



National Service in America: Policy (Dis)Connections Over Time

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Over the past several months America’s largest civilian national service program has faced significant potential cuts in new enrollments.”

The program is AmeriCorps; the date, fall 2003. But these words do more than describe present reality. They describe AmeriCorps in 1995, and in 1999, and in fact, for much of the 1990s.

The program is VISTA; the date, 1971. And 1976, and 1981, and in fact, most of the 1970s and 80s.

The program is the Civilian Conservation Corps; the date, 1936. And 1941. By mid-1942, the program faced the most significant cut in enrollment possible: it was ended.

While the proximate causes of AmeriCorps’ current troubles can be found in a complex array of administrative practices and budget decisions unique to the program itself, the larger question of why the program, after 10 years, is still struggling to be institutionalized can only be answered by looking at the history of national service programs more broadly. While all very different, America’s main domestic civilian national service programs – AmeriCorps, VISTA, and the Civilian Conservation Corps – all have faced similar obstacles. None have been deeply institutionalized, nor have they built upon one another, for a number of reasons:

- First, as a policy area national service is in some sense “surrounded” by hostile ideological stands and interest-based claims, from both the left and the right. It typically most strongly appeals to moderates in both parties. The result is that neither party may find it in its interest to strongly back a program that simultaneously offends some of its most committed supporters and appeals to significant numbers of the opposition.
- Second, national service advocates have few natural interest group allies. In the constellation of groups affected by national service, none support national service out of hand. In many cases support or at least neutrality from interest groups can be negotiated, but it is contingent and difficult to come by.
- Third, the above factors converge to make presidents the key actors in creating national service programs, but this very support compromises the programs’ future. The personal presidential investment that allows national service programs to exist at all makes them a convenient target for presidential opponents.
- Fourth, national service programs are products of their times, and as times change the programs can come to be seen as irrelevant or counter-productive. This makes them hard to sustain, and hard to use as models for future program development.
- Finally, the definition of national service keeps changing. The benchmark for what counts as national service continues to shift, making it (for supporters) less a program than an ever-elusive goal.

One of the many policy areas that has received renewed attention following the events of September 11, 2001 is national service. While the president's call for Americans to engage in service to their communities and country builds on America's long tradition of voluntary action at the local level and citizen service in the military, the call for citizens to participate in programs like Bush's USA Freedom Corps is both relatively new and contested. The American experience with civilian national service – with federal programs that engage participants in work that fills a public need, typically done by young adults working full-time at subsistence wages for a year or two – dates back only to the New Deal. It has had a rocky – but instructive – history.

In this paper I trace the development of three of America's main civilian national service programs – the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) (1933-42), Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) (1965-93, when it was incorporated into AmeriCorps), and AmeriCorps (1993-present).¹ In the process I explain why, in contrast to scholars' recent emphasis on "path dependence," policymaking for civilian national service performed on American soil has not followed a "path" and has never been deeply institutionalized in the U.S. Key points include national service's centrist appeal and its lack of interest group allies, the strong association between specific national service programs and their founding presidents, parties, and time periods, and the changing definition of national service itself.²

It is certainly possible to approach this project solely on the basis of empirics, without recourse to a normative framework, but underlying my analysis is an argument that national service makes a number of unique contributions to citizenship and civic engagement and as a result should be strengthened and expanded. While I limit

the scope of this paper to analyzing what has come before, my goal is to build from this to offer lessons for future policymaking.

NATIONAL SERVICE IN AMERICA

Providing needed services. Mixing the races and classes. Teaching skills and instilling values. Salvaging alienated, impoverished youth. Salvaging selfish, over-privileged youth. That national service might accomplish all of these goals and more is why it has been called "the Veg-A-Matic of domestic policy" (Kaus, 1992 81).

Added to this list are several less well known benefits, but benefits that only national service can provide. Because national service is a federal government program dependent on at least some measure of bipartisan support in Congress, of necessity it creates a non-partisan space for civic engagement.³ Concern that participants (individually, in groups, with support from their service organizations, or under pressure from party-affiliated service decision-makers) will incorporate or substitute party activism for service has led to legislative and bureaucratic bans on certain types of activity. And while many supporters lament that programs or individuals funded through national service can't register citizens to vote or lobby for or against legislation, fewer recognize the benefits of supporting alternative, and complementary, non-partisan bases for civic action. Second, national service structures a particular kind of relationship between citizens and government that few other policies provide. As taxpayers, citizens pay money to the state; as beneficiaries they receive goods and services from it. But typically the links are hard to trace. In contrast, national service is based on a principle of direct reciprocity that extends beyond money. Participants give substantially of their time and talents in exchange for living expenses that enable

1. In addition to focusing this study solely on civilian national service, I also limit it to domestic service. International service, specifically the Peace Corps, has a different political dynamic that stems from it being an instrument of foreign policy and the fact that it is performed outside of states and localities that have direct representation and otherwise participate in U.S. national policymaking. A study comparing the politics and policymaking of military, Peace Corps, and domestic civilian service would add significantly to this field.

2. For ease of reading and in keeping with common usage in newspapers and policy circles, I will use "national service" as a short-hand for "domestic civilian national service," although it is important to note that this study focuses only on the later, more limited category.

3. This is not to say that national service lacks partisan political implications as a policy area, just that it makes an effort to remove partisan considerations from the funded service activities themselves.

them to do so and often for additional benefits, like education grants, that are of both personal and public value. Finally, national service has the ability to connect otherwise disparate service efforts into shared, national work, giving some important focus and content to what it can mean to be a citizen.⁴

Given all that national service can potentially accomplish, one might expect both politicians, as well as the public, to be strongly in its favor. For the former, the ambiguity and malleability of national service would seem to be particularly attractive: the wide range of purposes it can serve can allow politicians with different interests to support it for different reasons and gives them the ability to tailor the focus of national service to fit changing times. For these reasons, it is reasonable to hypothesize that national service would have at least as good a chance as any social policy to be established and supported over time. But, as the history of the CCC, VISTA, and AmeriCorps shows, this hasn't been the case.

