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# The Service/Politics Split: Rethinking Service to Teach Political Engagement\*

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Over the past few years, I have experimented with a classroom exercise that encourages students to think about how they perceive service and politics. I ask the students to create lists of service activities and political activities in which they and their friends and families engage. The service list typically includes such activities as working in a soup kitchen, delivering meals to the homebound, tutoring in the school system, and cleaning up parks. The list of political activities usually includes things like voting, protesting, raising money, lobbying, letter writing, and running for office.

Turning students' attention to the list of community service activities, I ask them to give some adjectives that people might use to describe the listed projects. The students usually offer such descriptors as altruistic, caring, helping, selfless, and giving, as well as individualistic and one-on-one. Often, the students will also add the words selfish or insincere to describe those students who engage in community service to enhance their resume or earn academic credit.

Asked for adjectives that describe politics, the words come fast and furious—dirty, corrupt, ambitious, crooked, dishonest, compromising, slow. After the initial rush of negative descriptors and with little prompting on my part, students will also talk about politics as a means to affect social change and make a difference for groups of people.

I have used this exercise with audiences ranging from young women uninterested in politics, to young people planning careers in politics and policy making, to foundation officials. Invariably, the answers are the same, reflecting a dramatic split in thinking about service and politics

as very different types of activities with very different value structures.

This exercise was developed after working with college students, primarily young women, for several years.<sup>1</sup> Most of these students were involved in community service, and most of them were filled with disgust, disillusionment, and even dread toward politics. They wanted to "make a difference" and they believed the best way to do that was by helping another person one-on-one. Working on policy, challenging decision-making structures, or engaging mainstream institutions rarely entered their thinking.

The interest in service as an alternative to politics seems to reflect a larger trend among 18 to 24 year olds. According to a recent study released by the National Association of Secretaries of State, there is a "large gap between political and non-political engagement. Less than 20% of young Americans voted in 1998 and just 16% report having volunteered in a political campaign. In contrast, 53% say they have volunteered in non-political organizations" (1999, 6). A recent study commissioned by the Panetta Institute (2000) found similar results. In a national survey of college students, 34% of the eligible voters voted in the 1998 election cycle, while 73% reported doing volunteer work in the past two years. Politics and government, the authors reported, were largely irrelevant to these students.

These findings, and my own work with young people, lead me to the conclusion that educators cannot simply assume that service contributes to political engagement. Rather, I fear, service has been positioned as a morally superior alternative, a belief reinforced through rhetoric and practice by parts of the community service movement. The following quote from the newsletter of the Corporation for National Service (CNS), which as the major funder

