

By the People

Serving One's Country

In this view, citizens must do more than just vote and participate in an informed way in making collective choices. Our Republic faces major problems and has a big role to play in the world. If it is to succeed, citizens must be prepared to do their part, serve their country, and if necessary, make sacrifices for the public good. In this view, citizenship is not just about the pursuit of self-interest without harming others or breaking the rules. It is also about being part of collective efforts to solve our collective problems. After all, we all benefit from the successful operation of our democracy. Hence we all need to do our part.

When people hear the phrase “serving your country,” they often think of military service. Currently, the American military is an “all-volunteer” force. Proponents argue that this approach is in line with American ideals of liberty. However, the United States has used conscription (“the draft”) during several periods in the past (for example, during the two world wars). Males between the

Selective Service System: the method through which the U.S. tracks those possibly subject to military

ages of 18 and 25 are still required to register for the “Selective Service System” so that a draft can be more easily resumed if and

when deemed necessary.

But public service does not have to be military in nature, and there are several federally-sponsored non-military public service programs. One example is AmeriCorps, which funds “volunteers” through a network of non-profit organizations to provide services ranging from public education to building public housing. Another example is the Peace Corps, which sends Americans to help with public service (e.g. health, education) in more than 70 countries around the world. Like the military, these programs are currently run on an all-volunteer basis.

While many people support the status quo of an all-volunteer army, some argue that the US should



introduce a mandatory military service period for all US citizens. This would help with military preparedness, they say. Other countries do have military conscription. For example, all Israeli men and women must serve a period in the Israeli Defense Forces.

One point of controversy if mandatory military service were introduced in the US would be the question of whether it would include women as well as men. As noted above, only men are currently required to register for the Selective Service System, and this has raised complaints of discrimination by women's groups. Additionally, some argue that an all-volunteer merely forces those who have no other options or job opportunities—the most unfortunate—into military service.

Some people argue that a period of national service should be mandatory in the US, but

say that citizens should have options other than the military. For example, the service obligation could be fulfilled by time with a non-profit organization working for the public good (as is now done through AmeriCorps). Germany has a system like this, in which all males must serve for 9 months either in the military or in a civil protection (e.g. disaster preparedness) or other public service organization.



Discussion Questions

- Do you think that military service is comparable to service in the Peace Corps?
- If there were mandatory military or volunteer service, how would it affect your life? Do you like the idea?
- What do you think about the fact that only men have to register for the Selective Service System?
- Which do you think is more important for democracy—voting or volunteer service?

 **Some Proposals:**

Fill in the chart below with arguments for and against the following proposals

	Approaches: Serving One's Country	
	Arguments for	Arguments against
Keep our current system of an all-volunteer military and public service opportunities on a voluntary basis		
Keep our current system, but expand volunteer public service programs such as AmeriCorps and Peace Corps		
Require a period of public service by all citizens, either in the military or in non-military programs working for the public good		
Require a period of military service by all citizens		



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