

Voters for National Service:

Perspectives of American Voters on Large-Scale National Service

**An Executive Brief for The Franklin Project at The Aspen Institute
by Civic Enterprises with Hart Research**

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Executive Brief

Americans have a long history of coming together to serve their country and communities in times of national challenge. Through the military in World War II and after the attacks of September 11, 2001, millions of Americans answered their nation's call to serve. During the Great Depression, through the Civilian Conservation Corps, more than 3 million Americans worked to improve our public lands and waterways. Following President Kennedy's call to "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," tens of thousands of young Americans volunteered for the Peace Corps. And most recently through AmeriCorps, more than 800,000 Americans have participated in a year of national service, helping to address national challenges from education to poverty, homelessness to hunger, and disaster response to environmental conservation.

As the country recovers from the recent economic downturn, national service can be a benefit to communities and the nation and to those who serve. Among some of the hardest hit by the recession were young people who are facing historically high rates of unemployment. The unemployment rate for 16- to 24-year-olds is 16.2 percent, more than double the April national unemployment rate of 7.5 percent. For those young people who attend college, many are graduating with high levels of student loan debt, placing dreams of higher education further out of reach.

This brief summarizes the results of a nationally representative survey of American voters to gather their perspectives about national service. This survey of more than 1,000 Americans finds broad support for the idea, potential, and impact of national service. Below we highlight several of the key findings from this survey.

Key Finding 1: American voters have a positive view of national service and a broad understanding of what the term national service means.

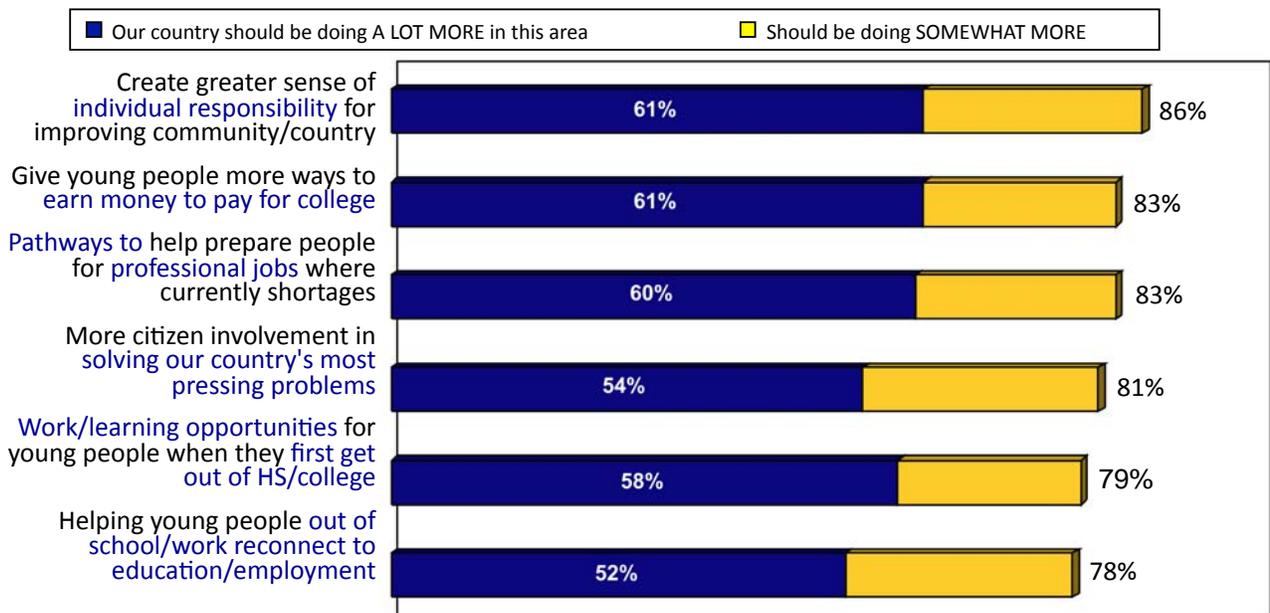
The phrase "national service" invokes a positive response from American voters. A strong majority of those surveyed (61 percent) react favorably to the term "national service," while only nine percent expressed unfavorable views of the term. Democratic (66 percent) and Republican (60 percent) voters both react favorably. Voters who completed college (67 percent) or graduate school (70 percent) have a significantly more positive reaction than those with a high school degree or less (50 percent). As with the service communities, the term "national service" means a variety of things to voters (nearly all of them positive), including "military/troops who protect our freedom," "providing a service to our country," and "volunteering through giving your time and talents."

