

Toward a Bold New Policy Agenda: Five Ideas to Advance Civic Engagement Opportunities for Older Americans

By John S. Gomperts

In October 2006, Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act. Almost unnoticed in this legislation were the small steps added to begin developing new civic engagement options for older Americans. Specifically, the new Older Americans Act authorizes the head of the Administration on Aging to make grants to organizations that engage older adults in volunteer service to meet critical community needs. The legislation also directs that area agencies on aging include civic engagement in their annual planning. Perhaps most significantly, the act directs the Administration on Aging to work with the chief executive of the Corporation for National and Community Service to “develop a comprehensive strategy for utilizing older individuals to address critical local needs of national concern, including the engagement of older individuals in the activities of public and nonprofit organizations such as community-based organizations, including faith-based organizations” (U.S. Congress, 2006).

Though the civic engagement provisions in the new law are far from earth-shattering, they have been a long time coming and are perhaps a

Balancing the costs and benefits of an aging society.

welcome start in the direction of more robust policies. In the best-case scenario, this modest beginning will turn out to have been the harbinger of a burst of policy innova-

tion that helps shape expectations and opportunities for active civic engagement for Americans who have finished their midlife careers.

The new Older Americans Act is a start, but what should come next? This article describes why further policy initiatives are important, spells out a set of criteria by which to judge whether policies might be beneficial, and outlines five new policy initiatives that can help advance a variety of civic engagement opportunities for older Americans.

WHY THINK ABOUT POLICY CHANGE?

Though the statistics about the aging of the U.S. population are no longer news, they are nonetheless breathtaking. In a little more than five years, 20 percent of the population of the United States will be over the age of 60. This seismic demographic shift will bring profound changes to schools and universities, to healthcare and housing, to transportation and the workplace, to virtually every institution in our lives (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

We are already having a debate about the consequences of an aging America. But so far that debate has focused almost exclusively on the additional costs to programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. The importance of these issues is undeniable, both for the financial and health security of individuals and for the fiscal solvency of the country. But the changes that the demographic wave will bring go far beyond these fiscal realities. And with the first baby boomers nearing the doorstep of traditional retirement age, the time has come for policy to reflect reality: The largest generation ever to pass through its 40s and 50s is now moving into its 60s.

The realist in all of us must acknowledge that it is reasonable and responsible for policy makers to be concerned first with the costs associated with an aging society. At the same time, a debate that focuses only on the burdens of aging will bring costs of its own—negativity, generational resentments, an unhealthy sense of separation and isolation. Advancing an ambitious set of proposals to reap the potential benefits of aging, on the other hand, would have important symbolic impact as well as a substantive one, as we begin to capture the energy, idealism, and talents of millions of Americans who want to make a major contribution to the public good. In this respect, the civic engagement agenda can balance the scales.

A one-sided debate focused only on costs (and proposals to ameliorate costs one way or another) risks missing another opportunity for public benefit. Survey research has shown a deep wellspring of interest in pursuing opportunities to work—in ways both paid and unpaid—for the public good (MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures). In a nation filled with needs in education, healthcare, and the social sector, and at a time when people across the nation yearn for a greater feeling of connectedness and community, looking away from the potential of engaging older adults would be as irresponsible as ignoring the costs of an aging society.

Policies, especially broad federal policies, have advantages that cannot be found in any other kind of initiative.

A serious policy debate about civic engagement will help to educate leaders at all levels

about the potential contribution of older Americans. Too often today, politicians (even those who are themselves older) carry around stereotypes of older Americans—as a heterogeneous group who are all frail and dependent. The possibilities for people who are between their midlife careers and very advanced age are not yet evident to most political leaders. That should be remedied, and advancing a bold policy agenda is one way to grab the attention and change the minds of leaders in the public domain.

In addition, consideration of serious policy proposals would bring a new and different type of media coverage of older-adult civic engagement issues. Instead of being relegated to “feel-good” stories in the style and living sections of Saturday newspapers, a policy debate about civic engagement of older Americans conducted by media-savvy politicians would catapult the issue into the national news section and imbue the idea with a level of seriousness that it has not previously enjoyed in the mainstream media.

