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Claremont McKenna College

**A Proposal for Mandatory National Service:
Developing Cross-Cultural Empathy To Combat Social
Division and Political Polarization**

Submitted to
Professor George Thomas

by
Torben Deese

for
Senior Thesis
Spring 2022
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Abstract: The United States' democracy has been losing empathy at an alarming rate. Both sides of the political aisle have lost respect and the ability to have constructive conversations about the future of our country. The polarization we have seen in this country has largely been a result of the limited ways in which we can develop empathy across cultures and regions in the United States. These limitations are related to trends in civic engagement and social bubbles that have grown in the United States over the last 30 years. A solution to this problem is a mandatory national service program. By creating an environment where people will need to immerse themselves in a new culture and engage in regular conversations with people from different regions and cultures, empathy can be developed. There are also many external benefits associated with national service that will make the project both viable and worthwhile. Through this program, polarization in the coming generations of voters will likely be alleviated. By breaking down social divisions, national service can revitalize American democracy.

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Introduction: The Social Division in American Bubbles

I grew up in Sumner, Washington. A small, rural, and conservative town just slightly removed from the I-5 corridor in Washington state. Despite Washington being one of the most Democratic states in the union, throughout my upbringing I was exposed to extremely conservative viewpoints culminating in a large portion of my city supporting Donald Trump in the 2016 election. In many ways, growing up in this environment allowed me to appreciate the availability of opposing viewpoints. As a person raised by two parents who align with the Democratic party, it was interesting growing up having conversations going back as early as the third grade about both sides of any political argument. While it was mostly regurgitation of whatever our parents said out loud or what we saw on the news until we were in high school, there was a foundation that was created where healthy disagreement could exist between friends and the relationships would not be harmed. Now I have many friends of various political ideologies who I consistently discuss politics with without any animosity. Although, since the beginning of the Trump administration, there has been quicker jumps to judge individuals based on their political alignment even in areas where people are exposed to a diversity of viewpoints. The fact that individuals are less likely to have political conversations or that they are more outwardly assertive in their political beliefs might make it more difficult to empathize with other political viewpoints.

Communities like Sumner exist all over the country in liberal states, which means that in liberally concentrated areas there are opportunities for constructive debate. Although, in terms of respectful political discourse my experiences in Sumner were the exception, not the norm. Social isolation has clearly arisen in small conservative rural

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areas like Sumner. Furthermore, the experiences that have really opened my eyes were when I lived for 4 months in Nashville, Tennessee and when I was able to visit my college friend's home town in Oklahoma, both while I was a junior in college. The experiences and conversations I have had throughout my life have led me to realize that the lack of empathy in America is really a problem in these areas of the country. There are certainly people in major liberal urban areas like Seattle, Portland, or San Francisco that disseminate strong beliefs that limit empathy, but in areas with low population density and homogenous populations it is easy to ignore other people's issues.

What I found when I visited places in the southern United States was that the people living there are living in a completely different world than the one I had grown up in. Urban issues like homelessness had been something that I had been exposed to my entire life living near Seattle, but when I was driving around Oklahoma City it became clear that homelessness was not really an issue there.¹ While this is one of very many politicized issues, it seemed symbolic to me. If they were not being made aware of the ways in which poor people, especially those without homes, were suffering in our country, then how could they possibly want to support liberal policies like welfare. In the same way, the argument can be made that people living in urban environments are incapable of understanding the issues that people in rural areas face. Fixing this "empathy deficit"² could reconcile some of the stark disagreements over policy-making that have created democratic dysfunction. Spending money on an issue that seems non-existent in Oklahoma makes no sense, especially when the money has to come from tax revenue

¹ Oklahoma City. "Homelessness." Studies and Reports | City of OKC, 2020.

<https://www.okc.gov/departments/planning/programs/homelessness/studies-and-reports>.

² Judith Hall. "The U.S. Has an Empathy Deficit." Scientific American. Scientific American, September 17, 2020. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-us-has-an-empathy-deficit/>.

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raised by the people of Oklahoma. However, exposing people from Oklahoma or other geographically sparse areas to people who have missed out on the opportunities that the United States is supposed to provide could change their opinion on federal social programs. At the same time, these conversations could lead to more support for limits on spending. Either way, creating healthy conversations is what is most important.

It is unfortunate that proposals for federal programs do not necessarily target the people that are living modest lives in rural or suburban areas, but rely on their tax dollars to be successful. In reality, Blue States are contributing a lot more in tax revenue and getting less back.³ Despite this, the perception on the American right is often that tax spending that is targeted outside of a person's small community or the issues they care about the most is wasted tax revenue. However, opposing federal programs that would help people, like those living in the worst conditions, ignores the collective nature of the *United States* of America. Conservatism has really been focused on taking care of one's family and community and limiting the role of government spending broadly, while the American Left (focusing more on the rising popularity of the progressive movement) cares about providing economic stability to the entirety of the American people. We must look deeper into these polarizing differences in order to understand how our democracy is being harmed.

The real problem that arises in these divisive political issues is the fact that there are clear uncompromising social divides in the United States. Not just on party lines, but by class, geography, and culture. There is an overwhelming amount of evidence that

³ Tom Zirpoli. "Zirpoli: The States That Are Givers and Takers of Federal Dollars May Surprise." Baltimore Sun. Baltimore Sun, May 5, 2020. https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/carroll/opinion/cc-op-zirpoli-050620-20200506-7ya7okjfk5btdpy_snmrfouyz4-story.html.

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supports what I witnessed in Oklahoma or even at home in Sumner that there are strong divisions in this country that are not being regularly bridged. The problem of these kinds of bubbles is that there is no ability to empathize with or understand people outside of the given social bubble. People in Oklahoma do not have access to opposing voices and people in Sumner are very similar so the only exposure is from outsiders in nearby urban areas. The lack of exposure to differing viewpoints creates massive social divides that limit empathy.

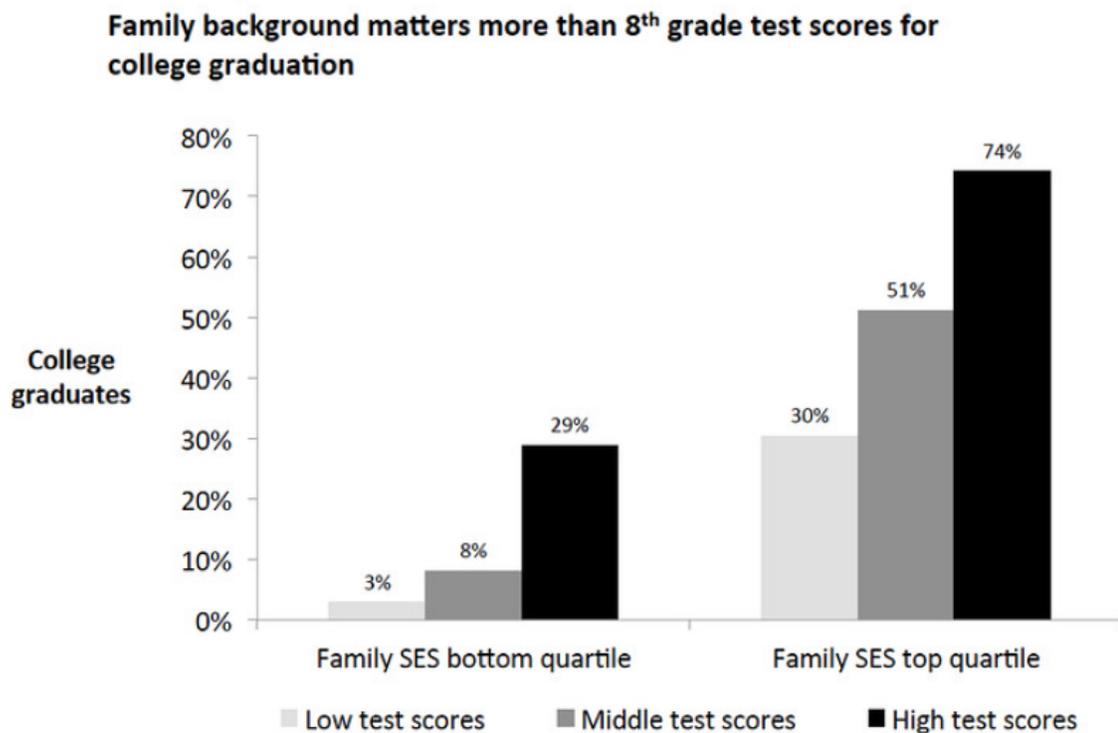
Books like Robert Putnam's *Our Kids* and Charles Murray's *Coming Apart* convey how America has fallen into a class-divided country. These divides, as Murray puts it, harm our ability to have a free society.⁴ What Murray argues is that the virtues of those that are in isolated upper-class neighborhoods are not being shared with the poorest Americans.⁵ I would also add that, by isolating themselves, upper class Americans shield themselves from facing issues that are too prevalent in poorer communities. Along with Murray, Putnam's commentary on mobility in his book *Our Kids* helps to further these claims because they show that people are stuck in the situations they are born into more frequently because the rate of interaction between social bubbles is much lower. Figure 1, from *Our Kids*⁶, conveys the restrictive way that class divisions have inhibited progress in the United States.