Survey respondents also possess positive attitudes toward specific concepts associated with national service. These concepts include “volunteering” (90 percent favorable), “community service” (89 percent), “military service” (86 percent), “public service” (74 percent), and “civilian service” (73 percent). Compared with the average respondent, younger voters are especially enthusiastic about “community service” (94 percent) and “public service” (80 percent), while older voters are more likely to have favorable impressions of “military service” (91 percent).

Key Finding 2: When asked what goals they have for our country, voters see many pressing needs and think the country could do more.

The vast majority of voters say our country should be doing more in areas where national service could have a real and lasting impact. Creating a greater sense of individual responsibility (86 percent), helping young people earn money for college (83 percent), and helping people prepare for jobs facing shortages (83 percent) were the most highly ranked as areas where the country could be doing more. Independent voters were the most likely to say the country should do more to create a greater sense of individual responsibility (90 percent), compared with Democrats (86 percent) and Republicans (83 percent). Additionally, there was a difference by age, with older voters over the age of 65 (89 percent) showing much stronger support than younger voters between 18 and 39 years old (79 percent). Developing employment pathways to help individuals prepare for jobs where there are shortages received strong support from voters, especially African Americans (91 percent) and Latinos (98 percent).

Figure 1. Voters believe the U.S. should be doing more to promote the core tenets of national service.



Just prior to this question, national service is defined as “voluntarily serving full time for a period of two or more years in the military, or one or more years of civilian community service addressing challenges such as education, poverty, the environment, and helping veterans adjust to civilian life.”

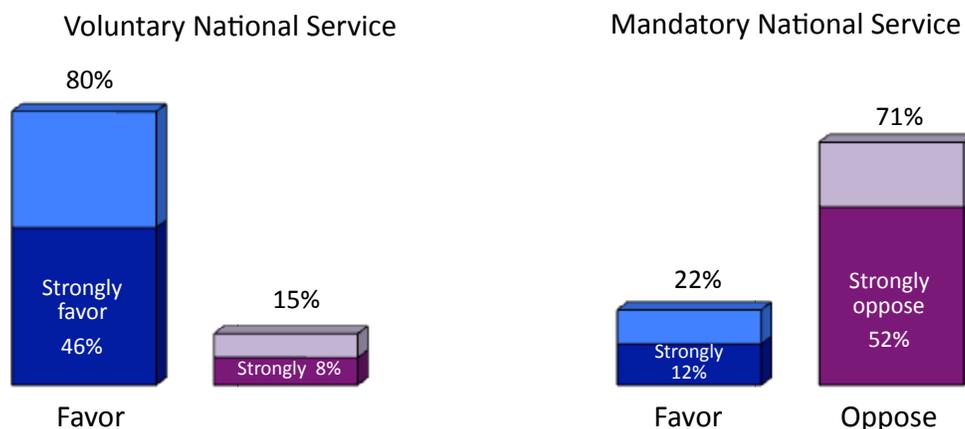
Key Finding 3: Voters overwhelmingly favor a system of voluntary national service, but oppose mandatory service.

Four in five voters (80 percent) support a system of voluntary national service in which people of all ages would be given opportunities to serve America in a military or civilian capacity for one year and receive a living allowance and education award. Support is high across all major subgroups, and partisan differences are minor: 88 percent of Democrats support voluntary national service compared with 76 percent of independents and 74 percent of Republicans.

While solid support exists for voluntary service, 71 percent say they would oppose a system of national service if it were mandatory. More than half (52 percent) are strongly opposed to the idea. Younger voters, age 18 to 39, most strongly oppose a mandatory system (59 percent), compared with 42 percent of voters over 65.