Finally, policy discussions held at the highest levels often lay the groundwork for future funding. Although the current federal budget situation makes a huge new federal program highly unlikely, even comparatively small government investments have the possibility of scale and geographic reach that are beyond the capacity of privately funded efforts. To create models of engagement that have the chance of reaching all Americans, the size and scope that comes with even a small federal investment will be invaluable.

That said, these evident benefits of pursuing a policy agenda should never blind us to the considerable risks of even successful policy campaigns. First, these policy discussions should launch a period of active innovation and experimentation, but government is not generally a good source of innovation. The ever-present fear of “wasting taxpayer funds” augers against government agencies committing to bold experimentation. Second, federally supported programs quickly develop strong constituencies and are difficult to end, even if those programs are not the most effective deployment of limited resources. Third, federal investment also carries the risk of crowding out other smaller

investors and introducing partisan and ideological politics into a domain that has remained remarkably nonpolitical through the years.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS FOR POLICY PROPOSALS

These cautionary notes are not reasons to abandon the policy agenda, but they do suggest a set of criteria for evaluating potential policy ideas. At this early stage in the development of new ideas for older-adult civic engagement, policies should do the following:

Support innovation and experimentation by individuals and organizations. We simply do not know what type of programs will attract members of the baby boom generation into significant service and volunteering, and we also do not know what type of approach will work best for the organizations and institutions that engage people. Under these circumstances, a period of intense innovation and experimentation is most appropriate. Even with plenty of innovation and experimentation, it is not realistic to believe that any single program will appeal to everyone or to every organization. If nothing else, the boomer generation is known for wanting choice, so policies must avoid the search for the “silver bullet” program that engages everyone, and instead work to develop a menu of opportunities that are appealing for individuals and organizations.

Make it possible for new organizations to come into existence and for existing organizations to innovate. One of the successes of AmeriCorps, the federally funded network of local, state, and national programs, is that it helped brilliant new organizations like CityYear, Public Allies, and Teach for America to flourish, and it helped bring new energy and resources to more established organizations like the Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and the American Red Cross. An effort to engage older Americans in service and volunteering should have the same type of impact on the organizations in the nonprofit sector.

Attract the broadest possible range of participants. Like AmeriCorps, new civic engagement endeavors should be open to all participants—with no limitations based on income, education, health status, or ability. Policies should be focused on

engaging older Americans to meet community challenges and solve real community problems.

Expand the current versions of older adult volunteering to a broader spectrum of engagement opportunities ranging from occasional volunteer activities to time-limited service opportunities to full-time work options.

Draw champions and support from leaders across the ideological spectrum. In a time of division, people have a hunger for ideas that bring people (including political leaders) together. Civic engagement has that potential. Each recent president (George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush) has advanced a major civic engagement agenda (Points of Light, AmeriCorps, and USA Freedom Corps) (Greenya, 2006). And what’s more, each president has actively supported the civic engagement proposals of the others. A major proposal focused on older-adult civic engagement should be designed to extend that bipartisan enthusiasm.

FIVE POLICY PROPOSALS

With these principles in mind, here are the broad outlines of five policy proposals to significantly advance the civic engagement options for people who have finished their midlife work and want a chance to make a major commitment and contribution to the public good.

Experience Fellows. People who are seeking to make a major commitment to service and good work often suffer from a lack of knowledge about and access to appropriate opportunities. People are not certain what they want, and organizations are not certain that they can make a long-term commitment. For many young people, we have eased this transition with internships and fellowships that provide an entry point and structure for gaining experience. These arrangements also provide the organizations with an inexpensive labor pool and a concrete way to engage young people.

The Experience Fellows program would create a similar pathway and structure for people who have completed their midlife careers but seek a way to enter into a period of work for the public good. The program would be modeled on the best aspects of the White House Fellows Program, VISTA, and the Coro Fellows, a

leadership training program sponsored by a nonprofit institute. People would apply for and be accepted as experience fellows. Each fellow selected would be vetted to seek a volunteer assignment from any nonprofit organization or public agency. The Fellows program would cover a stipend for the experience fellow and also provide funds to support training for the host organization. Organizations would compete to get smart, experienced fellows.