⁴ Charles Murray. "Coming apart: The state of white America, 1960-2010." Crown Forum, 2012.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Robert D. Putnam. *Our kids: The American dream in crisis*. Simon and Schuster, 2016. p. 190.

Figure 1: Dividing Success



In Murray's *Coming Apart*, he makes the case that there is a distinct white upper class and a white lower class that are becoming increasingly distant from one another. The "New Lower Class" is suffering because, as Murray argues "marriage, industriousness, community, and faith have all but collapsed."⁷ While Murray paints the divide between classes perfectly, his emphasis on culture is not perfect. Bringing the two classes together is not necessarily about the upper class gifting the lower class with their virtuous attitudes. It is more-so the case that class division has made empathy and cohesion between the two groups impossible. People cannot learn from one another, whether it is the upper class ignoring mainstream issues or the lower class struggling to

⁷ Jennifer Schuessler. "A Lightning Rod in the Storm over America's Class Divide." The New York Times. The New York Times, February 5, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/06/books/charles-murrays-coming-apart-the-state-of-white-america.html>

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pursue the American Dream. The growing ignorance of what life is like in the other bubble is causing divisive strain in American society.

We can take Putnam's concerns about mobility to more see how the problem is really rooted in a lack of interaction between the two sides. Putnam discusses his hometown of Port Clinton, Ohio as an example of how America has shifted its ability to empathize. Kids that graduated from high school in Port Clinton in 1959, when Putnam graduated, did better than their parents in life at a rate of 80%.⁸ Disadvantaged kids were just as likely to succeed as rich people. The rates of mobility, according to Putnam, are much lower today than they were in 1959. Putnam wants to draw attention to class segregation by geography. He calls the book "Our Kids" because people are now focused on just their own kids and "our kids" no longer implies care for every kid growing up in a community.⁹ There is no empathy for the people that are living on "the wrong side of the tracks" because people just are not interacting with them enough to appreciate their circumstances. Creating a collective solution to this enormous barrier to effective democracy is key to our proposed solution of national service. Putnam argues that the only way to solve the problems he examines is to make Americans more aware.

While Murray focuses on how upper-class isolation has had negative impacts on American society, Putnam really focuses on how young people are being impacted by social divides. Focusing on young people is crucial because they are the population that is most easily impacted. Social divides are clearly impacting schools, sports teams, and any form of social interaction that young people regularly engage in. As these social settings become increasingly stratified, it makes it more difficult for young people to engage with

⁸ Robert D. Putnam. *Our kids: The American dream in crisis*. Simon and Schuster, 2016. p. 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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other viewpoints and become well-rounded individuals. The solution to these social divides must come through creating a community where young people are put on an even playing field to learn and grow together.

The bubbles in the United States have arisen because it is easy to ignore the other side when the upper class is in control and it is impossible for this to be broken by a lower class that has no power. I will briefly touch on this later with respect to the political divides that have originated from these social bubbles. Furthermore, there are more and more instances where cities and neighborhoods are being spread in ways that make nearby communities more homogenous and economically segregated. These cause people to have limited interactions with people outside of their bubble. Limited interaction almost guarantees that empathy cannot be created in American society.

In Adam Smith's "A Theory of Moral Sentiments" he discusses his concept of the impartial spectator.¹⁰ The impartial spectator serves as a perfect tool for achieving empathy. Being an impartial spectator asks individuals to put themselves in the shoes of an unbiased bystander who has no vested interest in the issue. By doing this a person can see the issue from all the different perspectives without personal emotions or experience on a regular basis. Maybe there would be a lot more empathy in the United States, however this skews the possible solutions. Asking people to consciously and constantly engage in this kind of thought experiment is not likely or realistic. Instead we should focus on the lessons of the impartial spectator. The impartial spectator has to take all the different perspectives into account. Considering all the different perspectives is

¹⁰ Adam Smith. *The theory of moral sentiments*. Penguin, 2010. p. 19.

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something that Americans have a very difficult time with especially considering that some people are not even exposed to all the different viewpoints.

So, why are we incapable of imagining all the different perspectives? American society is moving to more and more social isolation, where people are not engaging in regular social interaction with people who have different views than them. We lack the environments for difficult conversations and we lack the exposure to new ideas. When people feel comfortable they get complacent and complacency does not lead to an effectively reactive democracy. Instead, complacency leads to a resistance to change that is unhealthy for democratic growth.

Ultimately, in this thesis I will argue that there is a lack of cross-cultural and cross-regional empathy in the United States. Political actors are not necessarily selfish, but they are limited in the scope of their considerations and their priorities due to a lack of opportunity to interact with people from around the country or even people living in nearby communities. The class isolation that we have created has lent itself to a politically polarized environment that has put the foundations of our democracy at risk. American democracy requires every member of society to commit themselves to engaging with others and this can only be accomplished through broad social reprogramming.

If people truly believe in things like the American Dream, where democracy upholds the ability of people to actively pursue goals and freely participate in society, then eliminating divisions that limit mobility and deliberative democracy are necessary. The proposed solution of mandatory national service will force everyone to break out of their social bubbles and experience other cultures and viewpoints. By creating more

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empathy we can reestablish a society that is not divided by class and regularly ignorant of other people's experiences, but instead create a society where regular interactions with new viewpoints leads to a cohesive society that promotes mobility.

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Chapter 1: Political Polarization

Due to partisan polarization, United States democracy has been challenged in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. The Trump administration regularly capitalized on a build up of distrust across all of American politics and society to succeed politically.¹¹ The growth of distrust and disagreement has to do with a lack of empathy and understanding from those with opposing viewpoints. It is important to acknowledge that these issues have been exacerbated by both conservative and liberal political actors. The disgruntled attitudes that have arisen on the American right are in-part due to the uncompromising beliefs being spewed by the American left. Political divisions reached a peak during the disastrous 2020 election in which the consistent integrity of American elections was called into question at a rate that was unprecedented and with a more aggressive tone than the questions surrounding the 2000 election.¹²¹³

In the book *Parchment Barriers*, several professors lay out the historical foundation by which we have come to this particular level of polarization.¹⁴ The history of partisan politics in the United States has led to many conflicts that have pushed the two major political parties further apart. The book describes the limitations that polarization has created for the proper functioning of each of the three branches of the federal government. For Congress, as Kathryn Pearson writes, polarization has created a deadlocked legislative process that severely limits the laws that representatives can pass

¹¹ Robert C. Rowland. "The populist and nationalist roots of Trump's rhetoric." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 22, no. 3 (2019): 343-388.

¹² Although there were questions about the 2000 election that led to the SCOTUS case *Bush v. Gore*, the level of distrust in the election did not elevate to the seriousness that was highlighted on January 6, 2021.

¹³ *Bush v. Gore*, 531 U.S. 98, 121 S. Ct. 525, 148 L. Ed. 2d 388 (2000).

¹⁴ Kenneth Miller, Eric Helland, and Zachary Courser. *Parchment Barriers: Political Polarization and the Limits of Constitutional Order*. University Press of Kansas, 2018.

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for their constituents.¹⁵ While Congress is a deliberative body and should not pass laws without significant discussion and debate, it is clear that partisan polarization has led to an unwillingness to negotiate or compromise when important benefits hang in the balance. Overuse of the filibuster and Congressional rules aimed at blocking the use of law-making powers have made Congress a victim of polarization. We can take the recent example of Joe Biden's Build Back Better bill which was ultimately trashed because of an inability to get any Republican approval.¹⁶ The bill was a clear example where neither side was listening to one another, they were instead operating from a place of partisan fortitude.

For the Judicial branch polarization has made things extremely difficult for the people who are appointed. The Supreme Court has been repeatedly referred to as an "activist" court because their decisions are consistently politicized and, despite SCOTUS justices non-partisanship, each justice is labeled by their political ideology.¹⁷ Because of their decisions relative to a certain ideology, openings on the Supreme Court have led to strong attacks on the character and judgment of those who are nominated. While I will not make any supposition about the validity of any Supreme Court nominee's accusation, I will say that the lack of empathy and sharp aggression that these people endure is troubling. Polarization has created an environment that is hostile towards these

¹⁵ Kathryn Pearson. "Rising Polarization in the U.S. Congress" Eds. Miller, Kenneth, Eric Helland, and Zachary Courser. *Parchment Barriers: Political Polarization and the Limits of Constitutional Order*. University Press of Kansas, 2018. pp. 35-57.

¹⁶ Post Editorial Board. "Biden's 'Build Back' Is Failing Because It Was Never a Good Idea." *New York Post*. *New York Post*, October 28, 2021.
<https://nypost.com/2021/10/28/bidens-build-back-is-failing-because-it-was-never-a-good-idea/?msclkid=c7f79e31c36f11ecb411a3e8f5913a39>.

¹⁷ George Thomas. "The Madisonian Constitution, Political Dysfunction, and Polarized Politics" Eds. Miller, Kenneth, Eric Helland, and Zachary Courser. *Parchment Barriers: Political Polarization and the Limits of Constitutional Order*. University Press of Kansas, 2018. pp. 15-34.

