strengthen the ties that bind us as a nation unless our civic duty is fostered by “bridging” social capital that helps us create links across groups. There is a “strength in weak ties” that stretch across lines of race, class, and religion because these weak ties allow us to recognize our dependence on one another so we can become more than communities of strangers (or as Mark Granovetter puts it, “Weak ties are more likely to link members of different small groups than are strong ones, which tend to be concentrated within particular groups”<sup>12</sup>). In Robert Putnam’s book *Democracies in Flux*, he examines the condition of social capital in several countries. The trends he finds are toward narrower forms of social participation and mounting discontent over political institutions. Yet he also finds evidence that the welfare

state and “big government” have sustained rather than eroded social capital. Why? Putnam’s most striking observation is that the unequal distribution of social capital remains a major problem. This unequal distribution of social power appears strongly connected to the shrinking membership and political power of traditional large membership organizations, such as unions, that once organized the working class. With the breakdown of these institutions, the welfare state is often the only remaining force fostering even a modicum of social equality.<sup>13</sup> Unless the decline of American *political* institutions is reversed, our problems and conflicts will not be adequately addressed, no matter how many bird-watching groups and church picnics we attend. Self-government is not just a social venture; it is a political venture.

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### **Bringing Politics Back In: Service and Citizenship**

That is why citizenship will not be strengthened if service is entirely divorced from politics. Yes, service is essential to civil society and it is part of what makes us citizens. But do not mistake it for politics. Harry Boyte shows that while service is about helping the disadvantaged, politics is about managing competing interests and finding structural changes that can break the cycles of disadvantage.<sup>14</sup> It is about developing solutions, even with people you do not like and with whom you may not agree. Also, democracy functions well only if everyone is in a sense a politician plodding through the muck of compromise and negotiation.

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No one disagrees about the merits of community service. Service can indeed demonstrate that citizens can be efficacious on matters of public concern. It is a discrete, tangible form of human bonding and “public work.” It is straightforwardly good to build a house for someone who does not have one or to volunteer in a soup kitchen and provide a meal to someone who is hungry.

Politics is always more complicated than such acts of mercy. It is often unpleasant and adversarial. It tries to get at the sources of poverty, hunger, and homelessness by connecting these problems to national policy and seeking systematic solutions.<sup>15</sup> If service is positioned as a morally superior alternative to politics, it could thus weaken rather than strengthen democratic citizenship. Service can so focus on individual acts of compassion and character building that it ignores the demands and satisfactions of politics. “Service,” Kevin Mattson argues, “became just another commodity to be bought and sold.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet legislators expressly prohibited AmeriCorps programs from “engaging in political advocacy.”<sup>17</sup> An early newsletter from the Corporation for National Service that describes why AmeriCorps participants were prohibited from attending the Stand for Children rally in Washington, D.C., explains the decision this way: “National service has to be non-partisan. What’s more, it should be about bringing communities together by getting things done. Strikes, demonstrations and political activities can have the opposite effect. They polarize and divide.”<sup>18</sup> Yet all of these activities are at the heart of democratic politics. For example, government support could be provided to such organizations as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) that provide instruction on how to develop popular leaders and group capacities to work together for a common purpose. Cultivating leadership, teaching kids about the political process, and assisting with voter registration should not be considered a politically partisan activity. In a thoughtful study of the IAF network in Texas, soci-

ologist Mark Warren concludes, “IAF combines authority with participation to create a dynamic form of intervention in democratic politics. . . . Many well-grounded community groups remain weak and isolated in their localities. Most advocacy groups, on the other hand, are top-heavy, lobbying in Washington without an organized base. The IAF has found a way to balance the two sides, placing a relentless concentration on local organizing while leveraging power at higher levels.”<sup>19</sup>

The ban on political activity within AmeriCorps was understandable as a means of ensuring congressional support, but it has had the effect of denigrating politics altogether and of depriving AmeriCorps members of opportunities to learn, as Tobi Walker has put it, “about how politics works, about the kinds of compromises and choices that are necessary in a representative, pluralistic democracy.”<sup>20</sup> Rhetoric about service that is divorced from institutional change and political engagement will not by itself reinvigorate democratic citizenship. Civic engagement increases during and after national crisis, as the experience of the great civic generation demonstrated after World War II. But that generation had already been conditioned to the importance of democratic engagement by the tumultuous years of the Great Depression and the New Deal. The great civic generation learned the importance of service in wartime. But it learned the necessity of politics when the nation was at peace.

President Bush has said that creating a “culture of service, citizenship and responsibility” could turn the United States into a “land of justice, liberty, and tolerance.”<sup>21</sup> It is a worthy thought. Yet justice, liberty, and tolerance are themselves the creation of politics. Service divorced from politics will never live up to its promise. Service harnessed to political and social reform could transform a nation.

#### NOTES

1. Skocpol, T. *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*. Norman: University

of Oklahoma Press, 2003, p. 256. I am grateful to Skocpol for drawing my attention to the excerpted Tocqueville quote that appears at the beginning of this chapter, a more extended version of which appears in *Diminished Democracy*.