Figure 2: Voters Support for Voluntary and Mandatory Service

Do you favor or oppose a system of [VOLUNTARY/MANDATORY] national service in which people of all ages would serve America in a military or civilian capacity for one year and receive a living allowance and education award?



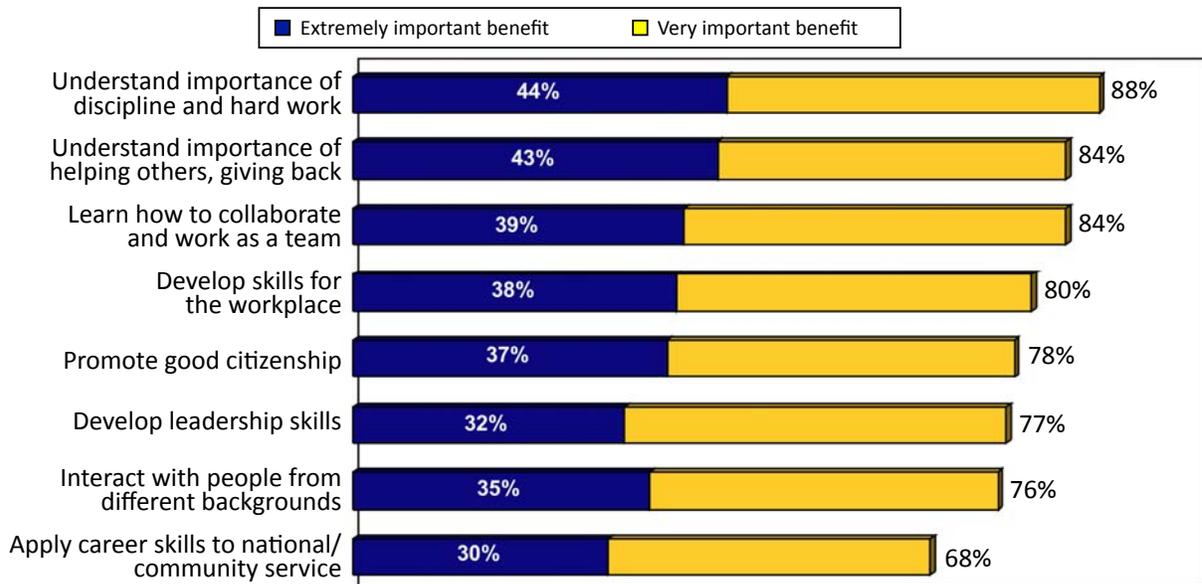
Key Finding 4: Voters say the country and national service participants would benefit greatly—and in a variety of ways—from a national service program.

Voters recognize that national service can help address many of the challenges currently facing our country and community. When considered in the abstract, it is not unusual for voters to see national service as more beneficial for the participants than for the country at large. But when voters are presented with specific ways national service could make a difference, large majorities say the country would benefit a lot from national service. The most beneficial examples include: Assist military families and veterans who are adjusting back into civilian life (93 percent); Mentor or tutor students in lower-performing schools to help keep them on track and graduate (91 percent); Help communities prepare for and respond to emergencies and disasters (91 percent); Clean up rivers, parks, and blighted public areas (91 percent); and Provide job training skills and career advice to boost economic opportunities for low-income Americans (90 percent).

Voters also recognize the important impact that national service can have on participants, especially younger Americans. Voters also ascribe important benefits to participation in national service. Foremost among these are understanding the importance of discipline and hard work (88 percent), understanding the importance of helping others and giving back (84 percent), and learning how to collaborate and work as a team (84 percent).

Figure 3: Voters Recognize Benefits of Service to Participants

Among several ways people could benefit from participating in a civilian national service program, how important would each be for a person serving in such a program?



When asked who would make an ideal national service participant, voters saw national service as appropriate for many age groups and life stages, especially for young people. Most notably, voters saw recent high school graduates looking for work experience (81 percent), recent high school grads taking a gap year (79 percent), and recent college grads or students taking time off (79 percent) as the most ideal national service participants.