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individuals who are supposed to be apolitical in their decision-making which makes their job much more difficult.

For the executive, polarization created through a lack of empathy has never been more prevalent than under the Trump administration.¹⁸ Trump's use of divisive rhetoric tore American democracy apart. Conservative individuals had to support someone whose words were harmful and worked against healthy conversations in America, liberals reacted to this by implementing attitudes like cancel culture where those sharing taboo conservative beliefs were judged and in extreme cases punished for their beliefs.¹⁹ The problem is that people were not taking the opportunity to empathize with one another. The executive branch has the power to bring people together or push them apart. Our President should be a symbol of empathy and combatting polarization. Divisive leadership is harmful to our democracy.

While the problem of polarization has manifested itself in every branch of American government, the solution to the problem has to be widespread social change. Voters are responsible for putting divisive officials in office and their election is a result of a broad social divide in the United States. Not only do legislators, justices and the President need to be more open-minded and in favor of across-the-aisle deliberation, but every voter is responsible for changing this pattern. If voters refuse to accept a government that does not internalize empathy for every American in the policies it produces, then they can show that growing empathy is a priority. Additionally, an

¹⁸ Robert C. Rowland. "The populist and nationalist roots of Trump's rhetoric." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 22, no. 3 (2019): 343-388.

¹⁹ Douglas Blair. "12 People Canceled by the Left after Expressing Conservative Views." The Heritage Foundation. Accessed April 23, 2022.
<https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/commentary/12-people-canceled-the-left-after-expressing-conservative-views?mselkid=a9615133c37011eca3abb56fe7f81660>.

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important note with this is that the lack of empathy is not one-sided. Polarization has caused left-leaning individuals to engage in hypocritical condemnations of conservative beliefs and those who hold those beliefs without engaging in conversations. Therefore, the solution to this problem has to be rooted in creating a safe and effective environment for these kinds of conversations to occur.

The solution to political polarization will be extremely difficult because it will have to get done in spite of the problem. The mechanism by which it must be solved is the mechanism that it has harmed the most, representative government. Our representatives are having a more difficult time creating laws that benefit the general welfare now more than ever before. However, if we can focus on getting voters to develop empathy for other cultures and regions of the country, then perhaps this problem will be alleviated slowly. That is why I propose mandatory National Service for 1 year. The goal would be to put young people in the same living situation with other young people from around the country in an area where they have never lived before and allow their immersion into a new culture and their interactions with new viewpoints to give them a stronger ability to empathize with other Americans. A wider range of empathetic interactions will alleviate partisan polarization and will lead to a more deliberative democracy.

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Chapter 2: Social Capital and Social Bubbles

“Consensus is said to be a prerequisite for stable democracy”

-Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*²⁰

Robert Putnam and Charles Murray help to convey that the social/epistemic bubbles that have been fostered in the United States have led to an inability to interact with people of different backgrounds and classes. While there can be plenty of social interactions within these bubbles, homogeneity leads to groupthink and ignorance. It is important to understand how we can take an effective approach to building what Putnam calls “social capital” in the United States in order to both burst social bubbles and create a deliberative society.

Social Capital

To understand the full extent to which polarization and a lack of civic interaction harms American democracy we must look further into Robert Putnam’s concept of social capital. We have expanded our community without developing the interactive framework to build strong civic engagement. American democracy has left behind an age of regular civic engagement and moved towards more isolation and small exclusive social circles. In Robert Putnam’s first work on civic engagement *Making Democracy Work*, he explores the effects that social capital had on Italian democracy.²¹ Since Italy had separate regional governments, it was easy to see the relationship between the activity of the population in a given region and the effectiveness of that region’s democracy.

²⁰ Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti. "Making democracy work." In *Making democracy work*. Princeton university press, 1994. p. 116.

²¹ Ibid.

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Firstly, let's explain the term "social capital". Social capital is a term that Putnam uses to describe the interactions in a given population.²² Widespread networks, collective norms and the ability to build trust in a society are all included in the social capital that Putnam finds to be central to the success of democracy.²³ Social capital is how engaged the population is in different social organizations. People can be involved in any number of different types of organizations from something directly political, like Black Lives Matter, to something more casual, like the bowling leagues that Putnam analyzes. However, populations that tend to isolate themselves have a lower social capital because they are not building a collective network that cooperates and creates mutual benefits. I worry that the United States has fallen into a trend of decreasing social capital and this has resulted in an inability to empathize with different viewpoints. The failure to empathize creates many instances where mutual benefits are left behind because democracy has become uncooperative.

Both economists and political theorists alike find institutions to be an important factor in the social and economic health of a citizenry. Economists like James Robinson and Daron Acemoglu argue that the difference between a successful capitalist economy and its failure is how effective the democratic institutions are in creating a fair and competitive environment.²⁴ Robinson and Acemoglu argue that regions that are similar in all resources and human capital could have completely different economic outcomes related directly to the institutions governing the areas. He uses cities on either side of the Arizona-Mexico border to demonstrate how it is easier to create wealth when institutions

²² Ibid. pp. 163-185.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ James A. Robinson, and Daron Acemoglu. Why nations fail: The origins of power, prosperity and poverty. London: Profile, 2012.

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are more responsive, as they have been in the United States.²⁵ Putnam adds to this theory and argues that social capital is necessary to create these types of responsive institutions.

Italy demonstrated that areas where people were more involved in civic organizations including but not limited to religious groups, political groups, and recreational groups the institutions were more reactive to the citizenry.²⁶ Responsiveness created health in Italy because it prevented any corruption among elected officials. People that came together and had a level of respect for one another were able to hold their government more accountable. The lesson learned from Italy is that divisiveness makes it easy for those in power to use democracy to their advantage rather than operating for the people being governed. An alienated or isolated population becomes the antithesis to effective democracy. Therefore, it is key to move towards high levels of social capital.

Noting that one of the important problems with democratic institutions in Italy is clientelism is key to the way in which the United States has embodied some of the flaws that have led to ineffective democratic institutions. Clientelism is when government officials are reactive to a smaller number of constituents because they are providing extra benefits that the rest of the citizenry is not holding officials accountable for.²⁷ In the United States, since the *Citizens United*²⁸ ruling, money has had a tremendous influence in its use as political speech. Since the United States is such a large bipartisan democracy, there are limitations on how to hold elected officials accountable. Especially in areas with low social capital or homogeneous opinions it is really easy to get candidates re-elected

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Robert D. Putnam., Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti. "Making democracy work." In Making democracy work. Princeton university press, 1994.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *Citizens United v. Federal Election Com'n*, 558 U.S. 310, 130 S. Ct. 876, 175 L. Ed. 2d 753 (2010).

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by making a partisan appeal to constituents. Once a person is elected, big corporations can craft policy-making by making constituents think that their priorities come with the party's priorities and it is a necessary tradeoff for other political ends. The ease in which the United States has started to fall into democratic facades like clientelism is a clear sign that social capital is inhibiting the United States' ability to have responsive institutions.

From his study in Italy, Putnam then focused his attention on the United States and wrote an article in 1995 called "Bowling Alone"²⁹ which he then turned into a book on civic engagement in the United States. While the social landscape of the United States looks much different than it did in the 1990s, a lot of Putnam's observations about America can be directly related to the lack of empathy seen in the United States today. A lack of empathy has fractured American politics and made institutions, especially those with elected officials much less responsive to constituents. Finding ways to build up civic engagement in the United States will be key to creating more responsive democratic institutions and potentially saving democracy.

Putnam looks at a variety of ways in which civic engagement and social capital impact a political society in *Bowling Alone*.³⁰ Each of these categories relates, in some way, to the lack of cross-cultural and cross-regional empathy in the United States today. I will look at four areas that Putnam relates to social capital. These areas will be impacted through the growth of empathy through a national service organization. They are political participation, formal and informal social engagement, conformity, and volunteerism. I will refer to all of these more broadly as civic engagement, despite the fact that Putnam

²⁹ Robert D. Putnam. "Bowling alone: America's declining social capital." In *Culture and politics*, pp. 223-234. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2000.

³⁰ Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon and Schuster, 2000.

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refers to civic engagement as more specific to social interaction. By improving empathy and bettering the population in these areas we can develop a common ground on which our democracy can operate.

Putnam found in his research an alarming decline in civic engagement starting in the late 1960s.³¹ While his predictions point to a potential rebound, it is important to examine the symptoms that led to the decrease in social capital. Political participation is a direct measure of how invested Americans are in their civic duties. The decline of political participation since the 1960s relates directly to people's interests in the collective well-being of society. Putnam found that people were becoming significantly less interested in participating in political activities.³² There were sharp declines in volunteering with political campaigns and people working for political organizations. The lack of active involvement shows that people are not enthusiastic about politics, and willing to be less informed if they eventually vote. Unfortunately, voter turnout has decreased at a similar rate. Since Putnam's book was released in 2000, it is important to add that this trend, along with the others we will discuss, has continued. The United States has consistently had low voter turnout compared to other OECD countries. The fact that less than 60% of the eligible population³³ is registered to vote is concerning because it shows that people are not taking steps to actively prioritize their involvement in political society.

³¹ Ibid. p. 54.

