



The Case for Universal National Service in the United States

Dennis A. Ross and Chip Webster*

This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

The ideas in each paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Beyond Intractability, Braver Angels, or the Citizen Scholars Council. The copyright and responsibility for the content of each article is retained by the authors.

This PDF version of the article is intended for printing and reading on desktop computers. An [HTML version](#), suitable for reading on smartphones, is also available.

All authors’ bios are found on the [Civic Scholars Council Biography Page](#).

Abstract

This essay argues that Universal National Service can strengthen America's civic fabric by bringing young adults from diverse backgrounds together in shared service. A required year of military or civilian service would develop leadership, character, workforce skills, and civic responsibility while addressing national needs and rebuilding trust, unity, and democratic engagement.

Introduction

The United States today faces a number of challenges that threaten the strength of its civic fabric. Political polarization has deepened, trust in institutions has declined, and Americans increasingly live and work among people who share similar social and political views rather than interacting as citizens with those who see the world differently. These divisions weaken the sense of shared national purpose that has historically helped the country navigate its greatest challenges. One potential remedy that has gained increasing attention in recent years is the concept of national service, or what is referred to in this essay as Universal National Service.

Universal National Service refers to a period of time young adults serve their country either through military service or civilian programs focused on education, disaster response, environmental conservation, public health, or community development. The idea is not new. Throughout American history, periods of shared service have helped bind the nation together and cultivate a sense of civic responsibility among citizens. When people from different regions, cultures, and economic backgrounds work together toward a common goal, they gain a deeper appreciation and respect of their fellow citizens and their country. They become courageous citizens who, by their very appreciation of the investment of their time and energy in their nation, learn to take ownership of their citizenship. These are social traits that our country desperately needs right now.

Former President John F. Kennedy in his 1961 inaugural address, famously challenged Americans to “ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” That call captured a principle deeply rooted in the American tradition: citizenship carries not only rights but responsibilities. Universal National Service today would strengthen civic unity, develop future leaders, address pressing national challenges, and restore a culture of shared responsibility that is essential to a healthy democracy.

In this paper we are advocating Universal National Service for all 18-year-olds. We will present the specifics we are proposing and its powerful impact on our national culture, as well as its impact on the longevity of our democracy.

Historical Roots of Universal National Service

The concept of citizens serving their country is woven into the fabric of American history. From the earliest days of the republic, Americans understood that the survival of self-government depended on the willingness of citizens to contribute to the common good.

In colonial America, local militias embodied the idea of the “citizen-soldier.” All individuals set aside their daily occupations to defend their communities and the young nation. This tradition

has continued through many of the country's major conflicts, reinforcing the idea that national defense and the health of the nation were shared responsibilities.

Perhaps the most powerful example of collective service occurred during World War II. During that period, millions of Americans joined the armed forces while millions more contributed on the home front by working in factories, rationing resources, and supporting wartime production. The scale of national mobilization created a powerful sense of unity and shared sacrifice that transcended political and social divisions. The impact of the shared civic responsibilities carried on for decades.

The twentieth century also saw the development of organized civilian service programs. In the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was established during the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt as part of the New Deal. The program employed young Americans to build parks, plant trees, and improve public lands while providing economic relief during the Great Depression. The CCC not only improved the nation's natural resources but also gave participants valuable job skills and a sense of purpose. This service instilled a sense of civic pride.

Later, in the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy created the Peace Corps, sending American volunteers abroad to support education, agriculture, and community development in developing nations. The program reflected the belief that service could promote both international goodwill and personal growth among participants. Domestic service opportunities expanded further with the creation of AmeriCorps during the presidency of Bill Clinton. AmeriCorps volunteers work across the country in areas such as education, disaster response, and environmental conservation.

The Vietnam war's poor execution and result created a negative image of military service and in many ways divided our nation. As a result, military service became concentrated among a smaller portion of the population. Today, only one half of one (0.5%) percent of Americans serve in uniform, and many citizens have little direct connection to those who do. This growing separation between civilian life and military service has prompted renewed interest in expanding opportunities for Americans to serve their country in meaningful ways.

Under the heading of volunteering for nonmilitary community activities the post-Vietnam hangover has impacted the decline in civilian voluntary participation. We believe this trend has contributed dramatically to the well-documented decline in trust in the government and in each other. We need to break down the barriers to build trust so we can operate in a healthy national culture of trust and respect. The decrease in volunteerism for community projects could be improved by exposing young adults to the personal benefits of spending a year in such an environment similar to a "gap year" post high school.

Universal Service as a Tool for Civic Unity

One of the most compelling arguments for Universal National Service is its ability to bring Americans together across social and cultural divides. In an era when communities are increasingly segregated by income, education, and political affiliation, shared service experiences can help bridge those gaps.

