

## **Melissa Bass, *The Politics and Civics of National Service: Lessons from the Civilian Conservation Corps, VISTA, and AmeriCorps***

Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013. For order info, click [here](#).

### **Overall**

This book is a superb study of the politics and civics of national service over three periods of innovation: the 1930s (Civilian Conservation Corps), the 1960s and beyond (Volunteers in Service to America), and the 1990s and beyond (AmeriCorps). It is careful and nuanced, even-handed in terms of probing political and ideological arguments for and against the idea of national service itself, as well as specific programmatic developments across multiple presidential administrations. Its analytic and normative perspective elaborates the possibilities and challenges of “public policy for democracy” at the national level and can guide further development of national service generally, which has an increasingly important place for the work of developing more sustainable and resilient communities in the face of climate change.

### **Author**

Melissa Bass is associate professor of Public Policy Leadership at the University of Mississippi. Before receiving her PH.D. in Politics, she developed curricula for youth engagement and democracy for National 4-H, Public Achievement, and the state service commission of Minnesota. Melissa is a senior associate editor of **CivicGreen**.

### **Context**

This book grows out of heightened discussion in the 1990s on renewing citizenship and community capacities for solving problems amidst many signs of the erosion of social capital and trust. The debate on national service was reignited during the George H.W. Bush administration (1989-1993), and then especially with President Bill Clinton’s (1993-2001) support for a new program, AmeriCorps. While the broader debates had much resonance across partisan lines and within communities and academia, the proper role of the federal government remained contentious, as did further possibilities for utilizing national service to help solve a range of community problems.

### **Research methods**

The book utilizes primary sources and interviews on policy development, as well as secondary sources.

## Broad perspective, analytic framework

Bass seeks to answer several questions:

- *weak institutionalization*: why has national service been so difficult to institutionalize deeply and why have new programs been able to build so little on previous ones?

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), created in 1933 to offer job relief to young men during the Depression by engaging them in conservation work that the public valued, was discontinued in 1942, and did not shape future national service policy options significantly in the immediately following decades. Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) was created in 1963 and 1964 as part of the emerging War on Poverty, and although it has managed to persist, it generated substantial opposition and is currently the smallest of the major national service programs. Advocates for national service had to basically start over twice.

AmeriCorps, which has incorporated VISTA and some aspects of the CCC, was created in 1993, and although it has a sound basis for deep institutionalization, has periodically had to fight for its life and remains underfunded and under-enrolled relative to legislative targets.

Bass examines a range of factors that help account for the (repeat) establishment and relatively under-institutionalized character of national service programs across these three major periods of innovation. These factors include difficulties of generating broad public recognition and visibility, lack of concentrated interest group support due to its centrist appeal, ideological and partisan conflicts on the meaning of service and the role of the federal government, and the strong association of the program with its founding president (FDR and LBJ in the first two cases), partly loosened as George W. Bush and Barack Obama chose to build upon the policy legacy of Bill Clinton.

- *policy for democracy*: Bass utilizes this approach to policy developed especially in works by Helen Ingram, Stephen Rathgeb Smith, and Anne Larason Schneider. These authors ask how policy design can “empower, enlighten, and engage citizens in the process of self-government.”

This approach addresses how policies send messages about the proper role of citizens – in essence, how policy generates “teachings” and “lessons” that become formative of who we are and how we act in the polity and community. Bass further breaks these questions down by examining six common elements of policy design: goals, agents and implementation structures, target populations, rules, tools, and rationales, as well as various resources and incentives.

## Conceptualizing citizenship

For Bass, citizenship is a multifaceted and contested concept. It means different things to different people and in different contexts. Its various meanings can be complementary, but they can at times also be contradictory. National service programs can support multiple perspectives simultaneously, but no program can support all equally, and tradeoffs are inevitable. Choices of program design thus matter for how we enable active citizenship across varying contexts and for different goals.

For tables summarizing the main features of each program in the three main periods, see pages 3, 74-75, 140-141, and 222-223.

The following conceptions of citizenship are most relevant for this study:

- *constitutional citizenship*: focus is largely on legal status, rights, and obligations, and the ways in which citizens, including young people, support the norms of constitutional democracy, enroll and exercise their vote. National service can directly facilitate voter registration and/or help develop civic skills and attitudes that motivate voting.
- *critical citizenship*: constitutional democracy requires critical citizens who exercise their rights of free speech, assembly, petitioning, and advocacy, as well as resistance to injustice. National service programs sometimes encourage direct advocacy to improve conditions and government programs in communities in which service corps members work.