³² Ibid. pp. 38-41.

³³ Drew DeSilver. "In Past Elections, U.S. Trailed Most Developed Countries in Voter Turnout." Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, May 28, 2021.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/03/in-past-elections-u-s-trailed-most-developed-countries-in-voter-turnout/>.

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A lack of political participation itself can motivate the need for a national service organization for a variety of reasons. The most prominent reason is that people do not feel the need to participate in federal elections because they do not feel as though the nation as a whole is a priority. Comfort is the enemy of responsive democracy because people will feel like everything is creating a simple and comfortable life for them. Comfort creates political complacency and creates a static political climate that does not ever embrace necessary change. Mandatory national service would inherently create an experience that all Americans share. By having something in common, there will be a deeper interconnectedness as a nation. By creating relationships between people from all over the country there will be a stronger familiarity with the political issues that are important to friends not just fellow citizens. National service could also inspire a deeper political interest in people who learn of new stories that have caused new peers to suffer. If we take someone from Oklahoma whose experiences are consistent with what I saw in Oklahoma and provide an opportunity for them to discuss homelessness with someone who actually has experienced poverty in New York city, then they will have a personal connection to ground their feelings towards political issues. The service itself could also expose people to political issues and cultures that create a desire to use political participation for others. In each of these ways national service could create an environment where people are inspired, out of empathy, to participate in elections.

Besides political participation, the other important measure of social capital's contributions to democracy are measures of social engagement. While there are several types of formal social organizations that create civic engagement, I want to focus on informal interactions as being key to the development of empathy. While formal civic

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engagement can play an important role in creating a consistently active community, there are also problems in formal settings that interrupt the process by which empathy is developed. In formal settings there tends to be more homogeneity among members, due to the fact that people choose which groups they join. Giving people choice allows them to gravitate towards what will make them feel comfortable. The benefits of this kind of civic engagement is that it will lead to political action which is important in holding officials accountable. However, it also may ignore issues that are worth action because issues that a homogenous member group are unaware of may never get any attention.

Putnam, focusing one chapter on the informal social connections that we have in the United States, lays a foundation for the argument that more casual interaction could be important to the creation of empathy in the United States.³⁴ As we hone in on the empathy problem being experienced it is clear that this will not necessarily be solved even if political participation increases. Responsive American democracy relies on any gap between the two parties to be bridged through trust and respect. If we have high political participation but the system remains fractured, then civic engagement will have not done anything for our democracy. However, through informal interactions we can create more civil interactions that lead to a disarming of the hostilities each party shows towards one another.

When examining informal social interactions, Putnam's study reveals that people are interacting with each other at lower levels over time.³⁵ Less people are hosting dinner parties or going out to the movies together.³⁶ Families are becoming more isolated and

³⁴ Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon and Schuster, 2000. pp. 93-115.

³⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 97-103

³⁶ *Ibid.*

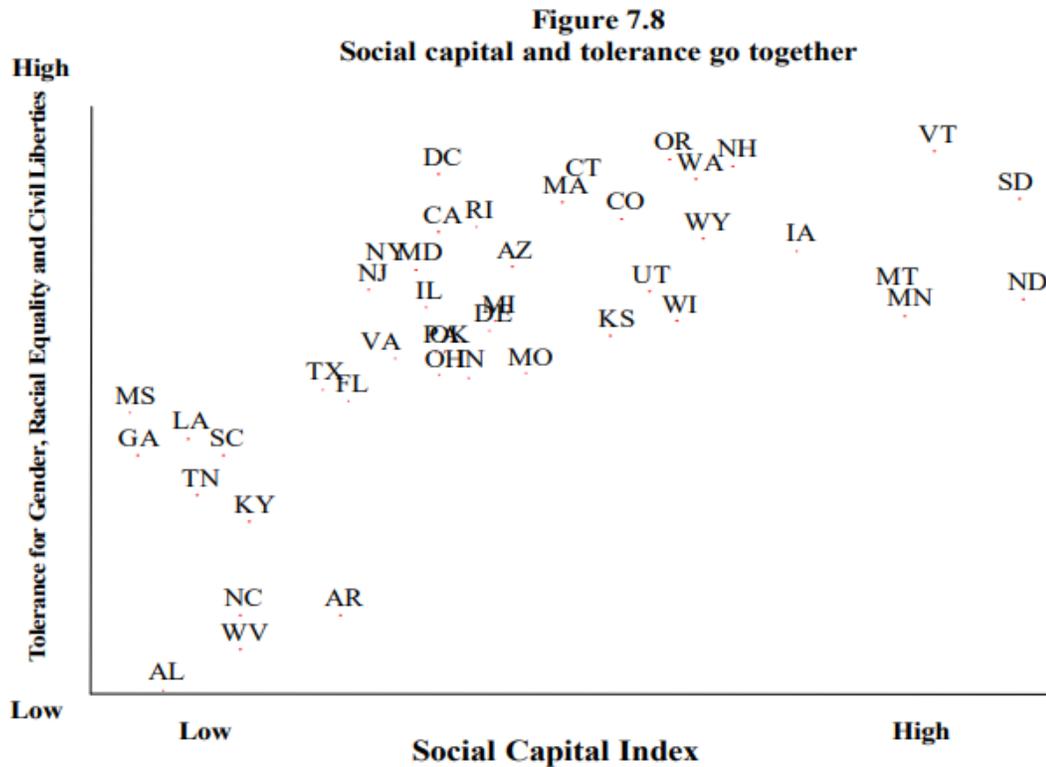
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this lack of socialization limits the ability to become familiar with new perspectives.

Uncomfortable conversations happen in these environments because casual conversations can allow different perspectives to arise freely as opposed to the formal environments where uncomfortable conversations must be forced into an otherwise comfortable environment.

Acknowledging the benefits of informal interaction is key to a mandatory national service organization that has people living with one another. The moments of informal interaction are the moments that allow people to develop a diverse social circle that involve casual conversations that welcome different perspectives. While national service will have a formal side that exposes individuals to the outside community that they are working with, empathy will really be developed through the relationships that a person builds within their cohort. By creating these informal social environments uncomfortable conversations can lead to a deeper understanding of different viewpoints. The deeper the understanding the more capable people are of empathizing with a wider range of Americans.

Figure 2: Learning Tolerance from Others



In his chapter “The Dark Side of Social Capital ” acknowledges how civic engagement has contributed to historical wrongdoings.³⁷ Due to the homogeneity problem discussed above, it is easy for agreement on issues that may be worth more discussion. When social divisions create stratified viewpoints, social capital cannot do the work that it needs to do to foster empathy. Putnam asks the question: is it better to have social capital or equity?³⁸ However, both are necessary to developing a responsive democracy. Avoiding things like conformity and social division will be necessary to create an inclusive environment where empathy can develop. With national service,

³⁷ Ibid. pp. 350-352.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 358.

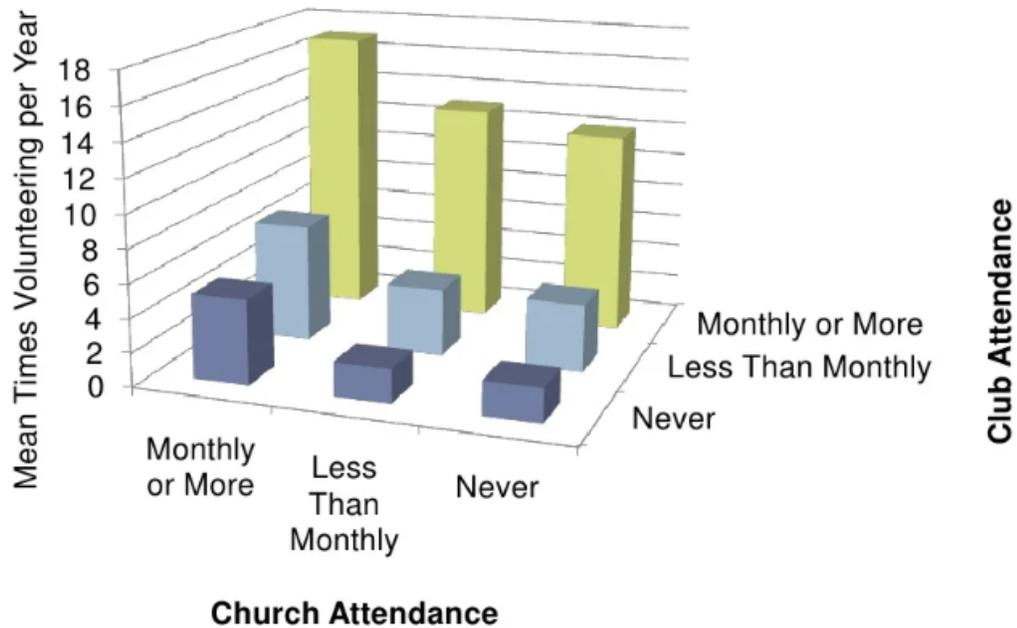
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creating an environment where people from all backgrounds must work together towards a common goal can help to break down prejudice. National service will create an environment where people are treated equally no matter their background. By creating this kind of organization, it will allow people a platform to interrupt patterns of conformity that young people may fall into. Working towards a collective goal will force people to interact with each other and humanize those people who others may have a prejudice against. It is clear from the evidence in Figure 2, from *Bowling Alone*³⁹, that social capital has in the past led to a more tolerant society. We must use a national service program to break down the divisions that have made social capital less effective.

