

# Compulsory National Service Would Strengthen American Citizenship

There's more to citizenship than simply asserting your rights.

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It's Time to Redress the Balance

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There are different kinds of rights. Some we enjoy simply because we are human beings—the rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, for example. Others are linked to a particular status: American citizens possess some rights that noncitizens do not. We do not have to earn human rights, and no one can take them away from us. By contrast, we may have to perform specified acts to obtain citizenship rights (that's what naturalization laws are about), and we may act in ways that lead to forfeiture of some of those rights, at least temporarily, as in the case of convicted criminals not being allowed to vote.

Citizenship, then, is a package of rights and responsibilities. But there is no theory that tells us exactly what is or should be in that package. It's up to us to decide.

In recent decades, we've expanded old rights and created new ones. While often controversial, that process has in many respects made us a fairer and more inclusive society. We've spent less time on the other half of the equation—the responsibilities that citizens share for the well-being of others and for the country as a whole. It's time to redress the balance.

**Citizens' due.** Some responsibilities are not controversial, such as obeying duly enacted laws. Another example: Most people recognize that the right to trial by a jury of our peers exists only on paper unless we appear for jury duty when summoned. No doubt the summons can arrive at an inconvenient moment, but we can't take the position that mandatory jury duty is an illegitimate limitation on individual liberty without threatening the basis of our justice system.

In the past, we have regarded [military](#) service as a responsibility of citizenship. After Vietnam, in which the fairness of the draft emerged as a major issue, we turned toward all-volunteer armed forces. In many respects the shift has been a success. The military has attracted a steady stream of highly qualified recruits, and the skills and discipline of our armed forces have never been higher.

But we have paid a price: A small percentage of Americans do the fighting for the rest of us, creating a wedge between military professionals and average citizens. Many elected officials lack military experience, and few have children in uniform. For most of us, defending our

country is something we watch on television. Little in the lives of young Americans helps them understand that citizenship is more than a list of rights to which they are entitled.

There's something we can do about this. Suppose that upon high school graduation or reaching the age of 18, every American were given a randomly selected lottery number based on their birthday and that a certain portion were selected for civic service. They would be offered a choice—two years of either military or civilian service. Those doing civilian service would receive stipends large enough to pay living expenses, as members of AmeriCorps do today.

This system would produce a number of desirable results for the country, as it would benefit from such service, but also for those who perform it. By the time they entered high school, young people would know that they might be asked to serve, and they would begin to talk to their older siblings or relatives about their options. They would begin to understand that there's more to citizenship than simply asserting their rights.

Those called to serve would spend time helping their country in their communities, in hard-hit areas far from home, or overseas. They would meet people unlike themselves, members of other classes and ethnic groups, with different aspirations. Some would begin to reshape their conceptions of how to spend their lives, opting for military, nonprofit, or public service careers. Most would form enduring friendships; all would have formative experiences they would never forget.

Some will object to this proposal as an unwarranted limitation on liberty, and surveys probably would show a majority of high school students opposed. But we have to ask ourselves whether we're satisfied with the condition of American citizenship today and, if not, how we're prepared to strengthen it. This is a national debate we should all welcome.