However, this can be quite controversial, since it utilizes government funding to tilt the ideological and advocacy scale, and since national service programs rely upon bipartisan support in Congress and nonpartisan support among the broad public to achieve some of their other goals.

Radical critics argue that this is the proper terrain for national service. Anything short of advocacy for social justice tends to reproduce and legitimate injustice.

- *citizenship as patriotism*: focus is how service can enhance commitment and affection for one's country, with a willingness to sacrifice, as in the military. This perspective can be controversial when one's country is involved in what appears to some as unjust wars and foreign policies, or unjust economic and social policies.
- *citizenship as service*: a core example is military service as a socializing experience, yet it is one that is less prevalent today than in previous generations. Volunteering for community service projects can be a substitute or a complement that enhances one's sense of community and responsibility. This may provide an avenue to other forms of citizenship.

However, the role of government in organizing and/or funding such service can be controversial, especially across partisan lines. Some conservatives see pork barreling and

inefficiency, as well as crowding out volunteer action and eroding civic predispositions. Other conservatives, however, see a key role for government in organizing service and inculcating a service ethos.

- *citizenship as work*: this can be conceived as supporting oneself through paid work, or more broadly as “public work” (Harry Boyte), which engages citizens in common labor to solve public problems and create things of public value. Public work can be part of one’s paid job or as voluntary effort collaborating with others as co-creators of a public world, whether through the market, the state, or civil society. National service can promote this conception of citizenship quite extensively, while insulating against a soft communitarianism or charitable service.

Many forms of conservation, forest and watershed restoration, disaster recovery, and other environmental service programs fit quite comfortably within this conception of citizenship as public work. These also tend to nurture leadership and decision-making skills, as well as teamwork among diverse actors, and can provide opportunities to learn how government works, thus enhancing constitutional and critical citizenship effects.

Bass tends to favor this conception, but she is alert to the many legitimate concerns of those operating on different philosophical, political, and programmatic terrain. Her book enlightens about how we as citizens, policy entrepreneurs, and lawmakers might make and justify policy design choices.

## Civilian Conservation Corps

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1933 at the height of the Great Depression, and it lasted until 1942. It was America’s first and largest civilian national service program – although it did not call itself this – and its civic mission to create citizens was explicit. It was very popular, although never deeply institutionalized. Thus, it was vulnerable to shifting politics and labor market needs, especially when WWII led to a massive call-up of troops. It was not utilized as a model for future national service policy making.

Various factors help account for the CCC’s emergence, its institutionalization, and demise:

- *origins*: as governor of New York, FDR had instituted a state reforestation program that enrolled some 10,000 men; California had an even bigger one. Thus, there were existing models, as well as rising interest in conservation. The Sierra Club (in California) and the National Audubon Society had organized decades before, and the 1930s witnessed the creation of the National Wildlife Federation and the Wilderness Society.

In 1933, as FDR entered the White House, millions of Americans were unemployed, especially younger ones. Thus, the CCC could be framed as a relief program, employing “soil soldiers” and “tree soldiers,” in service to the country and local communities, but not quite the civilian national service propounded by theorists such as William James. Any hint of compulsion in universal service would have generated resistance from

organized labor, as well as reducing the transatlantic ideological contrast with Hitler's Germany.

- *administrative organization*: the Army was available to set up and manage camps around the country, the Department of Labor could assist in recruitment through state and local relief agencies, and the departments of Interior (which included the Park Service) and Agriculture (which included the Forest Service) could manage conservation work. These four bureaucracies worked relatively well among each other, and the CCC central office could remain relatively small. This, however, reduced its leverage in arguing for continuing the program.

Professional foresters and local woodsmen were not threatened by program design, but could be enlisted in training.

- *purposes*: work relief and conservation were its initial purposes, though it evolved into a youth training program that tended to obscure its lessons as national service.

Work relief was primary, but the corps performed public work visible to local communities, to visitors to federal and state parks and trails, as well as through print and broadcast media that showed young men at work restoring forests and land, as well as showcasing the finished projects.

- *civic ethic*: an ethic of “reciprocity” and “collaboration” among enrollees, the federal government, and local communities was prominent, as well as citizenship as the dignity of useful paid labor and public work.

Constitutional citizenship was also nurtured through some of the formal teaching, but the largely regimented classes limited the extent to which critical and self-governing citizens were nurtured.

Enrollees were also expected to remit \$25 of their \$30 monthly earnings to their families as part of the civic ethic of the program.

- *diversity*: the CCC did foster diverse work collaboration, club and team pursuits, and camp living, but mainly among a limited set of enrollees: young, single white men from urban multi-ethnic, farm, and hill-country backgrounds.