³⁹ Ibid. p.356.

Figure 3: Inspiring Volunteerism

Figure 28: Volunteering Fostered by Clubgoing and Churchgoing



The fourth and clearest way in which Putnam’s considerations connect to the idea of a national service organization is in his chapter on “Altruism, Volunteering, and Philanthropy”. In this chapter Putnam explains trends related to Americans’ willingness to help others. A core doctrine of a national service is to use the benefits of building empathy and relationships to develop strong hard-working teams that can create real change through service. These trends convey why we need to develop social capital in order to effectively pursue service. What Putnam found in the 1990s was that there was a lot of potential for the millennial generation to become a powerful force of volunteers.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 119.

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Volunteering among young people was happening at a much higher rate than it was when millennials parents were younger. Despite an increase in volunteerism, Putnam's research predicted that the number of community focused projects would go down over time. These predictions conveyed the need for outlets for volunteerism to be focused and effective.

What has happened since Putnam's research is that millennials were significantly more involved throughout their young lives in volunteering as nearly over one-third volunteer in some capacity regularly. Also, more than 70% had volunteered at least one hour of their time.⁴¹ We are seeing similar trends among the next generation with over a quarter of them volunteering regularly and many also willing to give their money to causes that they are passionate about.⁴² However, returning to the problem of social division. We can see in Figure 3, also from *Bowling Alone*⁴³, how the correlation between local social capital, like attending church or clubs relates to volunteering. Churches and clubs are places where the homogeneity problem is often exacerbated. Small groups with similar priorities do not challenge one another to empathize better. Since the worries about social bubbles remain, there must be something to bolster volunteerism without exacerbating social division. A national program will eliminate the roots of social division while still teaching individuals the value of volunteerism.

⁴¹ Brigid Schulte. "Millennials Are Actually More Generous than Anybody Realizes." The Washington Post. WP Company, November 25, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/06/24/millennials-are-actually-more-generous-than-anybody-realizes/>.

⁴² Cheryl Hardy. "The next Generation of Nonprofit Donors and Volunteers: Convergent." Convergent Nonprofit Solutions, October 1, 2019. <https://www.convergentnonprofit.com/blog/next-generation-donors/#:~:text=A%202015%20study%20of%20Generation%20Z%20representatives%20in,also%20more%20likely%20to%20give%20their%20time%20volunteering.>

⁴³ Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon and schuster, 2000. p. 120.

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Since volunteering is trending upward, national service should not be that disagreeable. We must take advantage of the willingness of people to give back. The opportunities are limited, especially with less social engagement occurring, and people are not engaging the right networks to find a good place for them in volunteer service. By making service mandatory for one year we can create an environment where the desire to volunteer is met with opportunities to serve and concurrently grow empathy and helpful skills. Finding areas where people are willing to serve will allow these environments to become productive areas for defeating polarization.

Putnam asserts that groups can be more effective when they have high levels of trust and solidarity.⁴⁴ Trust and solidarity can only be developed through interactions with diverse viewpoints and experiences that are not always directly related to political issues. However, it is not easy to engage different perspectives in daily life. A theme throughout all of the areas I have explored is comfort. It is easy for people living comfortable lives to disapprove of change. However, actively adapting as a nation and not falling into complacency is what a democracy needs to thrive. Empathy can only be created through uncomfortable interactions and change. By creating empathy we can expand our understanding of the country and people's experiences. Allowing empathy to create a more solid common ground for democracy to operate upon will create a more effective democracy. A more civically engaged population will be a more empathetic population and this empathy will fuel further civic engagement.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

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Geography and Social Media

To further understand the current patterns of civic engagement in the United States, it is necessary to investigate two exacerbating factors that have arisen since Putnam's book was released. First, migration patterns including the isolation of individuals in suburban and urban areas has impacted cross-regional empathy. Second, social media has created some positive, but mostly negative effects on cross-cultural empathy. The impacts of technological growth have had significant negative effects on the ability of people to empathize with others. Trends in business development have shown technology's ability to draw people towards urban environments as more and more people settle around major metropolitan areas. At the same time, suburban areas have become socio-economically segregated in a way that plays into the comfort and complacency that resists change in democracy.

To understand the impacts that social media and geography have had on democracy we must explore a few philosophical terms. Epistemic bubbles and echo chambers are extremely important to the lack of cross cultural empathy in our country.⁴⁵ These two concepts relate to the information that a person is aware of and how they handle that information. Epistemology, or the study of knowledge and how to know things, is important in considering empathy because understanding the implications of others' experiences is related to the way that a person processes incoming knowledge. By understanding geography and social media through these two terms we can further understand the gap in empathy that has been created as a result of limitations on social capital and political polarization.

⁴⁵ C. Thi Nguyen. "Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles." *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (2020): 141-161.

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Living in an epistemic bubble is when a person has not been exposed to an opposing belief or argument.⁴⁶ The omission of viewpoints makes it impossible for a person to come to a different conclusion about what the right viewpoint is than their default viewpoint. To understand epistemic bubbles related to a lack of empathy let's look at religion. If all a person has ever known is the Christian religion, they were raised in it and everyone around them practiced it, then it would be really perplexing to see a person practicing Islam. By not being aware of other religions a person will not be able to understand the motivations for practicing another religion. Confusion will limit the person's ability to feel tolerant of other religions. Limited exposure leads to people who are incapable of empathizing with the lived experiences of others.

In contrast to epistemic bubbles, echo chambers rely on discrediting new viewpoints to perpetuate a dominant viewpoint.⁴⁷ Once again looking at the Christian religion. If Christians argue that their religion is the one and only true religion, they are actively undermining the practice of other religions. If a person is told this their entire life, then even when they are exposed to a new religion, the echo of their upbringing will cause them to be intolerant of other religions. Echo chambers pose a major threat to empathy because they invalidate other viewpoints prior to engaging them. However, echo chambers can be defeated by the humanization of differing viewpoints. I will now focus on how these two philosophical tools have manifested themselves in the people's ability to interact geographically and across cultures.

Geography impacts empathy in a couple of ways. The first has already been discussed. In general people have a difficult time understanding what life is like in places

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

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that they have never experienced. An epistemic bubble is created for people and sometimes they cannot process the experiences of people who live in different geographical areas. Therefore, it is hard to build empathy without going somewhere new or spending time discussing how people think and live in areas that are not home. Furthermore, geography also has the ability to interrupt empathy building in a more costly way. Local geography trends have created a segregation of viewpoints that creates homogenous communities that fall into the aforementioned issues of complacency. These communities become echo chambers where viewpoints have found themselves as popular and widespread but they discount the experiences of people living in nearby areas that are urban or rural.

As major employers centralize themselves in large urban areas, the millions of employees that work there have to find somewhere affordable to live. Within urban areas there are often not a lot of places that are big enough for the average middle class family or that they can afford. The effect that this has on urban living is that many families have flocked to suburban areas outside of cities in a phenomenon known as sprawl. The urban areas have grown because people tend to commute into work in these major metropolitan areas. The kind of sprawl we are seeing leads to only the upper class individuals staying in the city and the rest of urban housing turning into impoverished areas. There are clear limitations on mobility created by sprawl.⁴⁸ The economic segregation that has occurred makes it difficult for people to socially engage with people of different viewpoints and even schools, where there should be plenty of opportunities for interactions between socioeconomic classes, are becoming segregated because of district and zoning

⁴⁸ Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon and schuster, 2000. p. 214-215.

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restrictions. Instead people are feeding off of similar viewpoints and falling into groupthink⁴⁹, where their priorities as a community are the most important political ends. They refuse to humanize the people they see everyday while going to and from work because they are not part of the social community that is being prioritized. Echo chambers allow these communities to isolate themselves. If people are isolating themselves from diverse viewpoints even in areas that are physically close to them, then it is much more difficult to overcome the barriers that stop people from understanding the viewpoints of people who live much further away.

Another epistemic bubble that makes echo chambers easier to fall into arises in a more general geographical sense because people are incapable of understanding life in a different type of environment. It may be possible that a person living in the suburbs of Chicago can understand what life is like for people living in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Although there are still geographic divides, these groups lead similar lives. However, the viewpoint segregation that is occurring due to geographic homogeneity is stopping suburban people from empathizing with people living in urban or rural environments. Here, like the echo chambers that discount the problems of those living in the city, there is a lack of cross-cultural empathy. There may be no physical space between the people living in these different communities, but their lived experiences combined with the echoing of those experiences from community members limits how much those communities can empathize with other cultures.