The Civilian Conservation Corps
The Civilian Conservation Corps was America's first, and largest, civilian national service program, enrolling over three million participants between 1933 and its termination in 1942. Through the CCC, unemployed young men and veterans, from families on or in need of relief, did "simple work . . . forestry, the prevention of soil erosion, flood control, and similar projects" (Roosevelt, 1933/1938 2: 80) for an average of nine months in exchange for room and board in forest camps, other necessities, and \$30 per month (of which approximately \$25 was sent home to help support their families). Administratively, the Department of Labor was charged with selecting the enrollees, the Interior and Agriculture Departments planned and supervised the work projects, and the War Department oversaw all aspects of the enrollees' lives while in camp – providing food, clothing, shelter, health care, recreational and educational programs, and ensuring order.

In retrospect, the national service elements of the CCC are clear. It was a federal program

that engaged its participants, most of whom were young adults, in full-time, short-term, subsistence wage work that filled a public need. However, because it was created first and foremost to address mass unemployment brought on by the Great Depression, policymakers and the public categorized it principally as a relief measure, not as national service. Further, the national service content and framing it had, however implicit, lessened over time as its original goals of work relief and conservation evolved into youth training, and wasn't recaptured, even with the coming of World War II. Nonetheless, the CCC always retained an ethic of national service.

In his first inaugural address, Franklin Roosevelt declared that the "nation asks for action, and action now. Our greatest primary task is to put people to work" (1933/1938 2: 12-13). Within a month and a day, Congress had authorized and the president, through executive order, had created the CCC as a temporary, emergency work relief program. Three months later nearly 275,000 men were working in the nation's forests.

Although work relief was clearly the driving force behind the CCC, conservation was given pride of place and in combination these two goals supported the CCC's key civic principle, that of reciprocity – a clear understanding that both the nation and the CCC participants were to benefit from the program. Obviously the enrollees benefited from the economic, social, and educational opportunities the CCC provided, while the public and posterity reaped the environmental benefits of their work. However, families were also supported by the wages enrollees sent home, communities near the camps profited from CCC spending; and in FDR's words, the CCC's "moral and spiritual value [accrued] not only to those . . . who [were] taking part, but to the rest of the country as well" (1933/1938 2: 271). As expressed by enrollee Allen Cook, the CCC "was not only a chance to help support my family, but to do something bigger – to help on to success this part of the President's daring new plan to down Old

4. In making these claims I am not arguing that all civic engagement efforts should be non-partisan, national in scope, and mediated by the state, just that there are benefits to having some of them follow this pattern.

Man Depression" (qtd. in Butler, 1935 33). The Great Depression provided a larger context for enrollees to contribute to the country. As a work relief program, the CCC wasn't simply about giving poor young men jobs, and as an environmental conservation program, it wasn't just about planting trees. In both respects it was about changing how people thought about the depression and the future of their country, and what they believed they and their government could do. That was its larger lesson in national service.

But if this focus had profoundly positive lessons, it also had its limits, particularly for those not content with the CCC as a temporary relief agency. As such, the CCC was open to two principal critiques, both of which a work training focus addressed. The first was that the CCC should not only see young men through present difficulties by giving them temporary work, but more importantly should prepare them for permanent employment. The second argument was that there was little in the CCC as originally designed that would allow it to expand participation beyond the poor or justify its existence in the absence of mass unemployment. Critics in this camp were less focused on young men's prospects for permanent employment than the prospect of creating a permanent CCC. Nonetheless, these interests converged to support a shift in the CCC's mission to work training, and while the shift was not dramatic, replacing relief with training attenuated the CCC's critical, if implicit, national service mission.

First, the strongest advocates for training questioned the value of conservation work. They advocated reducing the CCC's work hours to allow enrollees more time for formal classroom and workshop training (see, for example, Rep. Albert Thomas, House Permanency Hearings 1937, 93-95); and with regard to on-the-job training their motto might have been (as it actually was for one camp supervisor), "Don't let the job interfere with the men," (qtd. in Hill, 1935 67). Under their plan, the enrollees might reap additional future benefits, but the benefits to the public would become less direct, if not simply less.

Second, in arguing that the CCC should function as a permanent training (as opposed to

a temporary relief) program, advocates hoped to sever the connection between the CCC and the depression. What was lost in the attempt was the example enrollees and the CCC as an institution set for the nation as a whole. The change can be seen in the language of the president: In recommending that Congress make the CCC permanent, FDR spoke of the "moral and spiritual [improvement] of our citizens who have been enrolled in the Corps and of their families" (1937, 1941 6: 144). Gone was his reference to the moral and spiritual value of the CCC to the nation (see 1933, 1938 2: 271). The sense that the CCC was helping the country "[gain] control over its collective destiny" (Boyte and Kari, 1996 102) required the national service ethic the depression implicitly brought to it. To sustain this sense of purpose in the absence of crisis, the CCC would have needed to adopt an explicit national service framing, one that a job training focus couldn't deliver. As it turned out, neither could it deliver permanence.

In 1937, and again in 1939, the administration pressed Congress to make the CCC a permanent agency. In neither instance was the continued viability of the CCC at stake; the alternative was to continue the CCC temporarily, and this was the option that Congress chose. At issue was the structure and function of the CCC and the standing of the Congress. As the administration acknowledged, the CCC had been created under emergency conditions with little forethought; as a consequence opponents of permanence argued that its goals and policies should be revisited (House Permanency Hearings, 1939 23). In essence, they wanted a program designed in a matter of weeks, that had operated substantially unchanged – although well – for several years, to be rationalized, if not redesigned, after the fact. Not surprisingly, no one ever stepped up to the plate. More importantly, the 1937 CCC vote came close on the heels of Roosevelt's court packing plan and followed years of executive branch aggrandizement. By voting to reauthorize the popular program but not do the president's bidding by making his "pet baby" permanent, the House of Representatives declared congressional independence (Salmond, 1967 151-57). By 1939, a

precedent had been set: while reauthorization was never in question, the permanence provision didn't even make it out of the House Labor committee.