The Experience Fellows program would start as a federal pilot program, growing to include as many as 1,000 fellows per year. However, the fellowship model could be replicated on a state and local level, and could even be replicated by employers in the private sector who wanted to help employees nearing retirement make the transition to nonprofit or public sector jobs.

Reverse GI Bill. The GI Bill established the basic concept of rewarding service with educational opportunity. It was one of the great successes of the twentieth century. For people who have finished their midlife careers and who want to move into work or service in the nonprofit sector, a reverse GI Bill can provide similar benefits.

Many people who want to move into professions in high-need areas like education or healthcare will require a period of training or education. In some instances, people might need to gain a credential or certificate. The student loan approach may not be practical for people in their middle years. The Reverse GI Bill, modeled on the approach of ROTC and the Public Health Service Corps, would support midlife individuals in getting education and training; the people would then repay the educational support by a period of service in a high-need profession. One year of education or training would be repaid through two or three years of service or work.

Expansion of Troops to Teachers. The federal government already has a highly successful transition program called Troops to Teachers. In the past dozen years, some 8,400 veterans of the armed services have received support to gain teaching credentials and have then been recruited into teaching and administration jobs in high-need areas (Chan, 2006). The program has been a great success, winning plaudits from school principals and other educators and from independent evaluators.

Recognizing the success of Troops to Teachers, Congress just authorized a study of a small Troops to Nurse Educators pilot program (Maze, 2006), which would recruit people from the Army and Navy medical corps into nursing education, an area that is suffering from a workforce shortage.

Further extensions of the Troops to Teachers idea also hold promise. Federal employees, for example, are eligible for an excellent retirement program after thirty years of federal service, allowing many to retire from the federal government in their mid 50s, with decades of productive public service left. They could benefit from a program that allowed them to make a transition to education or other high-need fields.

Organizational Innovation Fund. In the fall of 2005, the Corporation for National and Community Service put out a call for proposals for existing organizations to make special efforts to engage baby boomers. The corporation required a stiff (two to one) private matching requirement to apply for these funds. After Hurricane Katrina, the corporation narrowed the call for proposals to efforts responding to the disaster in the Gulf region. Even with these limitations and the challenging match requirement, the corporation received a large number of proposals (Hunn, 2005).

The corporation's experience with this one-time competition demonstrates that a comparatively small investment of federal dollars can stimulate nonprofit organizations to adopt new practices to engage older Americans in service and volunteering. Building on the corporation's experience, an Organizational Innovation Fund would provide federal grants to nonprofit organizations that adopt new and creative ways to engage older Americans in service and volunteer work. The focus of the grants would be to create new opportunities for high-commitment, high-impact service and volunteering.

Through the operation of a matching grant requirement, these funds would bring additional private investment in older-adult civic engagement. And by lodging the response in nonprofit organizations (either existing organizations or potentially new organizations), the fund provides the greatest chance for creative, risk-taking responses from the nongovernmental sector.

Blue Ribbon Commission to Evaluate, Report, Recommend. Each of the foregoing proposals is designed to stimulate creativity, innovation, and experimentation in the private sector. The range of approaches reflects an understanding that no one yet knows the best ways to attract people who have finished their midlife careers into high-commitment volunteering, service, and work in the public interest. A variety of approaches should be explored, tried, and evaluated.

To bring all that work together, my final proposal is that Congress and the president establish a blue-ribbon commission to oversee the implementation and evaluation of older-adult civic engagement programs. The panel should comprise people from the nonprofit sector, the private sector, government, and academia. After two years of implementation, the commission should present a formal report to Congress and the president analyzing the efforts to date and making specific recommendations for the best future public and private investments to engage people who have completed their midlife careers in high-quality volunteering, service, and work for the public good.

SUMMARY

As the demographic reality of an older America emerges, debates about the costs of such a society will continue, as they should. Just as important to the quality of life for all Americans—young, old, and in the middle—is a discussion about the ways that an older America (and older Americans) can bring benefits to our communities. Advancing a bold and inventive agenda for engaging people of all ages in high-quality volunteering, service, and work should be

a major part of that effort. In the end, this debate over policy will balance the costs and benefits of an aging society and will produce a new range of opportunities for those who have finished their midlife careers to be deeply engaged in the life of our communities and our country. ❧

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