THE VALUES OF NATIONAL SERVICE

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Introduction

As discussed in the topicality essay, although the topic lists specific programs that the affirmative needs to increase participation in, the resolution ties those programs together by pushing the affirmative to support "national service." In many ways, the question of what constitutes national service is irrelevant since the programs are specifically identified, but the question nonetheless remains important because its presence in the resolution may require the affirmative to justify it, and because affirmative, even if not required, may choose to justify it as a way to leverage answers to common critiques and counterplans.

Discerning justifications for national service is not a simple task. Most of the literature is focused on the need for service, not national service. Although many of the values of service can be captured through appropriately designed national service programs, the values of service in general do not inherently support national service.

The Value of Service

One of the most commonly cited justifications for service is the need for civic engagement - broadly speaking, a commitment to participate in our communities.

In 1990, Robert Putnam, a Professor of Public Policy at Harvard, published a famous book, entitled, BOWLING ALONE, in which he argued that Americans were becoming disconnected civically. More recent evidence (B1-13) confirms that trend. September 11th (B99) and the war in Iraq (B10) have failed to reverse that trend.

At a basic level, a strong argument can be made (B18-21) that a failure to engage civically means that the institutions that we need to support democracy may fail to exist, making the growth of democracy possible. Service can reverse that trend by encouraging Americans to become involved in their communities and building strong ties.

Precisely what it means to "engage" the civic is difficult to discern. The authors of both the most advanced studies and the most simple newspaper articles use the term very loosely. The term has been used to mean our participation in our local government, voting, volunteering in our communities and schools, and/or establishing personal ties in our communities. Given the differences in the values of each of these, they have been broken-down further in subsequent sections.

Political disenchantment has been well-noted (B27-30). The consequences of such disenchantment are problematic because it allows for a full expression of what we are (B36-38) and prevents a loss of liberty (B41). Since attitudes of the youth toward politics are developed when they are young (B42-3), political engagement of youth through service can help reverse these trends. Greater impacts can be found in defenses of state-centered politics and of participation in those politics. Studies indicate that Americans are less engaged in their communities (B45-47). The loss of community, however, is a threat to dignity because our identity and who we are is shaped by our community (B47, B52). Individuals depend on each other for their lives (B48) and strong communities support democratic engagement and problem solving (B57). Extreme individualism can result in excessive state strength (B61) and collectivism (B62).

Related to the importance of strong communities is social capital. Social capital is a concept developed by Robert Putnam. He argues that communities with strong social capital are more likely to have strong schools (B78), happy children (B75-77), healthy individuals (B71-2), be socio-economically advanced (B80-3) and more tolerant (B87-8), experience less inequality (B84-87) and be less likely to be totalitarian (B69). Service can boost capital by engaging individuals in their communities (B93-5).

The Value of National Service

None of the arguments discussed so far are specific to the values of national service. Although national service can, if appropriately designed, support engagement in our local communities and governments (B101-2), this is not a unique justification for the service being national. Affirmatives need to defend national service.

There are at least some arguments in favor of national service. National service could focus the nation and potentially avoid fragmentation (B93-5). Switzerland is one of the countries in the world that requires national service, and one of the reasons they do it is because Switzerland is an otherwise disunited country, with seven different languages spoken.

A second justification for national service is to strengthen the sovereign power of the state (B98) and overall strengthen the power of our national democratic government (B89) and community (B104). Local politics and engagement are unlikely to capture these benefits (B103).
A third justification is to boost our sense of citizenship - a sense of service that we owe our national government (B105). This sense of citizenship is important to liberty (B106) and to strengthening the same community institutions (B108), the importance of which has been previously discussed.

Criticizing the Value of Service

The value of service can be criticized on a number of fronts. First, negatives can challenge the need for additional policies to promote civic engagement. There is a substantial amount of evidence (B112-118) that indicates that civic engagement trends are not entirely negative.

Second, negatives can argue that service does not actually promote civic engagement. Affirmative evidence often claims that it will boost engagement, but this evidence is very weak in warrants - reasons to believe it. Service often fails to boost engagement because it involves almost no time commitment (B119), has a poor track record of boosting engagement (B120), and cannot hope to solve all of the reasons that people fail to engage (B123, B126).

Third, negatives can argue that civic engagement is bad. They can argue that the most well-off are those most likely to be engaged and that the engagement will only serve to expand existing inequalities (B124-5). Community engagement has often reinforced racism and sexism (B135) and excluded minorities (B156).

Fourth, even if the negative concedes that engagement is good, they can argue that that engagement should occur outside of the political. Other mediating institutions such as churches and cooperatives can support public engagement (B131) and develop strong-person-to-person relationships (B132). Civic groups arguably function the best outside the purview of government (B133-4) and many of the leading affirmative authors do not even support engagement through the state (B135-142). Service can even threaten appropriate relationships with the state by discouraging political participation (B143), reducing confidence in government (B144), and retaining people to be consumers (B145).

Criticizing the Value of National Service

As this essay should make clear, many of the values of national service are, at best, values that are associated with community service - strong civic engagement at the local and community levels through a number of mediating institutions such as libraries, churches, schools, and political institutions. Even if one were to concede that service were to boost such engagement, it is hard to defend that this service must occur through a national service program rather than a local community service program.

The benefits of service can both be captured and rhetorically challenged, by a negative that endorses either a counterplan or a critique alternative that endorses community service and the language of community service rather than the language of national service. Wycliff (B163) argues that we should replace the rhetoric of national service because it connotations of militarism while McCurdy (B163) argues that the language romanticizes statism. Etzioni (B164) argues that all of the benefits of program implementation can be capture while avoiding problematic language. Chapman (B166) argues that even policy-makers recognize the importance of avoiding the use of the term "national service", and that it has important discursive implications (B167), that politics occurs in communities (B170) and local mediating structures (B171), and that decentralization is the way to prevent tyranny (B173-78) this is probably wise.

Conclusion

The general case for engagement at the community and local level is a strong one. Negatives can engage this at the uniqueness or impact level, but they are unlikely to prevail. Negatives have a better chance at attacking it at the solvency level - arguing that service will not necessarily support engagement and can even undermine many of those levels.

While this solvency question is a live one, even stronger negatives will attack the value of national service at both a rhetorical and pragmatic level. Most of the evidence discussed and referenced in this section only speaks to the value of engagement and not to the value of service, particularly national service. Community and local engagement alternatives can capture the benefits without producing many of the harms that have been identified.

Negatives taking this approach do need to answer the argument that national service can serve to unify the country and prevent fragmentation. There is evidence (B160-1), however, that national service programs do not boost such solidarity and even evidence that challenges the value of pluralism (B162). Defensive arguments against this one affirmative claim are certainly available.

Affirmatives are going to have to rally hard to defend service to and through the nation. Affirmatives who want to win are either going to have to argue that they do not have to defend national service at all (difficult) or defend national service.

Some of the evidence that is included here gives the affirmative a start at such a defense, but it is not adequate to the task. To acquire more evidence, I suggest a couple of approaches. First, affirmative should read a book that we didn't have time to read before finishing this volume -- WHAT WE OWE OUR COUNTRY by William Buckley. There is a good chance that this volume contains such evidence. Second, you should do specific research on the values of citizenship and sovereignty. Link evidence to those concepts is included in this section, but affirmatives will need much better impact evidence.

Ultimately, I think, the debate over the value of national service is the core question of the topic. Affirmatives that can defend it will be able to use the defense as leverage against popular critiques and popular counterplans, such as the states. Negatives that can effectively criticize it will be able to argue for everything the affirmative says except their endorsement of national service.