Unlike geography, on its face Social media seems to have created a beneficial effect on civic engagement, it created widespread networks across the country and

⁴⁹ Groupthink is a psychological term used to refer to instances where groups solidify their views by actively discouraging any disagreement

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exposed people to differing viewpoints. Despite its defeat of some epistemic bubbles, it contributed to the growth of echo chambers and hurt Americans ability to respectfully interact. It is easy to hide behind a mobile device and spew hate towards others. The ease in which people fall into defense of their own views without acknowledging the merits of others' views is a huge problem for American democracy. Divisiveness on social media sits at the root of the most recent issues we have witnessed with political polarization. The echo chambers that were created on both the political left and right made cooperation during the 2020 election impossible and it played a significant role in the spread of misinformation that called the election results into question.⁵⁰ The spread of misinformation makes an echo chamber where people cannot find a common ground of truth that can serve as a foundation for political debate. By creating superficial social engagement, social media leads to patterns of people provoking one another without considering the human behind the profile they are arguing against. Without real human conversation, it is easy to fall into an echo chamber that discounts the views of people on the other side of the political spectrum.

Research on social media has revealed there are a lot of social harms across all platforms. For young Americans social media is the only form of news that they are receiving apart from word of mouth. While most people still prefer to get their news from digital outlets like websites and apps, 53% of Americans get news often or sometimes from social media.⁵¹ Most people entering adulthood do not regularly read a variety of

⁵⁰ Samuel C. Rhodes. "Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and fake news: how social media conditions individuals to be less critical of political misinformation." *Political Communication* 39, no. 1 (2022): 1-22.

⁵¹Elisa Shearer. "More than Eight-in-Ten Americans Get News from Digital Devices." Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, January 12, 2021.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/?msclkid=0e00dc38c37c11ecabb6bcf734274aab>.

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news sources. If algorithms force young people into echo chambers at an early age, then they will be even harder to escape as they grow into political agents. By creating inelastic opinions through echo chambers the process by which people develop empathy is inhibited. The problem is that people are unwilling to accept different perspectives when they are seen on social media. They immediately write them off as propaganda from the other side. Only when people are able to hear and appreciate lived experiences can they actually break out of an echo chamber and develop empathy.

Our solution will rely on putting people of different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds in the same room as one another. By putting people face to face they will have to humanize the perspectives that they have discounted. Social media allows people to hide behind a screen, but doing service together will force people to confront any prejudices they have towards people from different cultures and backgrounds. Overcoming the echo chambers and epistemic bubbles that cause social media and geographical divides to inhibit empathy will require a novel approach to fostering empathy which will be achieved through national service.

Conclusion

By creating an environment of service that both requires civic engagement and regular interpersonal interaction the empathy gap in the United States could be bridged. Defeating epistemic bubbles and echo chambers will be easy with the infrastructure that a national service organization will provide. National service will be focused on crafting relationships with peers that represent a variety of viewpoints. These relationships will serve to boost social capital and provide plenty of opportunity for people to engage new

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perspectives. A stronger ability to have a civil discourse, even when there are disagreements will directly benefit democracy.

To address the Putnam quote that started this chapter, we must realize that democracy relies on the creation of a common ground. While not every single issue must have consensus, that would inherently harm a deliberative democracy, there must be a consistently expanding ground on which policies can be created successfully. By creating an organization where people must become familiar with others' experiences, reality will expand and create a more firm basis for political debate. The common ground is a direct result of empathy. Empathizing with others means that people can accept why others approach policy in a given way and allows the parameters that guide policy-making to expand. The benefits of mandatory national service will expand empathy that allows people to come to more collective and effective solutions to America's problems.

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Chapter 3: A Better Economy Makes a Better Democracy

While a national service organization is going to be extremely beneficial in the sociopolitical realm, there are also many external economic benefits that the program can create. People across the country are divided over issues dealing with things like housing, education, disaster relief, and so much more. If national service can actively pursue solutions to these problems while also improving the foundation of American democracy, then it will allow the government to do even more for Americans. There are many things that are considered rights around the world that the United States' Constitution and policymakers have refused to protect. Things like housing for everyone, free post-secondary education, and universal healthcare are things that have been considered in the U.S., but never prioritized. Class division ensures that policies that would have strong economic benefits for the poorest Americans are not implemented. The external economic benefits of a national service organization will make resources available to pursue some of the more agreeable economic rights.

Using a framework delineated by Stephen Holmes and Cass Sunstein, we can analyze how a mandatory national service can specifically contribute to pursuing more economic rights in the United States. One idea that is alluded to in Sunstein's works is that democracy would benefit from establishing some economic rights because it would create more free individuals.⁵² Freedom comes when a person has options with their lives and economic rights can certainly give people living in poverty more freedom to control how their lives play out. On the other hand, people argue that the costs of economic rights are too great to not impose a restrictive burden on those who would carry the weight of

⁵² Cass R. Sunstein. "Social and Economic Rights-Lessons from South Africa." *Const. F.* 11 (1999): 123.

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the costs. While Sunstein and Holmes argue that raising taxes are necessary to developing the revenue needed to establish economic rights⁵³, this is where a national service organization could play an effective role.

When we discuss freedom in politics we often acknowledge Berlinian positive and negative liberty.⁵⁴ Negative liberties are things that people can do without any interference and it is the role of the government to simply maintain an environment where these kinds of freedoms are not infringed upon. Negative liberties are the types of things protected in the Bill of Rights. Positive liberties, instead require intervention by the government to establish them. Sunstein and Holmes argue that many positive liberties have enormous costs associated with them that may be difficult to justify to the Americans in the context of their expected economic freedom. Adding the tax revenue necessary to pay for social programs would require taking more from those with money and this might limit their negative freedom to spend their money where they would like. However, in American society true freedom needs to be paired with a level of financial security and a subsistence level that allows people to make choices in their lives rather than being servants to the economic system.

Establishing economic rights could allow poor individuals to have some level of financial stability making them freer. Some of the costs for these kinds of rights can be covered by a national service organization. Expanding freedom through economic opportunity will create an environment where there is not such a large class divide in the United States. Looking back to Putnam's *Our Kids*, there is a real worry about the current

⁵³ Stephen Holmes, and Cass R. Sunstein. *The cost of rights: why liberty depends on taxes*. WW Norton & Company, 2000.

⁵⁴ Isaiah Berlin. "Two concepts of liberty." *Berlin*, i 118, no. 1969 (1969): 172.

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standing of upward mobility in America. The physical segregation of people with higher incomes reduces the cross-class interactions needed to develop empathy. By creating socioeconomic bubbles we have defeated the American Dream for many people from both urban and rural areas. If we do implement national service, economic benefits can be targeted towards overcoming these inequalities. It will also actively undermine the epistemic ignorance of people who advocate against economic rights. By exposing people to those suffering from financial instabilities, there can be an empathetic bridge for these political divides. Pursuing economic rights through national service will further unite the country while adding economic value for those serving and those being served.

Exploring some of the rights that could be established using a national service system will help to show furthermore why making service mandatory for young people will benefit American society for the rest of their lives. First, let's look at how those serving will be compensated. If their labor is generating an economic benefit to society and they are not being paid, it is necessary that the government offer some kind of incentive to participate and not desert the program other than the risk of punishment. It would be easier to make public college free for people from families with an income lower than \$125,000 if young people were creating an economic benefit that more than counterbalances the cost of public education. By creating important products, like housing, service members can make up for the estimated \$47 billion per year that Bernie Sanders' or Joe Biden's education plan would cost.⁵⁵ Colleges and universities create communities and networks that will expand exposure to new perspectives even further.

⁵⁵ Rob Berger. "The Surprising Cost of Biden's Free College Tuition Plan." Forbes. Forbes Magazine, June 30, 2021.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertberger/2020/09/04/the-surprising-cost-of-bidens-free-college-tuition-plan/?sh=1f0832016f7f>

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Therefore, creating this benefit for individuals who serve will add an extra contribution to the empathy gap and polarization that we are seeing in America. While making college free for Americans could be an important first step in bridging the empathy gap, not everyone wants or needs to go to college. What people can gain from serving if they do not intend to go to college after serving is certifications for trades that are part of their service or free training for work they can continue with for the rest of their lives if they choose. Some who serve will

There are infinite possibilities when it comes to the direct economic benefits of a national service organization. Having around 6 million young adults every year to work on various projects will create a lot of opportunities for growth in a number of sectors. They could be working on infrastructure projects, housing for the poor, wildlife preservation, or educational support. Any of these would generate a free economic benefit for American society and establish a way to pay for the costs of rights. While resources may be costly, the labor is a significant portion of the cost that will be covered through a national service program. By having young Americans work for the betterment of society, they can generate outcomes that look similar to some of the rights being advocated. I have discussed combatting housing crises, but a national service organization could also contribute to infrastructure in ways that would be much more cost effective than Biden's Build Back Better plan would. The program will create an economic right of regularly updated and efficient infrastructure. The kind of logic that would use national service to target a specific economic project, like infrastructure, can apply to any kind of project which is why it will be helpful to have mandatory national

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service. An easily mobilized group of young adults can be incredibly helpful in the further economic development of our nation.

I recognize that it is easy to fall into the trap of making the case for only one side of American policy. While I do argue that there should be more cohesion in policymaking, spending of any kind tends to be considered a Democratic approach to economics. However, there are some economic projects that Republicans advocate for that do require significant spending. While it may be a divisive and sensitive topic, a wall at the southern border would be an example where a national service organization would alleviate the costs of a major economic project that conservatives would advocate for. The utility that the U.S. government can gain from using targeted volunteer service will be extremely beneficial to the pursuit of American policy goals, whether or not partisanship is considered. Hopefully, national service will work to make projects more agreeable so that the service can be targeted to better the United States.