Where did this leave the CCC on the eve of World War II? It had not been made permanent, so it would have to justify its existence in an altered domestic and international context. However, its leaders had stressed its civilian nature since its founding, refusing even in the face of congressional and public support to add military training to the program. Its work training focus had undercut its implicit national service ethic and created a gap that made it difficult to argue that the CCC had always been geared toward addressing emergencies, first the Great Depression and next the coming war. Further, the training focus had done all this without dislodging from the public mind the connection between the CCC and unemployment relief – an unhelpful association at a time when young men's labor was suddenly in high demand (Salmond, 1967 216).

All of these factors converged to make it all but impossible to square the CCC as a national defense program with its identity and development up to that point. Not that its leaders didn't try, stressing the role of the CCC in improving military bases, training men for non-combat military jobs, and making America "more worth protecting and defending" through its conservation work (Gilbertson, 1941 4). Nonetheless, the dissonance was too great. In the language of the times, the CCC was given an "honorable discharge" in 1942, thanked for services effectively rendered but no longer needed (Salmond, 1967 216).

Just as a number of factors converged to end the CCC, multiple factors limited its ability to influence future policymaking. It was intimately tied to Roosevelt when Truman assumed the presidency, and strongly associated with the Democrats when Eisenhower took office. Its supporters never explicitly identified it as national service and actively promoted an alternative framing, obscuring its value as a model for national service during the Kennedy and Johnson years. Even if it had been a

model, its administrative infrastructure had been dismantled a generation earlier, leaving little for a later program to build upon. By the time Clinton took office, the CCC's national service legacy had been reclaimed but was principally honored as a noble experiment of the past, not used as the basis for building national service into the future.

VOLUNTEERS IN SERVICE TO AMERICA

Volunteers in Service to America – or VISTA – was established under President Johnson as part of the "War on Poverty" in 1964 and continues to this day as part of AmeriCorps.⁵ Its roots, however, extend back further – although, importantly, they do not extend back to the CCC.

In the two decades following the CCC's demise, several members of Congress introduced bills to establish new youth conservation and national service programs, but none received strong presidential support until John Kennedy took office. While Kennedy's national service legacy is rightly tied to the Peace Corps, he also laid the groundwork for future domestic national service and conservation initiatives. In tracing the CCC's influence on these proposals, what is most striking is that what the CCC explicitly joined – the idea that participants should both receive benefits from the public through the program and create benefits for the public through their work – the Kennedy proposals (and later Johnson programs) divorced. Kennedy initiated two programs, a Youth Employment program, which included a Youth Conservation Corps (what would be passed under Johnson as the Job Corps), and a National Service Corps (what would become VISTA). In his Special Message on the Nation's Youth, Kennedy warned Congress that

The Youth Employment bill should not be confused with . . . the National Service Corps. The Youth Employment program is designed for those young people who are in

5. While VISTA has largely remained the same since its incorporation into AmeriCorps, the differences are significant enough that I limit my discussion in this section to VISTA's pre-1993 history, and for simplicity's sake write in the past tense.

need of help – the unemployed, the unskilled, the unwanted. . . . The National Service Corps, on the other hand, is designed for those citizens of every age, young and old, who wish to be of help – whose present skills, jobs or aptitudes enable them to serve their community in meeting its most critical needs . . . [I]t is clear that their emphasis is wholly distinct (1963 4).

While the advocates of work training never wholly succeeded in eradicating the CCC's national service ethic during its lifetime, they had effectively erased it from the minds of the next generation of policymakers. It would be another generation before it was recaptured. In the meantime, domestic national service instead would be framed as a counterpart to the Peace Corps. In fact, the NSC proposal grew directly out of the success of the Peace Corps and the growing recognition that poverty and need were not confined to developing countries.

Initially, Kennedy's National Service Corps fared far worse than its international predecessor: In the summer of 1963 it was tabled in the House of Representatives. However, in the months following Kennedy's death the proposal was incorporated into and passed as part of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act. Aside from changing the name to Volunteers in Service to America, the program largely kept the same features as the earlier Kennedy plan.

Through VISTA an average of 4000 people a year, a majority of them young adults, lived and worked in impoverished communities, providing services and assistance for one to two years to "help people help themselves." In exchange VISTA volunteers received a minimal stipend to cover living expenses, health insurance, and a modest end of service award. Administratively, VISTA volunteers were sponsored and principally supervised by local organizations, while selection and training responsibilities shifted between and

were sometimes shared by VISTA and the local sponsor.

Unlike the CCC, VISTA was recognized as national service from its founding. Its members were to work with the urban and rural poor, Native American Indians, migrant workers and their families, the mentally ill and retarded, and underprivileged youth enrolled in the Job Corps to directly combat deprivation and to motivate others to do the same (Economic Opportunity Act 1964). However, with the changing of its name from the National Service Corps, the language of national service disappeared from the program's vocabulary.⁶ More importantly, certain elements of the VISTA program design and challenges to its practices (and existence) over time led national service advocates to promote alternative proposals within several years. Nonetheless, like the CCC, VISTA always retained an ethic of national service.

At a White House ceremony in December, 1964, Lyndon Johnson told the first group of 20 VISTA volunteers that

Your pay will be low; the conditions of your labor will often be difficult. But you will have the satisfaction of leading a great national effort and you will have the ultimate reward which comes to those who serve their fellow man (1964/1965 801).