Today 49 countries have active required national military service and another 36 have laws on the books (including the United States) that can be activated in a time of need. We can learn from the nations that have a form of universal service and the impact it has on civic culture. Let's start with one possible impact of required military service on a nation's cultural health. Of the seven happiest countries in 2024 according to The World Happiness Report (conducted by University of Oxford and the UN) five of the seven have active national service programs. It is very possible that having shared goals and experiences while working with people from a variety of backgrounds plays a role in the overall happiness of a nation.

Universal Service programs bring together participants from diverse geographic regions, economic backgrounds, and cultural traditions. When individuals work side by side on projects that benefit the broader community—whether rebuilding homes after natural disasters, tutoring students, or restoring public lands—they develop relationships that transcend stereotypes and political labels.

These experiences are particularly valuable for young adults who are forming their views about society and their place within it. Living and working with people from different backgrounds encourages empathy, understanding, and respect. It also fosters a deeper appreciation for the diversity that characterizes the United States.

Shared service can also help rebuild trust in democratic institutions. When citizens see the tangible results of their efforts, whether improved schools, stronger communities, or restored ecosystems, they gain confidence that collective action can make a positive difference.

Historically, the earlier mentioned periods of national mobilization have produced similar effects. The shared sacrifices of World War II created a powerful sense of national unity that endured for decades. While today's challenges may differ from those of wartime, the principle remains the same: when Americans work together toward common goals, the bonds of citizenship grow stronger.

Universal National Service therefore offers a practical way to strengthen civic culture in a time when many Americans feel disconnected from one another and from their government.

Developing Leadership and Character

Beyond fostering unity, Universal National Service also serves as an important training ground for leadership and personal development. Many of the skills required to serve effectively—discipline, teamwork, adaptability, and responsibility—are the same qualities needed to lead in both public and private life.

Experience is the best teacher. Three independent data sources, You Science (2022–2026), Education Week (2025), and the OECD (2025) consistently show that between two-thirds and three-quarters of high school graduates leave without a clear or confident direction for their future. Many people have supported the value of a “gap year” for those transitioning into the workforce or college. Universal National Service would help 18-year-olds see a broader view of what is possible, give them actual work experience, teach them how to work in teams, develop

leadership skills, build character, and grow from working with others from outside their community.

Participants in service programs often confront complex problems that require creative solutions. Whether helping to coordinate disaster relief efforts or teaching in under-resourced schools, volunteers must learn to collaborate with others, manage limited resources, and respond to unexpected challenges. These experiences help cultivate resilience and confidence. Individuals who complete a demanding year of service often emerge with a stronger sense of purpose and a clearer understanding of how their talents can contribute to society.

American history offers many examples of leaders whose character was shaped by service. Former Presidents John F. Kennedy and George H. W. Bush served in WW II, Bush as a naval aviator and Kennedy as a PT Boat Commander. All levels of society felt compelled to serve our nation. And both went on to serve country in public office. Similarly, longtime U.S. senator John McCain endured years as a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War, an experience that profoundly influenced his approach to leadership and public service.

While not every participant in Universal National Service will pursue a political career, the lessons learned through service can shape leadership in many fields, including business, education, nonprofits and community organizations. By encouraging young Americans to serve, the nation invests in the development of a generation better prepared to address the complex challenges of the future. More importantly, we submit that participation in universal service will help build informed citizens who will have the courage to make our democracy thrive and therefore will extend the life of our Democratic Republic.

Addressing National Challenges Through Service

There is a wide variety of areas in which Universal National Service could benefit individual communities and the nation as a whole. Programs can play a practical role in addressing some of the country's most pressing challenges. By mobilizing thousands of volunteers each year, service initiatives can expand the nation's capacity to respond to critical needs.

One area where service programs have proven particularly effective is disaster response. Volunteers trained in emergency management can assist communities recovering from hurricanes, wildfires, floods, and other natural disasters. Their efforts help accelerate recovery while providing valuable experience in crisis management.

Environmental conservation represents another opportunity for service. A modern version of the Civilian Conservation Corps could help restore forests, maintain national parks, and address challenges related to climate change and natural resource management. Such programs would not only protect the nation's natural heritage but also create opportunities for hands-on education in environmental stewardship.

Education is another area where service can make a meaningful difference. Volunteers working as tutors or mentors can help address learning gaps, particularly in underserved communities. By supporting teachers and schools, universal service participants can contribute to improved educational outcomes for students across the country.

Community development projects—such as building affordable housing, improving infrastructure, or supporting public health initiatives—also benefit from the energy and commitment of service volunteers. These efforts demonstrate that universal service is not merely symbolic; it provides tangible benefits that strengthen communities and improve quality of life.

Economic and Social Benefits

For young adults who may be uncertain about their career paths, a year of service can provide valuable direction. Participants often discover new interests and talents while gaining real-world experience that strengthens their resumes.

According to the National Bureau of Labor, in 1979 there was a peak in high school students working, with about 59% having jobs. In 2024 that number dropped to 22.5%. Getting away from the house and video games is a way for young adults to grow up, learn how to work with others, be responsible for showing up on time, etc. Too many are missing that key element of life experience.