Native Americans (who had separate programs in their own communities) and veterans had some separate rules regarding marital status. Women were completely excluded from the CCC. Some programs in the South completely excluded African Americans, others segregated them, which then became the rule virtually everywhere after 1935. However, African Americans do seem to have benefitted from the general experience of CCC work.

At its height, the CCC had some one-half million men working at any given time.

- *institutionalization and permanence*: the possibility for permanence of the CCC (as FDR had wanted in the 1937 reauthorization) was undercut by arguments that permanence would send a message undermining civic and work morale. The message of permanence would be “immoral,” critics argued. The earlier shift from “public work” to job training as a “service” tended to undermine the ethic of reciprocity. FDR’s court packing plan also helped derail the possibility of permanence during the 1937 reauthorization.

In addition, initial motivations to enroll were primarily not civic or conservationist, but work relief, which tended to obscure the CCC’s national service identity in the ensuing decades. Changed labor markets from WWII troop call-ups and heightened war production helped to undermine the program’s rationale.

No national association of former CCC members was created to lobby for continuing the program. New conservation corps eventually emerged, beginning with the Student Conservation Association in 1957, which did help inspire later federal efforts.

## Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA)

Authorized by legislation for the War on Poverty, VISTA volunteers went into American communities in 1965.

- *origins*: in line with his famous 1961 inaugural mantra (“ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country”), President John F. Kennedy proposed a National Service Corps to complement his Peace Corps. After his assassination in November 1963, President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) reconceived it as VISTA to provide opportunities for service in the War on Poverty.

The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which began with a mandate of “maximum feasible participation” in its Community Action Program, oversaw VISTA. This, along with a range of civil rights and other organizing efforts, nurtured an ethic of participatory and change-oriented activism that permeated VISTA, and was given at least tacit approval by Congress

- *enrollment*: a competitive process with, at most, around 5,000 slots at any one time. This moved service even further from the idea of universal civilian conscription as a complement to military service, although this idea (propounded by philosopher William James early in the century) had its supporters.

Initially, volunteers were overwhelmingly white, educated, and middle-class as “outside catalysts” of change, though later recruiting brought in a more diverse group of “locally recruited volunteers,” eventually up to 75 percent of the total. The former group tended to be more radical and confrontational, the latter more patient and humble in style of work.

Increasing stress also came to be placed upon having specific professional skills in such fields as law, business, education, health, and architecture.

VISTA volunteers were always majority female, and the proportion grew further through local recruitment, many of whom were women with deep connections to their communities. Local recruitment also increased the proportion of minorities significantly.

- *policy design*: various components tugged against each other, making the program politically contentious especially in transitions between Democratic and Republican presidents, and limited its capacity to be strongly institutionalized. However, VISTA did avoid the elimination that many conservatives had sought. Bass takes us through the struggles within each administration from LBJ (1963-1969) to George H.W. Bush (1989-1993).

The main tension in goals was between eliminating poverty and injustice (critical citizenship) and service to the poor. Unlike the CCC, the program did not operate on federal lands or state forests, but in communities, and thus had to accommodate local control over projects, though often favoring local actors that had more of a community organizing approach.

Contracts for initial training, which went to universities and private organizations, often exacerbated the tension in goals. The University of Maryland program, for instance, emphasized highly critical citizenship and generated much conflict, as did many other university-based training programs. In the early years, VISTA had a clearly radicalizing effect on its participants.

The organizing model was favored during the LBJ years and then under the leadership of Sam Brown during the presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977-1981). President Nixon (1969-1974) and his administrators pushed for a more purely “service to the poor” orientation. VISTA was placed under the auspices of a new agency (ACTION), which replaced its home at OEO. Republican presidents Gerald Ford (1976-1977) and Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) likewise favored service (when not trying to eliminate VISTA), as did George H.W. Bush (1989-1993), who however provided an opening for innovation in national service.

- *metrics of success*: these were much less visible and quantifiable in VISTA than they were in the CCC (millions of trees planted and acres restored, thousands of dams built) and tended to generate greater local contention (whereas trees didn’t talk back). The public tended not to be aware what VISTA was, or misidentified it as a floor wax or a credit card. It was virtually impossible for the general public to identify VISTA work sites.

It was much more difficult to measure VISTA volunteers’ relative contribution to a service program that depended on other local actors and institutions, and even more so to measure the results of community organizing and empowerment strategies.

- *interest group*: to defend the program, VISTA volunteers first organized the National VISTA Alliance in 1970, consisting of 2,000 current volunteers and 10,000 former ones. It eventually disbanded, but was later replaced by Friends of VISTA. This, along with

bumbling by VISTA opponents in the Reagan administration (1981-1989) and support in Congress, saved the program. It was made part of AmeriCorps in 1993.

## AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps was established in 1994 and has grown to some 75,000 members enrolled per year. It includes VISTA (as AmeriCorps\*VISTA) and the National Civilian Community Corps (as AmeriCorps\*NCCC), as well as its signature program, AmeriCorps\*State and National, in which state commissions on service largely determine projects and control funding and recruitment. AmeriCorps draws upon multiple traditions of citizenship, in different mixes across programs and presidencies since its founding under President Bill Clinton.

While citizenship emphases and mechanisms have been contested on partisan grounds, and some have tried to defund the program, it has remained resilient over multiple presidential transitions. In 2009, its growth was authorized at 250,000 under the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, though it has yet to be funded and implemented at this level.

NCCC organizes teams of 18 to 24-year olds to travel the country for ten months for a variety of intense, multi-week projects, such as environmental restoration, hiking trail renovation hurricane and other disaster relief, and building homes, as well as other projects. FEMA Corps, established as part of NCCC in 2012, works with communities through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Environmental and sustainable community work also occurs through a variety of AmeriCorps\*State and National grants to local and state organizations.

Bass analyzes a broad range of program features, among which are the following:

- *origins*: President Bill Clinton (1993-2001) signed the National and Community Service Trust Act in 1993 with the same pen that FDR used to sign the bill creating the CCC in 1933.

Clinton was motivated, in part, to position the Democratic Party (which had lost the three successive presidential elections of 1980, 1984, and 1988) as favoring reciprocity in the form of rights *and* responsibilities, as well as reforming the welfare state. Such goals were supported by the centrist Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) under Will Marshall (who advanced a national service proposal) and Clinton, who served as DLC chair when he was governor of Arkansas.

In 1990, Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) had introduced the National and Community Service Act, which Congress passed and President George H.W. Bush (1989-1993) signed. This established the Commission on National and Community Service, provided modest program funding, training, and technical assistance, as well as a strategic plan. Bush also established the first-ever White House Office of National Service.

City Year, founded in Boston in 1988 by Michael Brown and Alan Khazei, provided an especially important model.

- *administrative structure:* AmeriCorps\*State and National is designed to accommodate the much greater complexity in the organizational field of nonprofits than existed in previous eras of national service innovation, as well as the more widespread skepticism about federal government management of large programs. Clinton was quite explicit about this, which was consistent with his “reinventing government” theme, and it clearly helped in program resilience in the face of attempts to roll back or eliminate the program.

The administrative structure thus built upon state service commissions (appointed by governors), in a form of cooperative federalism, as well as local nonprofits, which apply for competitive grants through these commissions. Nonprofits typically have other sources of funding as well. The federal government’s role is thus seen as “catalytic,” within a larger collaborative governance and public-private partnership framework.

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) oversees all national service programs (the “Community” label was eliminated for a period under Clinton, and was thus CNS).

AmeriCorps was designed, like its predecessors, as a voluntary program, despite considerable support in the immediately preceding years among national service intellectuals for some form of universal service (civilian and military). While it includes an educational award that can go to funding college tuition or paying off student loans, the amount has been limited to maintain a significant symbolic and competitive incentive difference with G.I. benefits for military service (as veterans groups insisted).

- *program goals:* as initially framed by Eli Segal, the first CEO of CNCS, and then reinforced by Harris Wofford, its second director (also under Clinton), these were multiple:
  - *getting things done:* this was stressed and it became the program’s motto. It lent itself to a broad array of forms of problem solving and service with visible and measurable results, which had become increasingly important in government and nonprofit organizations over the previous decades in evaluation research.
  - *strengthening communities:* this lent itself to local action to build upon community assets, strengthen local leadership and organizations, and develop social capital.

It also increasingly lent itself to the goal of leveraging other (unpaid) volunteers. Under Leslie Lenkowsky, who initially led the agency under president George W. Bush (2001-2009), the goal of building the capacity – administrative, technological, financial – of nonprofit community organizations rose further in prominence.

- *encouraging responsibility:* especially encouraging young people to take care of themselves, their families, and their communities. This civic language expanded to include constitutional citizenship and utilized curricula designed for this.

- *expanding opportunity*: by providing opportunities to develop new work-related and leadership skills, as well as to utilize education grants to further education or pay off student loans after having completed service.
- *managing outside relationships*: to establish itself firmly and achieve its varied goals, AmeriCorps has had to manage a range of outside relationships (in addition to inside relationships within the federal government, not detailed here):
  - *general public*: AmeriCorps has had difficulty being recognized by the general public because it is such a decentralized program in a far more complex and crowded nonprofit environment than earlier national service programs. Indeed, many grantee staff are not always aware of their own AmeriCorps funding streams.