Another one of the major benefits of this program could be its short-term effectiveness in times of domestic emergency. While disaster relief is always fairly efficient in the United States, there have been many times where more helping hands are needed. People's lives could be saved because of national service. Disaster relief is nearly an \$11 billion industry which implies that significant resources are being put in this industry, but having more people able to use these resources could make relief efforts even more effective in the short-term aftermath of any natural disaster.⁵⁶ By allowing for more short-term and active roles we can appeal to people who want to have a future in

⁵⁶ "Industry Market Research, Reports, and Statistics." IBISWorld. Accessed April 23, 2022. <https://www.ibisworld.com/industry-statistics/market-size/natural-disaster-emergency-relief-services-united-states/>.

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emergency services and use times when disasters are dormant to train the individuals to serve in these incredibly important ways.

Another externality of a national service organization is that it would develop a framework for disadvantaged individuals to potentially escape poverty. There is a cyclical nature to poverty where people feel trapped because they need to take care of their families or they cannot find the resources to explore a more lucrative employment market. The class divide that Murray and Putnam point out particularly hinders the mobility of the poorest Americans. Housing and welfare policies have tried to improve these issues, but poverty remains a major issue in one of the world's wealthiest countries.⁵⁷ National service can give people the opportunity to build networks and pursue better educational outcomes. Exposure to new experiences might break the cycle of poverty.

One of Charles Murray's biggest worries in *Coming Apart* is that the poorest Americans have developed bad attitudes towards mobility.⁵⁸ Throwing a wrench in the cultural attitudes that have exacerbated the cycle of poverty could improve mobility. National service would introduce poor individuals to a different culture or lifestyle potentially breaking some of the greatest barriers to mobility for these groups. While this could be true, the responsibility for attitudes like these lands on class divisions that have created limitations on these groups. Acknowledging that the isolated upper class of Americans holds a lot of the power in this country forces us to question the ability of changing attitudes to actually create change. Instead, a national service program can reallocate resources to support poor Americans in many ways. One of the most important

⁵⁷ John Iceland. "Poverty in america." In *Poverty in America*. University of California Press, 2013.

⁵⁸ Charles Murray. "Coming apart: The state of white America, 1960-2010." *Crown Forum*, 2012.

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ways that people can be assisted is the professional skills that they can gain from doing service work. People coming from AmeriCorps work have found economic opportunities because of the skills gained while doing service.⁵⁹ These people were also found to be more civically engaged.⁶⁰ National service will provide a tremendous benefit to poor Americans by really contributing to their positive liberty.

There will also likely be continued volunteer work as a result of mandatory national service. A study conducted in Canada found that people who are forced to volunteer at a young age tend to find some value in the work that they do.⁶¹ The value of volunteering ends up reverberating into a spirit of volunteerism that brings society closer together. By serving nationally, people that are willing to give back to their communities will now see the broader benefits of giving back to the American community as a whole. The combined benefits of the national service program and continued willingness to volunteer after service will have a significant economic impact, especially for those who have the greatest need for service. It will also allow the scope of volunteer service to grow and provide for Americans in a more substantive manner.

While I have explained a variety of economic benefits related to my proposal for combatting social divisions and building empathy through national service, there is a clear through-line. A lot of hard work and changes need to be made to overcome divisions in this country. The work that needs to occur is not being done right now and it is threatening our democracy. While it may be costly, it is necessary work to create a

⁵⁹ Nathan Dietz, Brice McKeever, and Amanda Gold. "A Pathway to Economic Opportunity for Communities and AmeriCorps Members." (2020).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Karen Gallant, Bryan Smale, and Susan Arai. "Civic engagement through mandatory community service: Implications of serious leisure." *Journal of Leisure Research* 42, no. 2 (2010): 181-201.

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united society. The work can only get done through some form of collective sacrifice. By having young people spend a year of their lives giving back to American society, we can prop up an effective democracy and ensure future American success. Communities all over the country, urban and rural alike, are struggling to maintain their inclusion in the American dream, but national service will bring people together to work for each other.

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Chapter 4: A National Service Organization Described

How will the program be set up? There are many different ways in which a mandatory national service organization must be defined in order to see the clear ways in which it will contribute to the empathy problem in the United States. I will first lay out the general specifics of the program and then rationalize them. Firstly, the program will start during the Summer after a person's given high school graduation date. Even if a person does not complete high school, they will be given a date for when they will start based on when they would have graduated. The program will last one year. Individuals will be asked to rank the types of service that they would like to do and they will be asked to list where they have lived or where they have family. They will be placed in an area of the country where they likely have little experience. They will spend their time living with their service group of 10-15 individuals and 1 group leader doing their preferred form of service.

Timing: The length of service is one of the most important aspects of the program because too short of a time could result in a failure to reach the goals set out in the first part of this thesis. There is a mandatory service requirement in France that only lasts around 4 weeks, 2 of the weeks are training. The problem with a program like this is that only 2 weeks of service are being completed so the external benefits are sparse and there is very little interaction between those who are serving. In contrast, too long of a service length could be disruptive to American's lives and irreconcilable with beliefs about freedom in the U.S. While people will certainly find 1 year to be an inconvenient time period to be away from family living in a new environment. 1 year is plenty of time to create the relationships necessary for empathy to flourish in the United States. It could be

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shorter, but when we think about all of the external benefits to both those serving and the communities where they are serving, 1 year is not too large of an ask.

It is also important to find a time in people's lives where they can take on the necessary disruptive effects that national service will create. At 18, when most people have not started working a job or attending college is a time where the program will eventually have very few disruptive effects. Looking at the current norms, there are definitely going to be issues at the beginning of the program and that is why for the first few years there will be a fair and lenient opt-out policy so that families that are reliant on their children do not have them yanked away from their homes. People who are already planning on attending college will be encouraged to defer in the first few years of the program so that they can participate in the national service. One of the goals of the program is to create well-rounded groups which require the minds and perspectives of those who are intending to attend college. After a few years, in order to ensure that the intentions of the program are being met, there will be no opting out and everyone will participate.

Cohorts: Selecting individuals that will both work well together and bring in diverse perspectives is key to the success of the program. Allowing people to complete types of service that they are passionate about will be key to fostering an environment where empathy can be created. Forcing people to do something they are against or dislike will only foster contempt for the program. Unfortunately, it may be the case that people are so against the program that they will refuse to enjoy any kind of service. However, hopefully interactions with passionate participants can influence even these strong

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attitudes. Individuals will be placed in groups of 10-15 in order to include a broad range of perspectives, while avoiding cliques from arising inside of the groups.

Leadership: While the program can recruit leaders from any walk of life and this could contribute to the diverse perspectives of the cohorts, one area of individuals who are too frequently in need of jobs and accustomed to the lifestyle that the service organization would implement are veterans. People who have already served their country in a military capacity would make perfect leadership candidates for a mandatory national service program. Most veterans can serve in an administrative capacity and be good role models for young people who are being exposed to new perspectives. They also understand the ways in which the military serves as a great equalizer among a variety of citizens and can foster an environment where class divides are squashed as quickly as they are noticed.

Along with this, the nature of the service is to give people marketable skills so that they can have economic opportunities after they exit the service. If they choose to ever leave their leadership role with the national service organization, then these veterans would have skills to go into the job market more prepared to succeed and avoid problems with homelessness, addiction, and mental health that many veterans face. The national service program can take advantage of the leadership that the American military creates while also offering a more secure future to struggling veterans.

What will the Service Look Like? There will be a wide range of service opportunities to make the program accessible for every single individual whether or not they have a disability or serious family concerns. Using Americorps as a base model, there are many areas of service that have already been established as necessary in this

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country.⁶² Unfortunately, many of these programs are underserved, so having compulsory service will help to satisfy a greater number of individuals in need of the following services. Obviously, many other possibilities could be added to the following list, but the services included will look something like this:

- Building homes: Habitat for Humanity is a service project that often comes to the forefront of American minds when they think about national service projects. Building homes through a national service organization could focus on combating homelessness and housing insecurities for people throughout the country. There will be many opportunities to complete these projects in almost every region of the United States.
- Disaster relief: Having a widespread group of individuals ready to act if our country faces a natural disaster will be extremely helpful considering the limited resources that FEMA has. While these groups will likely be focused in the Southwest, Tornado Alley, and the East Coast, they can offer important training and experiences to people from other regions that have never had to face the distinct anxiety associated with the economic damages that natural disasters cause.
- Working and engaging with the elderly: Learning from the elderly can be a valuable source of social capital, while also supporting people who are unable to afford assisted living or retirement homes towards the end of their long lives. Serving people who have experienced the fluctuations in empathy around the country can help give young people better perspectives.

⁶² “Our Impact.” AmeriCorps, March 23, 2022. <https://americorps.gov/about/our-impact>.