Participants will graduate from the program with a better understanding of what work is and how to add value to an enterprise. They will have been exposed to a wider range of possibilities, and be exposed to training in practical skills such as project management, construction, environmental science and education. They will have a clearer vision of how they want to invest their time and talent toward serving a specific need for economic gain. Upon completion, many will be able to contribute to the success of the economy more rapidly than had they not had this experience.

These experiences help participants develop competencies that are highly valued in the workforce. Most importantly, universal service allows the participants to learn leadership skills at an early age through experiential opportunities. From a broader economic perspective, universal service programs represent an investment in human capital. By equipping participants with skills and experience, the nation strengthens its workforce and enhances long-term economic productivity.

Service programs also contribute to social mobility. Individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds gain access to training, mentorship, and professional networks that might otherwise be unavailable to them. As a result, universal service can help reduce inequality while fostering a sense of shared opportunity.

Educational incentives further enhance the value of service programs. Many initiatives could offer scholarships or tuition assistance that help participants pursue higher education or vocational training. These benefits not only reward service but also expand access to educational opportunities.

Perhaps, the greatest benefit of Universal Service is that the participant is being exposed and working alongside a cross section of society which is different in some way from that which they grew up in. This fosters an attitude of acceptance of others rather than the reflexive intolerance we may have been taught out of ignorance of other subcultures. In the words of author

John Inazu, it will help create “confident Pluralism”. As we have seen, in the countries who currently have mandatory national military service this can create a more united nation.

Addressing Criticisms of Universal Service

There are two arguments that must be addressed in the context of Universal National Service. The first would come from the Libertarian camp. They’d say we are infringing on an individual’s freedom. Yes, on the surface that is true. But what is required of the individual for a life filled with freedom? Universal National Service a personal investment in a free society that we all must work together to maintain.

The second argument against Universal National Service could be, a young person needs to keep progressing academically and experiencedly to achieve their full potential, a year of service would retard their progress. The answer is, a year of service would contribute a year of practical experience which would lead to a more productive individual and a contributor to the nation’s health.

Others raise concerns about the cost of expanding service programs. However, the long-term benefits, including workforce development, improved community infrastructure, and stronger civic engagement will offset the initial investment.

Another criticism is that universal service might become overly militarized. This concern can be addressed by ensuring that service opportunities include a wide range of civilian roles in areas such as education, conservation, and public health.

Finally, some skeptics question whether large-scale service programs can be effectively managed. Yet existing initiatives like AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps demonstrate that well-structured programs can successfully mobilize thousands of volunteers each year. By building on these established models, policymakers can expand universal service in ways that remain efficient, flexible, and responsive to community needs.

Ask yourself what do I owe my country? Is it too much to ask that you invest some sweat equity in the future success of our nation? The return on investment will yield a lasting positive impact by learning through experience the values that will play a very important role in your success as an adult and contribute to a stronger and healthier nation.

Policy Recommendations

To realize the benefits of universal service, policymakers should pursue several practical steps.

The United States should establish a required Universal National Service year for all 18-year-old citizens and noncitizens who wish to become citizens. Participants could choose from a range of service options, including military service, environmental conservation, education, and community development.

A key element must include a two-month long bootcamp that includes, civics education, team building and joint participation in a project needed in the area they are centered in.

A stipend and benefits such as trade school or college tuition, mortgage assistance, health insurance while serving, and potential other types of benefits must be a part of the program.

Partnerships with universities, nonprofit organizations, and private businesses could help expand service opportunities while ensuring that programs address real community needs.

Conclusion

Universal National Service represents more than a policy proposal; it embodies a vision of citizenship rooted in shared responsibility and collective purpose. At a time when Americans often feel divided by politics, culture, and geography, Universal National Service offers a practical way to reconnect citizens with one another and with the nation they share. Universal National Service helps build informed citizens which helps build engaged citizenship.

We all live in one national culture populated by many sub cultures. The health of the national culture allows the subcultures to flourish and be safe. Universal National Service programs gain valuable skills, build lasting relationships, and develop a deeper understanding of their country. In the process, they help strengthen communities and contribute to the broader national interest.

The challenge issued decades ago by John F. Kennedy remains as relevant today as it was then. A renewed commitment to universal service can inspire a generation to embrace the responsibilities of citizenship while building a stronger and more united nation. Through expanded service opportunities, the United States can cultivate leaders, restore civic trust, and reaffirm the enduring principle that the strength of the nation ultimately depends on the willingness of its citizens to serve.

* Dennis A. Ross is a Former Member of Congress and the founder of the American Center for Public Leadership

Chip Webster is a past President of Vistage Florida. He is the author of "Unity In Service, a Pathway to Responsible Citizenship" and currently serves as Chairman of the Board of Tampa Bay Watch