VISTA still embodied something of the idea of reciprocity – while low, volunteers did receive pay and benefits – but in general volunteers' benefits were to be more psychological than monetary, and the balance of benefits was to accrue not to the volunteers but to those served and to the nation. Volunteers would contribute, first, by providing direct service to individuals and organizing in their communities. In Lyndon Johnson's words, their job was "to guide the young, to comfort the sick, to encourage the downtrodden, to teach the skills which may lead to a more satisfying and rewarding life," (1964/1965 801). Since a key pillar of the anti-poverty program was the principle of self-help,

6. The name was changed to distance the latter proposal from the one that had failed earlier, not to distance it from the idea of national service.

or in statutory language the “maximum feasible participation” of the poor, encouraging participation in the political process was particularly important. As the Secretary of Agriculture explained,

By living and working in areas where . . . poverty is severe, [VISTA volunteers] will be able to encourage local people to use local resources to begin the long and difficult job of pulling themselves up to higher levels of economic opportunity. The [volunteers] will be doing that which we should all do – helping others to help themselves (Orville Freeman qtd. in President’s Study Group, “Facts” 1963 5).

This leads us to two of VISTA’s other goals, namely to dramatize human needs and motivate other citizens to serve. No one believed that several thousand full-time volunteers could effectively address the problems of the 33 million Americans in great need, yet those developing the program never envisioned it growing larger than 5,000. In their words, “a huge national program is neither practical nor consistent with American tradition” (President’s Study Group, “Report to the President” 1963 2). What they believed was both practical and consistent were local voluntary efforts, which a federal program would spur by focusing national attention on the country’s needs, by putting the “weight of the Presidency and the approval of Congress” behind volunteer efforts, and by providing – in the form of VISTA volunteers – “a guide, a light, a person whose example [citizens] can discover, respect, and emulate” (President’s Study Group, “Report to the President” 1963 1, 2). For this reason, VISTA provided volunteers only at the invitation of local institutions and with the expectation that local volunteers or staff would take over the VISTA volunteers’ responsibilities in a timely manner.⁷

While VISTA was passed, its goals did not go unchallenged. Opponents charged that the program

was both unnecessary and insufficient; would duplicate existing programs and displace local efforts; would usurp the authority of local and state governments; would cost too much and accomplish too little (see Congressional Digest, January 1964, “Con” articles). Of these, the concern that volunteers “will provoke; they will agitate”; and they “will feel perfectly free to disregard local social structures,” (Lausche, 1964 23; Senate Committee Minority Report, 1964 15) most closely foreshadowed the controversy to come.

As it turned out, the simple phrase “help people help themselves” meant different things to the variety of people involved with and impacted by VISTA. For example, less than a year after LBJ was exhorting volunteers to “encourage the downtrodden,” Senator Robert F. Kennedy was telling them that their job was “to make the people dissatisfied with landlords and politicians – dissatisfied even with this United States Senator” (qtd. in Robinson 1965). In a fair number of instances they succeeded. A 1970 review of VISTA project evaluations showed that 23% displayed evidence of conflict with local decision-makers and/or controversy within the community (Schaffer 1970). And while this ran afoul of the then-current Nixon administration’s interests, it equally troubled the earlier Johnson administration. As Daniel Patrick Moynihan explained, LBJ “had no sympathy whatever for financing a conflict of the Democratic poor against the Democratic mayors of the nation . . . he wanted no disruption” (1970 143). And not only did he and his successor get flak from the poor and from local elites, they got it from a number of VISTA volunteers themselves. In 1966, a small group protested the Vietnam War under the banner “VISTAs for Peace” (“VISTAs for Peace” File). In 1970, a much larger group created the National VISTA Alliance, its organizers arguing that “now is the time for VISTA Volunteers to take in hand the self-determination we daily preach to poor communities and hurl it at the VISTA administration, the OEO and the Federal Government” (qtd. in Pass, 1975 135). The NVA quickly grew to represent 2000 current and 10,000

7. VISTA’s final goal was to encourage its volunteers and others to enter the helping professions.

former volunteers (Lucas 1971). In 1974, they sued four VISTA officials in U.S. District Court for imposing "arbitrary and selective cutbacks" in support services for volunteers, charging that the cutbacks were part of a conspiracy to change VISTA into a "service-oriented, Red Cross type program" that would only ameliorate the affects of poverty, not fight its causes ("U.S. Agency Sued," 1974).

VISTA and its respective administrations responded in a variety of ways. They strengthened and clarified regulations regarding volunteers' political activity, on and off the job. They recruited greater numbers of older, professional, and community resident volunteers. They increased VISTA oversight of projects and volunteers through regionalization, and local government oversight by assigning more volunteers to reconstituted Community Action Programs (and later out of these programs and into traditional social service and government agencies). Finally, they put a much greater emphasis on project planning and evaluation (Strickler, 1994 ch. 6-9).

However, they also responded with more drastic measures. As early as 1965, Johnson's own Bureau of the Budget proposed cutting VISTA's funding request from \$20 million to \$15 million (Pass, 1975 202). In 1970, Nixon's Office of Management and Budget proposed a complete elimination of the program by 1972; only a concerted lobbying effort spearheaded by the National VISTA Alliance and key members of Congress prevented the close-out (Pass, 1975 217). Thwarted at one pass, the administration tried another. As one official explained, "I do not think the Agency can politically eliminate this program. The program [will] have to be terminated in the context of a much broader governmental reorganization" (John Wilson, qtd. in Pass, 1975 234). And reorganize they did. In 1971, Nixon succeeded in creating ACTION, an umbrella agency overseeing a variety of federal volunteer programs, including VISTA and the Peace Corps. And while ACTION officials were prevented from reorganizing VISTA out of existence, they were able to channel volunteers into direct service projects and funnel some of VISTA's funds to other, less controversial programs (Strickler, 1994 228).