2. Wolin, S. S. *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 5.

3. Hanifan, L. J. "The Rural School Community Center." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 67, 130, cited in Putnam, R. D. (ed.), *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 4.

4. Saguaro Seminar. *Report of the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2000.

5. Benjamin Barber, "Foreword." In T. Williamson, D. Imbroscio, and G. Alperovitz, *Making a Place for Community: Local Democracy in a Global Era*. New York: Routledge, 2002, p. ix.

6. See Unger, R. M. *Democracy Realized: The Progressive Alternative*. London: Verso, 1998; Unger, R. M., and West, C. *The Future of American Progressivism: An Initiative for Political and Economic Reform*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1998; Gitlin, T. *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995; Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., and Brady, H. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995; Sirianni, C., and Friedland, L. *Civic Innovation in America: Community Empowerment, Public Policy, and the Movement for Civic Renewal*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001; and Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*. See also the thoughtful criticism of Isaac, J. C. *The Poverty of Progressivism: The Future of American Democracy in a Time of Liberal Decline*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

7. Barber, "Foreword," pp. x–xi.

8. Sandel, M. "Reply to Critics." In Allen, A. L., and Regan, M. C. (eds.), *Debating Democracy's Discontent*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 335. See also Sandel, M. *Democracy's Discontent*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996; "America's Search for a New Public Philosophy," *Atlantic Monthly*, Mar. 1996, pp. 57–74.

9. Williamson, T., Imbroscio, D., and Alperovitz, G. *Making a Place for Community: Local Democracy in a Global Era*. New York: Routledge, 2002; Weir, M., and Ganz, M.

"Reconnecting People and Politics." In S. B. Greenberg and T. Skocpol (eds.), *The New Majority: Toward a Popular Progressive Politics*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997; Edwards, B., Foley, M. W., and Diani, M. *Beyond Tocqueville: Civil Society and the Social Capital Debate*. Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2001.

10. See Nisbet, R. *The Quest for Community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 54, quoted in Goldsmith, S. *Putting Faith in Neighborhoods: Making Cities Work Through Grassroots Citizenship*. Noblesville, Ind.: Hudson Institute, 2002, p. 9.

11. Goldsmith, *Putting Faith in Neighborhoods*, pp. 21–23.

12. Granovetter, M. S. "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology*, 1973, 78(6), 1360–1380; see esp. 1360 and 1376. See also Granovetter, M. S. "The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited," *Sociological Theory*, 1983, 1, 2001–2233; Macedo, S. "The Constitution, Civic Virtue, and Civil Society: Social Capital as Substantive Morality." *Fordham Law Review*, 2001, 69, 1573–1593; Ignatieff, M. *The Needs of Strangers*. New York: Picador, 1984; Etzioni, A. *Next: The Road to the Good Society*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

13. Putnam, R. D. (ed.). *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 393–416; *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000. Prior to *Bowling Alone*, the Putnam articles that prompted much debate about social capital were "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America." *American Prospect*, 1996, 24, 34–48; "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy*, 1994, 6(1), 65–78.

14. Boyte, H., "On Silences and Civic Muscle: Why Social Capital Is a Useful but Insufficient Concept," in E. J. Dionne Jr., K. M. Drogosz, and R. Litan (eds.), *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003.

15. Mosle, S. "The Vanity of Volunteerism." *New York Times Magazine*, July 2, 2000, pp. 22–26.

16. Mattson, K. *Engaging Youth: Combating the Apathy of Young Americans Toward Politics*. New York: Century Foundation Press, 2003. See also Barber, B. R. *The Truth of Power: Intellectual Affairs in the Clinton White House*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001, ch. 6; and Waldman, S. *The Bill: How the Adventures of Clinton's National Service Bill Reveal What Is Corrupt, Comic, Cynical—and Noble—About Washington*. New York: Viking Press, 1995.

17. Waldman, *The Bill*, p. 243.

18. Attributed to the Corporation for National Service general counsel. See Corporation for National Service, *National Service News*, June 17, 1996, p. 1, cited in Walker, T. “The Service/Politics Split: Rethinking Service to Teach Political Engagement.” *PS*, Sept. 2000 [<http://www.apsanet.org/PS/sept00/walker.cfm>].

19. Warren, M. R. *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 35, 253. See also Cortes, E., Jr. “Mobilizing Communities to Improve Schools.” In E. J. Dionne Jr. and M. H. Chen (eds.), *Sacred Places, Civic Purposes: Should Government Help Faith-Based Charity?* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2001, pp. 202–204; Shirley, D. *Valley Interfaith and School*

*Reform: Organizing for Power in South Texas*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.

20. Walker, “Service/Politics Split.”

21. Office of the Press Secretary. Presidential Message, New Year’s Day, 2003, released Dec. 31, 2002, [[www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/12/20021231-2.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/12/20021231-2.html)], retrieved Mar. 2003.

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*Kayla Meltzer Drogosz is a senior research analyst for the religion and civil society project at the Brookings Institution, where her research interests include ethics, political philosophy, civil society, and the public purposes of religion.*

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