On the flip side, low public recognition has arguably made AmeriCorps more difficult to target by opponents.

- *governors*: linking the program so closely to governors was initially a risk, since some Republican governors could have opposed AmeriCorps on ideological grounds. Yet civic service resonated with many, and AmeriCorps delivered resources to their states that were controlled by state service commissions, which they appointed. Governors thus became strong bipartisan supporters of the program.
- *grantees*: those developing local programs and receiving grants are the primary drivers of strategic development within AmeriCorps, although they operate within broad understandings and rules set through CNCS.

Thus, there are both bottom-up and top down-components, although even the bottom-up tends to disadvantage many grassroots groups that are not well-equipped in grant writing and financial management.

- *AmeriCorps members*: they identify with the program by taking the AmeriCorps pledge, wearing T-shirts with AmeriCorps logos, and engaging in various training and community-building exercises. In addition to taking action and persevering, the pledge includes getting things done, strengthening communities, and seeking common ground when faced with conflict.

Nonetheless, to avoid the backlash that faced VISTA in its early days, Corps members are prohibited from lobbying or otherwise participating in political activities and events while engaged in service. They are also not permitted to lobby for AmeriCorps appropriations. These stipulations were a condition for congressional passage.

- *interest groups*: AmeriCorps alumni can lobby for the program, although their separate organizational identities and competitive funding arrangements have tempered cross-program solidarity.

However, during the crisis of 2003, which threatened 80 percent cuts overall, alumni received support from philanthropic and business leaders to mobilize to stop the cuts and then, under President Obama, elected in 2008, to expand funding and enrollments. Voices for National Service emerged as a coalition of local and national service programs, state service commissions, and individuals, and has remained vigilant and effective ever since.

- *recruitment*: those who enrolled in AmeriCorps are called “members,” not “volunteers.” They serve for one or two years. Since many have worked in teams, they are often referred to as “team members.” Most are young, especially in NCCC, which recruited those 18-24 years old.
  - *sex*: predominantly women, some 2/3 to 3/4 depending on the specific program.
  - *race and class*: “seek actively” to achieve diversity, though some programs, such as YouthBuild, are often predominantly minority and low income, while others, such as NCCC, tend to be predominantly white and middle class.
  - *education*: many have college experience, yet the majority do not. Training in the program, as well as education grants, has enabled many to further develop skills for future work and careers, as well as general life skills. These educational benefits supplement the basic living stipend and health insurance. National service is thus anchored primarily as “reciprocity.”

Various curricula for citizenship have been utilized. One was developed by the author for the Minnesota service commission before she began her study. It focused on public-work skills and concepts and was adopted beyond Minnesota. Other curricula have stressed constitutional, service and other concepts of citizenship throughout American history.

Senior citizens serving in an AmeriCorps program could transfer their education benefits to their grandchildren. CNCS also lobbied colleges and universities to match its educational grants to counter the rising costs of tuition, which many have done.

## Lessons for the future

Bass completed her book in 2012, midway through the Obama administration. She ponders a variety of questions, some still very much alive, though certainly new ones have also emerged. Several issues are especially important to address:

- *public support*: has tended to be wide but not deep, and without the usual interest group allies that protect other programs. How might public support be strengthened by becoming further intertwined with robust community strategies, including for sustainable and resilient communities facing climate change and climate injustices?
- *institutionalization*: of AmeriCorps has been aided by broad-based civic innovation across a variety of fields, which have thus provided available partners. Collaborative governance and cooperative federalism have also generated solid ground for further expansion of AmeriCorps, as have rising concerns about homeland security, disaster resilience, and sustainable communities.

Funding and support for national service should be considered alongside of and intertwined with a broad range of civic capacity building challenges in the years ahead. It should not become an organized interest raised to prominence above these other challenges.

- *expansion*: how to expand enrollments, but without going down the road of universal and mandatory service?

The latter has persisting appeal in some circles. It would have spelled the political doom of national service in each of the main periods of innovation, and would assuredly engender fierce resistance in many sectors of the population today.

## In conclusion

This is a careful and foundational comparative study of national service across its three main periods of innovation, especially in its multiple civic roles, and holds many lessons for a realistic but ambitious expansion to address major challenges, including those of strong sustainable and resilient communities and ecosystems in an era of climate crisis.

Reviewed by Carmen Sirianni, editor-in-chief of **CivicGreen**

Last revised: 8/20/20