Under the Carter administration VISTA supporters found a brief reprieve. When Carter took office he inherited a proposed budget that would, again, have eliminated VISTA by 1979; he reinstated its funds (Strickler, 1994 ch. 8). Carter also appointed ACTION and VISTA administrators who embraced VISTA's reputation for providing "the shock troops of the war on poverty," (Brown, 1980 82) and who renewed the program's emphasis on community organizing. This did nothing to put the program in Reagan's good graces when he took office in 1981. Once again, VISTA was slated for elimination, with its director being much more forthright than his Nixon counterparts ever were when he stated, "I'm working as hard as I can to be the last Vista director" (qtd. in Gamarekain 1985). He wasn't. In fact, as a New York Times article explained in 1985, "over five years, Vista [had] five directors." In addition, "its recruitment program ha[d] been curtailed, its budget ha[d] been slashed from \$34 million to \$17 million, its volunteers ha[d] been cut from 4,500 to 2,000, and each year it ha[d] been designated for termination" (Gamarekain 1985). And as the Nixon administration had done under similar circumstances, the Reagan administration shifted the focus of volunteer efforts to direct service provision. As explained in the 1982 ACTION Annual Report, "VISTA concentrated more than half of its 500 programs on youth-oriented projects, addressing the problems of literacy, job skills, runaways, drugs and child abuse" (1982 2-3). In this form VISTA continued through the remainder of the Reagan and first Bush presidencies.

While VISTA never ended, like the CCC a variety of factors limited its ability to influence future policymaking. At any point, any effort to significantly expand the program would have had to surmount the program founders' own arguments. From the 1970s on, expansion was further constrained by VISTA's reputation for generating conflict and its association with the Great Society. As the program aged, its use as a model was limited by a new reputation – for being old, tired, and all the more set in its ways for having survived multiple near-death experiences. While it had been billed as a "domestic Peace Corps," VISTA never

captured the public imagination as had its older, international sibling, so instead of being venerated, it was ignored.

AMERICORPS

Unquestionably, VISTA survived because of the commitment of its supporters. However, others were committed not to a particular program of national service, but to the idea of national service – people like military sociologist Charles Moskos, conservative intellectual William Buckley, Jr., and Donald Eberly, who has been spearheading the national service movement since before VISTA's founding. Over the past decades, these proponents and others have reclaimed the CCC as national service and acknowledged VISTA's contribution, but their vision is different from both the CCC and VISTA. Their goal is to create a comprehensive program that would incorporate both military and civilian service, and would extend G.I. Bill higher education benefits to civilian servers. They envision a civilian service component at least as large as the CCC, but engaged in a wider range of tasks. They would broaden enrollment beyond the constituencies previously served, namely the disadvantaged and the well-to-do, and create an all-American national service institution (Buckley 1990; Moskos 1988).

As national service reached its nadir in practice with Reagan's cuts in VISTA, the Peace Corps and other programs, it reached critical mass as an idea – spawning numerous books, conferences, and legislative proposals. In Senator Sam Nunn's words, national service was "an idea whose time had come" (qtd. in Evers, 1990 xvii). First it came in small steps. In 1990, President Bush created a White House Office of National Service and signed the National and Community Service Act of 1990. This act established the Commission on National and Community Service, which provided funds for a variety of service programs including demonstration projects that awarded vouchers for education, training, or a

down payment on a home (Congressional Digest, 1993 228). However, the Act – and the president – drew the line at providing stipends to cover minimal living expenses⁸ and funding for all the Commission's programs was kept at modest levels, reaching \$75 million in 1993 (Hershey 1989; Congressional Digest, 1993 228).

National service had an even bigger impact on the party of out of power. Moderate Democrats in particular were attracted to its principle of reciprocity, believing that their party had lost public support by focusing too much on rights and too little on responsibilities. In fact, in 1988, Will Marshall made national service a cornerstone of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council's platform, and in 1992, the DLC's presidential candidate, Bill Clinton, made it a cornerstone of his campaign.

But Clinton was not limited to running on an idea; at the same time that national service advocates were pushing their proposals in Washington, others were developing model programs in local communities. For Clinton, Boston's City Year embodied his ideal. Founded by two former Harvard Law School students in 1988, City Year recruits a multi-ethnic, cross-class corps of young adults who engage in group service projects throughout the city for a year, in exchange for a living stipend and end-of-service education award. By 1992, City Year members had become as well known for their distinctive uniforms and early morning all-corps calisthenics in front of Boston's Federal Reserve building as for their solid record of service (Goldsmith 1993).

It was this combination of theory and practice, both fueled and tempered by political realities, that resulted in the creation of AmeriCorps in 1993, with its first members enrolling the next year.⁹ The National and Community Trust Act consolidated ACTION and the Commission on National and Community Service into a new Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), which oversees AmeriCorps and other service programs. AmeriCorps itself has three component parts: AmeriCorps*VISTA, AmeriCorps*

8. Outside of conservation work-training programs targeted to disadvantaged youth.

9. For a complete account of the often torturous road to passage, see Steven Waldman's *The Bill* (1995).

National Civilian Community Corps, and AmeriCorps*State and National. VISTA supporters once again saved their program, this time not from those who sought to curtail national service but from those who sought to expand it. For Clinton's national service staff, VISTA was "a piece of the puzzle that had to be fit in"; it was not part of the original plan (Galston 2003). Nonetheless, as part of AmeriCorps, VISTA has retained its focus on serving low-income communities while growing to nearly 6000 members, larger than it had ever been. AmeriCorps* NCCC shares much in common with the old CCC, combining civilian service with military elements. Its 1000-plus uniformed members live together on campuses located on military bases, work together on short-term service projects in nearby communities and travel to provide disaster assistance when needed. The bulk of AmeriCorps members – nearly 52,000 in 2002 – work through the State and National component, which supports programs, including City Year and many others, that are chosen by the Corporation or by individual states. In contrast to previous national service programs, governor-appointed state commissions play a key role in determining their states' AmeriCorps projects. AmeriCorps members can serve for up to two years, receive a stipend for living expenses, health insurance, child care if needed, and a \$4,725 voucher for higher education for each full-time year served (CNCS, Performance and Accountability Report and "AmeriCorps: Who We Are," 2003).