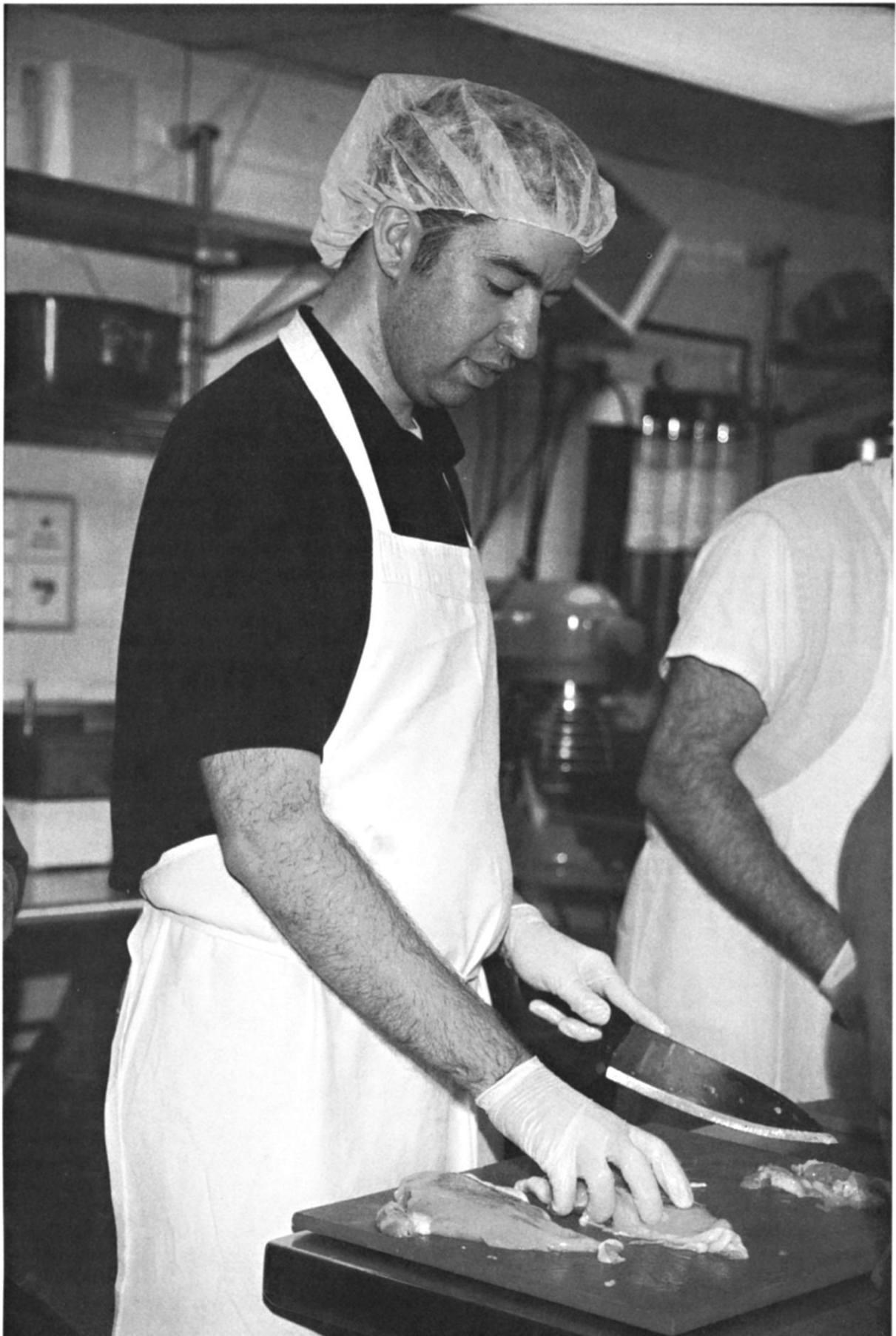
and supporter of national service and service learning sets the tone for the national movement, is telling. In describing why AmeriCorps participants were prohibited from attending the Stand for Children rally in Washington, DC, as members, the CNS general counsel wrote: "National service has to be nonpartisan. 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" (CNS 1996).

Corporation officials will argue, quite correctly, that they must prohibit political activities like lobbying, unionizing, working for candidates, and protesting to ensure congressional support. But rather than dismiss all political activities as divisive, they could use the political decision to narrowly define service activities as a lesson for AmeriCorps members about how politics works, about the kinds of compromises and choices that are necessary in a representative, pluralistic democracy.

It is argued that students involved in service are reconceptualizing engagement as localized activities where young people can "get things done" and immediately see results. However, if students only think of civic engagement as individual, results driven activity, they are not necessarily challenging institutions in power. Feeding the hungry does nothing to disrupt or rethink poverty or injustice. Tutoring inner-city kids does nothing to secure more resources for schools or ensure that teachers are held accountable. As educators, our task is to take the students' experiences and help them understand the larger social and political context. Why are people hungry in a period of unprecedented U.S. prosperity? How does government address the problem? How does government create the prob-

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Students tend to describe community service activities, such as working in a soup kitchen, as “making a difference” but must also understand the larger social and political context. Service learning helps students bring the greater picture into focus. Photo: AP

lem? Should responsibility for addressing the issues lie primarily with government institutions or with religious groups or nonprofit agencies? How are the agendas of those social service organizations shaped by government regulation and funding? The pedagogical benefit of service is that it can provide students with experiences that can inform such potentially abstract debates. But to be able to understand and address these questions, students must understand and address systems of power. One way

to approach this challenge is to help students think about service and politics not as two distinct activities—one moral, one corrupt—but rather as a continuum of activities.

Leading students to this view requires considering a different set of theoretical and practical roots for service pedagogy than those typically addressed. The roots of service as citizenship education have often been traced to the writings of William James. James argued that virtues instilled by military service are the “rock upon which states are built,” building the values of the good citizen—obedience, a sense of the common good, responsibility to the larger society (1967, 668). As a pacifist, James sought an alternative means to inculcate those virtues and proposed mandatory service as a mechanism for creating citizens. His arguments were the basis for the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps, which is often cited as the model for state-supported national service. Other service theorists (e.g., Moskos 1988) have invoked James’ ideas of “martial virtues” to argue that military service should be the model for community service as citizenship education, arguing that service teaches young people about their obligations to society.