Key Finding 5: Despite voters’ concerns with government spending, more than three in four say that increased funding for national service would be worth it.

The strong demand for opportunities to serve influences voters’ support for increased funding.

When told that more than 600,000 Americans apply to programs such as AmeriCorps and Peace Corps, but more than 80 percent (half a million) are turned away each year because there are not enough available positions, 76 percent of voters say increasing public funding to enable more Americans to serve in a civilian national service program would be worth it, including 93 percent of Democrats, 74 percent of Independents, and 60 percent of Republicans. Some of the strongest support for increasing funding for civilian national service came from Latino voters, with 91 percent saying an increase is worth it.

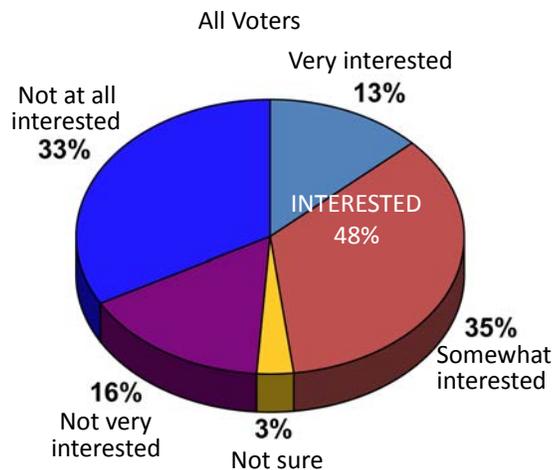
Support for heightened federal funding increases if it involves a private match, like many AmeriCorps programs currently require. Seventy-one percent of all respondents say they would support increased public funding for civilian national service if it were part of a public-private partnership in which increased public funds were matched with contributions from the private sector. Two out of three (66 percent) of Republicans agreed. Among those respondents who said increased funding would not be worth it (21 percent), 40 percent said they would be more likely to support increased funding if there were a private match.

Key Finding 6: Voters express real interest in participating in a national service program.

While many age groups, demographics, and political parties show interest, younger Americans are most interested in participating in full-time national service. When asked how interested they would be in participating in a voluntary national service program in the future, nearly half (48 percent) of respondents say they would be very or somewhat interested. Among voters ages 18 to 39, interest in participating increases to 53 percent.

Figure 4: Voters are Interested in Participating in National Service

How interested would you be in participating in a voluntary national service program at some point in the future?