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- Education: As I have noted, education is one of the most class-segregated areas. By having people volunteer to support educational opportunities and improve educational outcomes by tutoring or helping with physical education programs, developing relationships with groupmates and the community one is working with will build cross-cultural understandings that go so easily ignored in the current state of educational divides.
- Environmental Conservation: One area that individuals may be particularly passionate about is the environment. Whether this is clean energy efforts or volunteering in national parks, this kind of work can bring people together who have similar interests and values and expand their ability to empathize with one another.
- Food Insecurity: Communities across the country in both rural and urban environments struggle with food insecurity. Using national service to help distribute healthy foods to areas that struggle with starvation and/or food deserts will expose people to issues that most Americans will never have to face.

Explaining all of these programs makes it clear that there is a tremendous demand for service. There are several other programs that can be added to the service options, but the ones explained give enough evidence to realize that a national service program can do a lot of the work necessary to break down social divides in the United States. Each can improve empathy in a unique way, but they all will include genuine interactions that will create an environment that can save democracy.

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Chapter 5: Making the Program Happen

It may sound like a crazy idea to take 6 million individuals every year and relocate them. Forcing them to serve against their will sounds like the most un-American program one can think of. The infrastructure will be difficult to create, let alone convincing everyone to participate. While all of this is true, taking a pragmatic approach to this project is possible and necessary. Our democracy needs to be revamped. Our empathy needs to be bolstered. The benefits that mandatory national service will create be enough to offset the upfront costs that the country will take on. If the United States is willing to invest billions of dollars in protecting democracy around the world, then we should be willing to invest in improving democracy domestically. During the course of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars the United States spent over \$6.4 trillion.⁶³ Only a few months into the Ukraine-Russia conflict in 2022 the United States has \$13.6 billion.⁶⁴ The country is willing to spend on democracy. Ultimately, this program will serve as a way for America to reinvest in itself so that the country can continue to be consistent in its political, economic, and social success.

The viability of this program will depend almost completely on how much funding can be reallocated. I estimate that a program like this will cost roughly \$300 billion per year based on the current defense budget and the similar infrastructure that this

⁶³ Brown University. "Economic Costs." The Costs of War. Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, September 2021.
<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/economic#:~:text=Through%20Fiscal%20Year%202020%2C%20the%20United%20States%20federal,on%20the%20wars%20in%20Afghanistan%2C%20Pakistan%2C%20and%20Iraq.?msclkid=979dd36ac42111ec8a3f8ccac7867621>.

⁶⁴ Bianca Pallaro, and Alicia Parlapiano. "Visualizing the \$13.6 Billion in U.S. Spending on Ukraine." The New York Times. The New York Times, March 18, 2022.
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/03/18/upshot/ukraine-aid-details.html?msclkid=bf5bc0a7c42111ec8993453c7ee2873e>.

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kind of service will use in comparison to the military.⁶⁵ However, there are some important elements that could alleviate costs to make this program viable. First, the self-sustainability aspect will be extremely important. If the program can generate revenue then tax-spending will not be necessary and the program will be less objectionable. Although, even if it becomes self-sustaining, this program will require upfront spending to get it off the ground. Transferring spending from other parts of the the federal budget, asking states to contribute, and increasing tax revenue will all play a role in getting

Obviously, this is a massive budget request, but it will likely generate economic revenue. Services like building houses and selling them at affordable prices could allow the government to generate altruistic outcomes while also moving towards self-sustainability. While I will not go into depth on the complex process under which this program could eventually fit into the U.S. budget, I will briefly suggest some ways in which we can make a mandatory national service organization pragmatic.

If we can create a program that is partially or completely self-sustainable, then there is the possibility that the following will

- Pulling from the Defense budget to fund
- Relying on host volunteers, and;
- Creating free education or offering other future benefits

The Defense budget currently sits at around \$700 billion.⁶⁶ However, if we want to improve domestically we should reduce this budget and reallocate funding. Focusing

⁶⁵ “DOD Releases Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Proposal.” U.S. Department of Defense, 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2079489/dod-releases-fiscal-year-2021-budget-proposal/>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

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our budget on the United States will ensure that we can set the best example of democracy. Setting a better example will send a message to the international community that they should do the same. While some money will still need to be spent on national defense and necessary interventions across the world, reducing the defense budget could serve to free up tax revenue that can be spent on a national service program.

Host families could help alleviate the housing costs associated with a national service program that requires people exit their social bubbles for a year. While families would have to host a handful of young adults to achieve the intended empathy effects of the program, there are certainly places that have enough room to do this. If we account for the millions of homes across the country that are currently empty, we can find a way to relocate people so that they get the most out of their national service experience. Furthermore, there are military bases across the country that can house these people if the bases are reappropriated to focus on domestic work. Using existing housing will reduce the upfront costs of the program significantly.

Thirdly, offering a free education will be a worthwhile incentive for some people to participate in the program. However, it is key that the program includes every person. Therefore, an added cost that will offset labor costs will be any form of future benefits offered to people who complete the program. Since everyone should participate in the program, then things like universal healthcare or rights to housing could serve to become a self-sustaining part of the program because the service will help to establish these things while offering them as a reward for service. All things included, there are plenty of ways in which people can receive future benefits from the national service program so that they are willing to participate.

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In addition to the concrete economic benefits that this program will create, there are estimated benefits associated with improving American democracy that will improve the stability of American markets and avoid negative externalities. A final note from Robert Putnam's *Our Kids* is that he estimates the economic costs of crime, low labor productivity, and public health for disadvantaged individuals associated with the limitations being placed on mobility are upwards of \$500 billion every year. While national service cannot complete these issues, these costs could be a fraction of what they are in a society where national service is as successful as it should be. Even if the project does not seem viable it will be worthwhile to combat these major costs.

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Conclusion: Implementation Could Save Democracy

Maya Angelou said “I think we all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it.”⁶⁷ I would like to alter this idea slightly. I think we all have the capacity to empathize with others, we may just be stuck in circumstances that limit our ability to explore empathy. We need to change those circumstances. By instituting mandatory national service young Americans can experience relationships that are necessary to be effectively empathetic. The empathy gained from engaging the other side of the aisle, the rest of the country, and a range of perspectives will allow democracy to flourish.

While mandatory volunteer work may sound oxymoronic, it is a necessity that we grow our social capital across the country. The only way we can combat social divides is by doing difficult work to counteract the comfort associated with isolating oneself in a social bubble. By taking the first step towards acknowledging the need for more volunteer work, the United States cannot adopt an attitude of volunteerism that does not condemn the program for being mandatory, but appreciate the need for everyone to participate in the program. Every single day new conversations about life, family, politics, or any other topic will build emotional connections between people from every possible background, culture, and region in the United States. By creating this program, the United States can refocus its attention on domestic growth and building up every single American.

⁶⁷ Maya Angelou Quotes. BrainyQuote.com, BrainyMedia Inc, 2022.
https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/maya_angelou_578832, accessed April 25, 2022.

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Along with the empathy gained we will see distinct external benefits that will provide our democracy with even more fuel for improvement. By investing in our country we can create an environment that prioritizes the United States and prioritizes the American Dream. Strengthening infrastructure and establishing subsistence levels for struggling Americans can reignite the regularity of economic mobility and opportunity that the American project was founded on. While people may still doubt the program's viability, it will rely on the country's willingness to work hard for democracy. A country that was founded on hard work and values hard work should recognize that no one deserves to be born into an easy life. Everyone should have to work hard to take care of their families, communities, and the nation as a whole.

While polarization itself would make any program like this difficult to pass through Congress, appeals to the need for hard-working, community-driven individuals to improve communities across the country might help convince those on the Right that the spending necessary to create this program is worthwhile. Along with the rest of the benefits associated with this program, there is a way for this to be politically pragmatic and economically viable. I have said it so much throughout this thesis, but it must be said again: building empathy is the key to revitalizing American democracy by breaking social divides. An easy way to create worthwhile exposure to new perspectives is through a mandatory national service program.

Seeing what took place on January 6th, 2021 we can see how American Democracy has fallen into a state of uncertainty. It was easy for the people who violently protested in the capital that day to discount the humanity that American democracy needs to survive. There were no conversations had between the two sides, there was only anger

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and frustration channeled through aggressive behavior. Without civil interaction American democracy will fail. Change must be made in order to actively combat the inability for Americans to accept or at least acknowledge the humanity behind every belief that is held. Creating a program that can eradicate hateful polarization would have tremendous benefits on the American people.

The argument must be made that a better democracy will rely on more ubiquitous empathy. We need to overcome polarization through national pride. The meaning of national pride must transition, however, to a more collective pride. We must take pride in caring for every member of our nation, like we must acknowledge that “our kids” includes every kid. The United States of America has always claimed to be a land of opportunity, yet it has consistently failed to provide opportunity to everyone. While I am not arguing that everyone should immediately adopt a progressive mindset, healthy political discourse is going to be an important step towards a healthier democracy. As a society, there must be a stronger respect for people coming from all walks of life and a desire to see everyone succeed. Social isolation has come about and caused the decay of our democracy due to the inability of society to respect and appreciate other cultures. The lack of respect for other cultures comes from an inability to empathize. We must act together to create a union that is more respectful, more empathetic, and less polarized. We need national service.

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