

# By the People

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## 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

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

several periods in the past (for example, during the two world wars). Males between

the 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:

The chart below has some arguments for and against the following proposals. Have students research on their own or in groups to fill out their own charts.

	<b>Approaches: Serving One's Country</b>	
	<b>Arguments for</b>	<b>Arguments against</b>
Keep our current system of an all-volunteer military and public service opportunities on a voluntary basis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The current system of voluntary military service provides plenty of opportunities for those who wish to devote a period of time serving their country.</li> <li>• It also avoids the problems that arise from forcing people to serve against their will (just recall the turmoil caused by the draft during the Vietnam War).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The current system fails to instill a sense of civic duty and pride in our citizens.</li> <li>• Having an all-volunteer military does not reduce the need for military personnel; it merely shifts the burden of military service on those with fewer resources and opportunities available to them (i.e. the poor).</li> </ul>
Keep our current system, but expand volunteer public service programs such as AmeriCorps and Peace Corps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These volunteer organizations do valuable and important work while at the same time promoting the principle of public service.</li> <li>• These kinds of activities are best performed by people who are motivated; people who are forced into public service might not have the same level of commitment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public service programs are expensive and expanding them would be costly.</li> <li>• Expanding volunteer programs falls far short of implementing any serious effort for public service as only a few will take advantage of such opportunities.</li> </ul>
Require a period of public service by all citizens, either in the military or in non-military programs working for the public good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requiring a period of public service would help citizens understand and respect the responsibilities of belonging to a society as well as enjoying its benefits.</li> <li>• Those who are opposed to military service will still have options that contribute to collective problem solving.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandatory public service runs contrary to the idea of personal liberty.</li> <li>• Conscripts are likely to be less committed than volunteers, both in military and non-military contexts.</li> </ul>

<p>Require a period of military service by all citizens</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requiring universal military service will improve military preparedness.</li> <li>• It will help to more evenly distribute the burden of military service. Under our current all-volunteer system, poor people and minorities are over-represented in the military because they lack other opportunities; thus disadvantaged citizens bear a disproportionate share of the burden.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requiring military service would weaken the military by bringing in a flood of people who do not want to be there and who may not be committed or well-suited for military service.</li> <li>• It could take a toll on the economy as it would be a big drain on labor resources.</li> </ul>
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