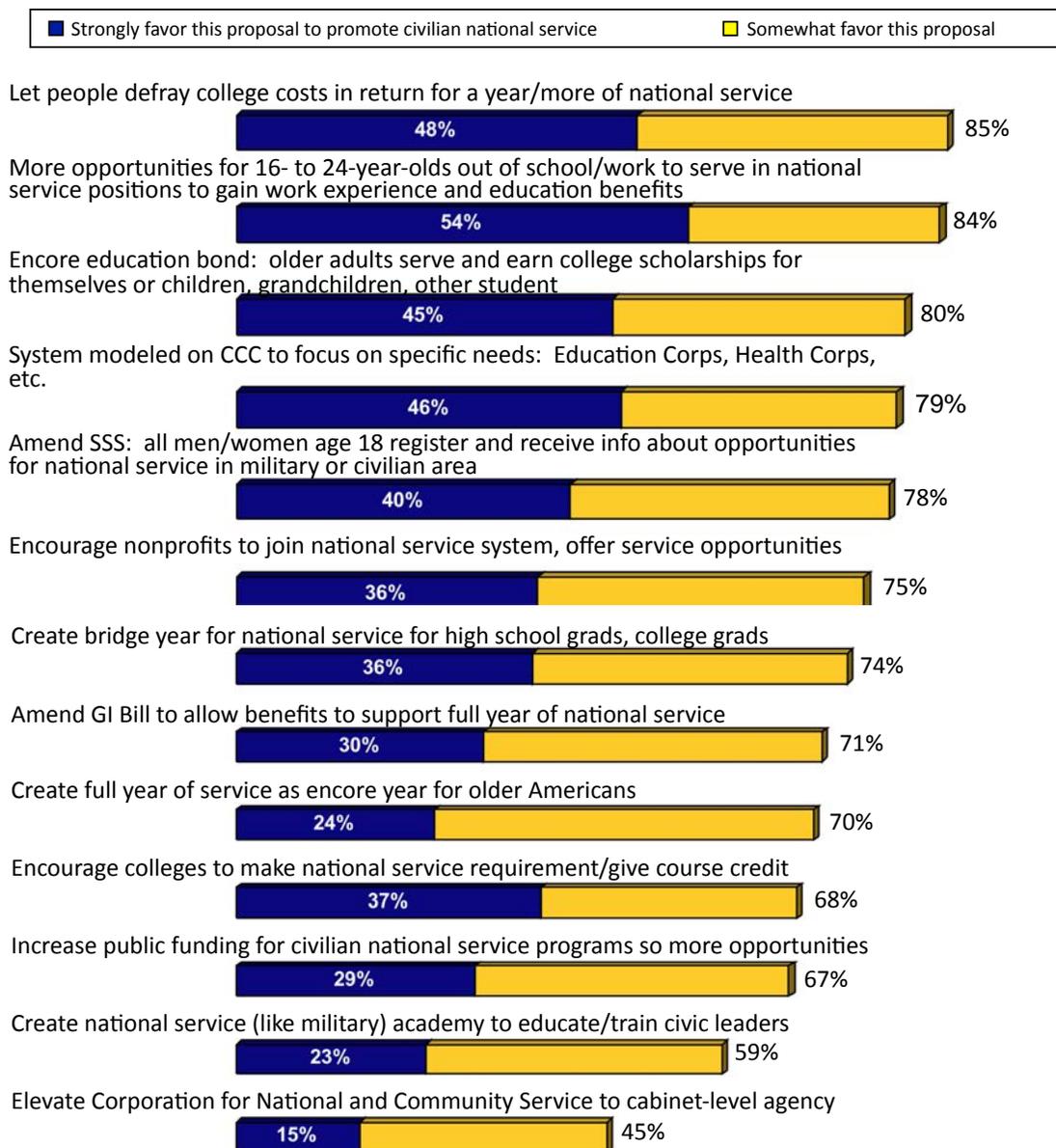


Key Finding 7: Voters favor a range of policy ideas to expand national service opportunities to more Americans, including many ideas currently being explored by the national service field.

Americans show strong support for a range of policy proposals that are core components of the Aspen Institute's Franklin Project (see below for full list of policy responses), including 79 percent support creating a system modeled on President Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps by setting

up programs that focus on specific needs, such as an Education Corps to help students, a Health Corps to expand access to health services, a Green Corps to clean up rivers, parks, and blighted areas, and a Rapid-Response Reserve Corps to respond to local and national disasters; 75 percent support encouraging nonprofit organizations, colleges, universities, and faith-based institutions to join a national service system by offering positions for Americans to serve for a year through their respective organizations; 74 percent support creating a bridge year for service, in which young adults would complete a full year of national service either between high school and college or between college and entering the work force; and, 71 percent support amending the GI Bill to permit veterans to use a portion of their GI benefits to support their performing a full year of civilian national service.

Figure 5: Voters Support Wide Range of National Service Policy Proposals



Methodology

These findings are from a telephone survey conducted by Hart Research among 1,002 registered voters nationwide. The survey, which was conducted via both landlines and cell phones from February 26 to March 4, 2013, has a margin of error of ± 3.1 percentage points.

Franklin Project at The Aspen Institute

The Franklin Project is a program of The Aspen Institute to marshal the best case for a voluntary civilian counterpart to military service in the United States. Created to help make national service a common expectation and opportunity for all Americans, The Franklin Project engages outstanding Americans from the private sector, higher education, government, the military, the faith community, philanthropy, and nonprofit organizations to develop innovative policy ideas and to build momentum around advancing a new vision of civilian service for the 21st century. For more information about the Franklin Project, please visit their website at www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/franklin-project.

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