Like VISTA, AmeriCorps is frequently described as a "domestic Peace Corps," and even more strongly than VISTA, AmeriCorps has been recognized as national service. Members serve in the areas of education, public safety, the environment, and other human needs both directly and by organizing community volunteers. Further, the language of national service has remained prominent – from the presidents' speeches to the AmeriCorps seal, participants and the public are reminded of its larger mission.

In his first major policy address as president, Bill Clinton explained that

Americans of every generation face

profound challenges in meeting the needs that have been neglected for too long in this country, from city streets plagued by crime and drugs . . . to hospital wards where patients need more care. All across America we have problems that demand our common attention.

For those who answer the call and meet these challenges, I propose that our country honor your service with new opportunities for education. National service will be America at its best, building community, offering opportunity, and rewarding responsibility (1993/1994 225).

In Clinton's presentation of AmeriCorps, we see the strongest expression of the principle of reciprocity since the early years of the CCC, and the principle is further reflected in the program's goals. AmeriCorps' first goal, and motto, is "Getting Things Done." Members are expected to do work that makes a recognizable contribution and produces results. AmeriCorps' other goals are strengthening communities, by uniting individuals from a variety of backgrounds in the common work of service; encouraging responsibility, by engaging members in – and rewarding them for doing – needed work; and expanding opportunity, by making higher education more affordable (CNCS, Getting Started, 2002 3). The central premise is that both the nation and the participants are to benefit.

While AmeriCorps was passed, its goals did not go unchallenged. In fact, over the same years that support for national service was growing in some quarters, the conservative critique – marshaled by people like the Cato Institute's Doug Bandow, the Discovery Institute's Bruce Chapman, and the Hoover Institute's Martin Anderson – was becoming more principled. From these opponents' perspective, national service corrupts the very meaning of service precisely because it rests on the principle of reciprocity. In the words of Bruce Chapman, "Enrollment in a

government-funded self-improvement project or acceptance of a government job [cannot] be called true service. Indeed, when coercion or inducements are provided, as in the various national service schemes, the spirit of service is to that degree corrupted" (1990 134). So while opponents made the same arguments that had been levied against the National Service Corps proposal and VISTA, namely that the program was unnecessary, unaffordable, and unlikely to accomplish anything of value (see Congressional Digest, October 1993, "Con" articles), they went further. In addition to its anticipated programmatic failings, they held that national service was, in and of itself, immoral. As Representative Robert Michel explained to his colleagues, "Government-run volunteerism is a contradiction in terms" (1993 237). This deep-seated belief set the stage for a battle over first principles that been waged since AmeriCorps' inception.

AmeriCorps was passed under a unified Democratic government, but it would depend on continuing appropriations from the later Republican-controlled Congresses. The problems began immediately: just six months after the first AmeriCorps members were sworn in, the House of Representatives voted to rescind three-fourths of the program's existing appropriation, which would have prevented most of the then-20,000 members from completing their year of service (Manegold 1995). Later that year both the House and Senate voted to eliminate funding for the upcoming fiscal year, which the House did again in 1996 and 1999 (Gray 1995; Gray 1996; Weiner 1999). In 1997, it relented and voted merely to halve the requested funds ("House Passes Bills" 1997). In each instance AmeriCorps survived by the threat or reality of a presidential veto and, after 1995, a measure of support in the Senate. The end result was a smaller program than the administration had planned, but a program nonetheless.

It is important to note that, unlike with VISTA, opponents rarely object to what AmeriCorps members do. For example, in 1995 avowed critic Senator Charles Grassley acknowledged that he "hadn't seen a single non-worthy project" (Manegold 1995). What he and others object to is

government coordinating what participants do and paying them to do it.

While this is the prevailing Congressional Republican sentiment, the program also has lost key liberal votes when it clashed with other funding priorities, as when both of Wisconsin's Democratic senators voted against the program because its funding threatened home loan assistance (Sands 1995). Conversely, a number of Congressional Republicans have supported the program from the start and others, most notably Senator John McCain, became convinced of its merits after seeing it in practice (see Congressional Digest, October 1993, "Pro" Articles; McCain 2001). AmeriCorps' presence on the ground also helped it gain at least rhetorical support from 49 governors, the majority of them Republican, by 2001 (Broder 2001). Importantly, one of these governors was George W. Bush.

But even more important than his experience with AmeriCorps in Texas, from the first days of his administration Bush saw AmeriCorps fitting with his "compassionate conservative" philosophy and emphasis on supporting faith-based and community initiatives (Lenkowsky 2003; Milbank 2001). As Leslie Lenkowsky, Bush's first head of the Corporation, explained, "in the armies of compassion, AmeriCorps can provide a lot of foot soldiers" (Lenkowsky 2003). While Bush's plans were less ambitious than Clinton's had been, or McCain and Democratic Senator Evan Bayh's were at the time (and still are: they continue to press for expanding the program five-fold over ten years, to 250,000 participants per year (Broder 2001)), he was open to the idea of expanding the program. Only in the months after September 11th, however, did his openness transform into a concrete plan. In his 2002 State of the Union address Bush proposed expanding AmeriCorps enrollment by fifty percent, to 75,000 participants per year, as part of his USA Freedom Corps initiative (Milbank 2002).

To date, Congress has not passed Bush's Citizen Service Act. With House Majority Leader Dick Armey, a fellow Texas Republican and typically a strong Bush ally, continuing to call the program "obnoxious," (qtd. in Eilperin 2002) it faces an uphill battle. Nonetheless, applications

to AmeriCorps increased 50% (Magee and Nider 2003) and enrollment increased 18%, to over 59,000, in 2001-2002 (CNCS, "Background" 2002).