This theoretical approach is problematic because it is based on and perpetuates a conception of citizen-

ship that has historically been exclusively male. A better model for service as a citizenship education tool is the historical relationship between women and community service. Such an approach offers insights into how

educators’ can reconnect service to political participation.

For generations of women activists, service galvanized them to engage in, not flee from, politics. Excluded from politics by law and tradition, women contributed to public activity by engaging in commu-

nity service. Through women’s clubs, settlement houses, and social reform movements like temperance, women worked to exercise influence on issues and communities. To justify their entrance into the public sphere, women’s activity was conceptualized as “moral housekeeping,” the extension of women’s caring work from the home to the public realm. Understood that way, women’s work was not a challenge to institutions of power where men exercised decision-making authority and the association of women’s public activity with service effectively deflated the perception of women’s power.

Many women activists understood that service alone would not substantially increase women’s power or bring about societal change. Some became involved in the campaign for suffrage, hoping their vote would increase their ability to affect decision making on social issues. For some women, work in reform and service movements galvanized their involvement in politics. Women’s clubs developed legislative agendas on issues of concern such as food safety and child labor (Scott 1990).<sup>2</sup> Women involved in Hull House, one of the great exemplars of social service activity, moved into formal government positions and began organizing workers into unions.

In a political science class at Rutgers University, I used these exam-

ples from women’s history as the model for how service can lead to political engagement.<sup>3</sup> In the class, students explored democratic theory, women’s political history, and social change strategy. Outside the classroom, they engaged in a four-hour-per-week community service placement of their own choosing, organized and managed by the university’s Citizenship and Service Education Program. At the end of the semester, students wrote a research paper on a policy issue related to their community service placement. For example, a student working at a local women’s health clinic did research on federal health care reform initiatives. As part of their research, students were required to interview at least two people involved in the issue—one of whom was a community activist and one who held a formal policy-making position. Finally, we required students to develop a public advocacy campaign that would integrate their public policy research, their community service experience, and their understanding of how public policy is made and changed. The students were expected to approach the issue as citizens seeking to exercise their voice in institutions with decision-making power, not as service providers proposing new programs or policymakers devising legislation or regulation.

While the small class size precludes drawing strong conclusions, students did report gaining an increased understanding of the political process, a clearer sense of how citizens can affect that process, and increased skills for engagement. Without a doubt, the service experience enriched and complicated the students’ academic learning. Students were exposed to people and to questions they never would have encountered in the classroom. Because they had the chance to work on an issue they cared deeply about, the students were more motivated to conduct research. For example, the difficulties that low-income women faced in obtaining health care appalled the student working in a local health clinic. Her outrage led her to conduct an in-depth study of the various approaches to reform in which her analysis was both politi-

cally engaged and supported by information and research. Students also confronted the questions about the limitations of their service on the issues. In particular, the students working with children were deeply concerned about the practical and ethical implications of ending their service.

As personally rewarding as students found their service, and as much as it contributed to their learning, I was also very aware that the students needed better ways to think about how to create political

and policy change. Serving in community agencies did not help students understand politics. For example, the students struggled with developing their advocacy plans. I had hoped that providing them the opportunity to be creative about an issue they cared about would excite and challenge students, but the vast majority had never thought about organizing others to take on an issue and engage decisionmakers. Very few had been part of such an organizing effort; they simply had no idea of how the process worked.

These students understood how to serve; they did not know how to affect political change.

Service can and should be an integral part of the way that students learn about civic and political life, challenging them to think about engagement more broadly than voting or belonging to an interest group. Nevertheless, while educators expand the concept of civic engagement, they must never abdicate their responsibility to engage students in the mainstream institutions that have power over their lives.

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## Notes

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1. This exercise was developed with my colleague Debra Liebowitz as part of our work

on NEW Leadership, a young women's political leadership education program at the Center for American Women and Politics, a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

2. Also see Baker (1984), McCarthy (1990), Pascoe (1990), Ryan (1979), and Welter (1966).

3. Ruth B. Mandel co-taught the course described in this article.

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