This enrollment increase is significant in two respects. First, it represents the first time in American history that a domestic civilian national service program grew under a president not responsible for its creation. This holds promise for the future growth and institutionalization of AmeriCorps. Second, since the enrollment increase was not accompanied by a sufficient increase in the trust fund for members' educational awards, it simultaneously complicated AmeriCorps' growth and institutionalization. On the negative side, due to the need to fully fund the trust, at this writing AmeriCorps may only be able to support 30,000 new members for the upcoming year (CNCS, "AmeriCorps Announces" 2003). While the decrease would likely be limited to one year, several states and many programs could lose their entire AmeriCorps contingent, making it difficult to scale back up in the near future (Talcott 2003). However, AmeriCorps' supporters are lobbying Congress, and pressuring the president to use his influence, to secure additional funds to allow an enrollment of 50,000. And on the positive side, the funding troubles have brought these supporters out of the woodwork. In Senator Barbara Mikulski's words, the crisis "is really shining a spotlight on the program's enormous grass-roots support, as well as its enormous corporate support," (qtd. in Dionne 2003) which could redound to the program's benefit well beyond the current funding battle.

It remains to be seen whether AmeriCorps will become a well-known, well-respected, and well-subscribed option for young adults (and others) to contribute to their communities and country. Its early history, and the history of its predecessors, suggests that the challenges are great.

WHY SO FEW POLICY CONNECTIONS, WHY SO LITTLE INSTITUTIONALIZATION

In the U.S., domestic civilian national service has been difficult to create and even harder to maintain and expand. The two continuing programs have been continuously embattled and the other, while highly esteemed, was ended. It is fair to say that VISTA, if not yet AmeriCorps, has been institutionalized within government, but civilian national service has yet to be institutionalized within society, recognized and supported as a viable policy option for addressing the nation's needs and a viable life-option for significant numbers of young adults. Further, none of these programs picked up where the previous left off. Kennedy and Johnson distanced VISTA from the CCC explicitly, while Clinton distanced AmeriCorps from VISTA implicitly, first by failing to reference the program in his speeches and second by "fitting it in" as opposed to building on the program. He did pay homage to the great work of the CCC, but programmatically its impact was limited to the small AmeriCorps*NCCC program. What accounts for this turn of events? I'll suggest five factors.

First, as a policy area national service is in some sense "surrounded" by hostile ideological stands and interest-based claims, from both the left and the right. Ideologically, support for national service most often (but not always) comes from centrists, those who are less leery of activist government than those on the right and equally less afraid to speak the language of civic duty and obligation than those on the left (or the libertarian right). This centrist appeal does help national service advocates win public support, but it hurts their attempt to build partisan political support: typically neither party finds it in its interest to strongly back a program that simultaneously offends some of its most committed supporters and appeals to significant numbers of the opposition, since they will share credit for legislative success. Centrist programs are often caught in this bind.

With national service, this has played out on a number of levels. For example, neither Walter Mondale nor Michael Dukakis were willing to make national service a campaign issue when they ran

for president, for fear of offending liberal interest groups (Waldman, 1995 5). At another level, Dick Arney refused to bring President Bush's Citizen Service Act to a vote in the fall of 2002 because, in the words of a senior associate, "it would [have been] a difficult vote for many of our members and it would [have] alienate[d] our base, less than 100 days before the [mid-term] election" (qtd. in Broder 2002).

Second, national service advocates have few natural interest group allies. In the constellation of groups affected by national service – business, labor, the military and veterans, non-profit organizations, colleges and universities, and existing youth serving and youth service groups – none support national service out of hand. As the head of the National Social Welfare Assembly testified regarding the Kennedy plan, "a National Service Corps, under certain conditions, can make significant contributions" (qtd. in Crook and Thomas, 1969 36; emphasis added). In many cases support or at least neutrality from these groups can be negotiated, but it has to be negotiated. It is highly contingent. This is largely the story of AmeriCorps' journey from idea to law, expertly described by Steven Waldman: administration officials negotiating with unions to protect service-sector jobs, with veterans groups over the size of the education award, with existing service corps regarding race- and class-mixing requirements, and on and on (1995).

Not only does this dynamic complicate national service policymaking, it means that support for national service first has to be built and is likely to be generated from within government. Advocates like Charles Moskos and Donald Eberly may come from the outside, but their energy has focused on influencing politicians and bureaucrats as opposed to building a coalition of supportive interest groups or creating a mass-based national service pressure group. In fact, in an effort that would become more commonplace a generation later, Kennedy's cabinet-level study group on national service all but created the Citizens'

Committee for a National Service Corps, a privately funded group formed to generate public and congressional support for the program. It was co-chaired by a much more than average citizen, Malcolm Forbes (Anderson, 1963 3).

This is not to say that average citizens are unreceptive to the idea – it was a big applause-line when Bill Clinton campaigned in 1992 – but he was presenting it to them. It is likely that if he hadn't his experience would have been similar to Representative Curt Weldon's, who "traveled to 48 States . . . and never heard one [person] ask for this program" (1993 251).

Third, the constraints of centrism and the need for strong within-government support combine to make presidents the key actors in creating national service programs, but this very support compromises the programs' future. Neither the CCC nor AmeriCorps would have been created without their respective presidents; AmeriCorps wouldn't have survived without it.¹⁰ However, the personal presidential investment that allows national service programs to exist at all makes them a convenient target for presidential opponents who want to make a point. In 1937, House Democrats principally denied the CCC permanence to chastise FDR. In 1995, House Republicans primarily voted to rescind AmeriCorps funding to humiliate the president ("Reneging on AmeriCorps" 1995). "[B]ecause Clinton loved the program so much," Speaker Newt Gingrich knew that "AmeriCorps could become a useful hostage" (Waldman, 1995 250).

Strong presidential identification also serves to tie the programs to the presidents' party, so that national service programs suffer from the drawbacks of both political centrism and strong partisanship without gaining many of the benefits. Opponents are concerned that national service will act as a recruiting mechanism for the party that creates it – to date, the Democrats. Some politicians of both parties, however, are concerned that it may be used to support the party in power, which, about half the time, will not be their own.

10. VISTA, obviously, was created under unique presidential circumstances: Proposed by Kennedy, but passed under Johnson, it is not strongly identified with either. Given its early conflicts with Democratic mayors and southerners, it is also not intimately identified with the Democratic party. More than president or party, VISTA is identified as a program of the Great Society.

The problem lies not only, or even principally, in the possibility that participants will engage in partisan political activities through their service work. While an issue with VISTA, this problem is generally amenable to bureaucratic solution, through project selection, job descriptions, training, and supervision. But what is the solution for gratitude? As Robert Bauman of the Young Americans for Freedom testified in 1963, "it is impossible to ignore the political implications of 5,000 roving welfare corpsmen who owe their jobs to the President" (1963 31), to say nothing of the tens of thousands served, who may thank the party for providing assistance by giving their support. Speaking of AmeriCorps, Dick Armev argued that "from first line to last, this bill seems calculated to increase the American people's dependence upon, and gratitude to, big Government" (1993 243). With the CCC, the goal of engendering support and gratitude was explicit: One month after its creation, CCC director Robert Fechner told Americans that the president hoped to "instill in [citizens] a greater faith in our government and in its sincere efforts to end the depression" (Radio Address on CBS, May 6, 1933). Clearly this phenomenon is not limited to national service. However, because national service mainly recruits the young and intentionally aims to socialize them – certainly into a commitment to service but also quite possibly into an understanding of the proper role of government – the partisan concerns are particularly strong.

Fourth, national service programs are products of their times. The CCC was created to respond to massive youth unemployment caused by the Great Depression and did so directly, by giving hundreds of thousands of young men meaningful public work. By definition it succeeded at its principal task, providing jobs, and the focus of its efforts led it to succeed at its other main purpose, accomplishing significant conservation work. When the war made jobs plentiful and the national budget tight, Congress eliminated the program – in essence declaring its mission accomplished. Today the thought of eliminating a popular, successful program is hard to conceive under any circumstance; we rarely succeed in eliminating any program, no matter how unpopular

or failed. Neither do we design social programs on the scale and in the form of the CCC today: typically they are considered too expensive and thought to concentrate too much authority at the national level.

At VISTA's creation, policymakers were committed not only to an alternative model of national service, but to a radically different approach to addressing poverty. Instead of directly giving poor people work, they would give them a volunteer who would help them find, or even better, organize a job training program that would prepare and then help them find work. In place of centralized administration, VISTA would operate, in principle and to a large extent in practice, in cooperative fashion between the national government and localities. VISTA's goal was significantly more ambitious than the CCC's – addressing the problems of millions by employing 4,000 as opposed to 400,000 or more – at the same time it was designed to operate in a much more complex social and political environment – all while drawing on limited experience.

In creating AmeriCorps, policymakers faced an even more challenging political environment, one that in Jonathan Rauch's assessment is all but paralyzed by growth of welfare state entitlements and the rise of interest groups dedicated to protecting existing programs (1992). They also faced opposition to national service in particular that was much more philosophically principled than in previous eras. However, once AmeriCorps was created, policymakers were able to draw on decades of experience with inter-governmental and public, non-profit, and private partnerships. More than any program, AmeriCorps is federal – a cooperative venture among the national, state, and local governments and the institutions of civil society. As Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland document, compared to their level of sophistication in the 1960s, professionals at all levels of government and in community organizations have become significantly more skillful at designing, implementing, and supporting effective civic practice, including national service (2001). While policy learning of this kind connects VISTA and

AmeriCorps, it also accounts for a number of the policy differences between the programs.

Finally, it has been difficult for programs to act as models for future policymaking because the definition of national service keeps changing. While the CCC is currently recognized as national service, it wasn't during its lifetime. At the time, advocates argued that it could become national service if enrollees were trained as military reserves, or alternately, if the program were changed to reflect William James's "moral equivalent of war."

The War on Poverty was such a moral equivalent, but one fought with very few troops. Two years after Kennedy's National Service Corps proposal was realized through the founding of VISTA, the New York Times ran an article titled "The Case for A National Service Corps": The key question was how to enroll all young Americans (Sanders 1966). This vision inspired AmeriCorps, and while the numbers fell short of the administration's goals, they took heart that even in its first year AmeriCorps was larger than the Peace Corps had ever been (Waldman, 1995 49). And they certainly proclaimed it national service. But the bar keeps rising. In 2002, following Bush's expansion announcement, UPI ran an article titled, "AmeriCorps Can Become National Service." Its opening paragraph states: "the United States needs a viable National Service program, and can establish it by expanding the Clinton-era AmeriCorps program by at least 50 percent over the next year" (Bourge 2002, citing a study by the Progressive Policy Institute). The benchmark for what counts as national service continues to shift, making it (for supporters) less a program than an ever-elusive goal.

CONCLUSION

While the future of AmeriCorps, and of national service broadly, remain uncertain, past experience highlights a number of challenges for deep institutionalization. National service's centrist appeal and its lack of interest group allies make it difficult to create, support, and expand over time. The strong association between national service programs and their founding presidents, parties,

and time periods, makes it difficult to create durable policy pathways that extend across time. Finally, changing definitions of what constitutes national service and principled debates over whether national service by any definition is a good make national service contested among supporters as well as between supporters and opponents. That President Bush has presided over growth in AmeriCorps and called for even more significant expansion is a hopeful sign for national service advocates: it signals growing bipartisan support and promises increased opportunities to serve. That the president hasn't pushed his proposal more strongly and that he needs to in the face of opposition from a Congress controlled by his own party demonstrates how contested the idea of national service remains, even after seventy years.

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