Interrogating calls for increased national service: A political discourse analysis

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Abstract
Service-learning and other forms of civic and community engagement have flourished within U.S. higher education over the past three decades, in part, through formal political processes to advance the national, economic, cultural, social, and youth development purposes of higher education. In this article we examine two recent national reports—one from academia and one from the federal government—that call for expanding civic education and national service within higher education. Findings illuminate the ways in which political discourse is used to frame national crises that then conjure a social imaginary wherein specific policy and practices of civic education and national service are justified. We argue that this not only conceals what types of political actions are possible, but also determines parameters of eligibility for who receives the resources necessary for survival. The reports under investigation have profound implications, further tethering higher education to U.S. nationalism and imperialism.

Keywords: civic engagement; national service; political discourse analysis; U.S. higher education

Introduction

Political polarization across the United States (U.S.) has been the focus of much media coverage, scholarly research, and think-tank reports within the past decade, and educational institutions have been at the center of the debate. Contentions over who and what determine recruitment, curricula, pedagogy, and support for students have played out in classrooms, school board meetings, state legislation, and the U.S. Supreme Court. As an extension of the nation-state, schools play a major role in childhood socialization by reinforcing the beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and practices of the particular society in which they are situated (Douglas, 2021; Parsons, 1989).

Through intellectual and technological innovation, higher education continues this process by preparing students for gainful employment that contributes to the economy. To these ends, educational institutions are shaped by the national political context *and* engage in nation building, particularly via curricula that influence students' conceptions of and loyalty to the nation (Douglas, 2021; Tröhler, 2023). Thus, schools are not only integral to political decisions, but also to the pre-assumed (and contested) values, ideas, and practices that accompany these decisions (van Dijk & Atienza, 2011). Decision makers are not ignorant of this dynamic.

Since the beginning of compulsory education in the U.S., scholars and politicians have debated the purpose and functions of education. Kliebard (2004) frames four divergent arguments as to the purpose of education that decisions makers advanced at the turn of the 19th and into the 20th century: (a) perpetuating culture, (b) training workers for the economy, (c) addressing society's challenges, and (d) developing individuals by cultivating children's curiosity and interests. While each of these purposes had an implicit connection to advancing the nation's interests, the connection became explicit at the end of the 20th century, during the Cold War. In the U.S. report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, an additional purpose for education joined the list: ensuring that the U.S. could lead the world in intellectual and technological advances (National Commission for Excellence in Education, 1983). Educating for global supremacy became a distinct interest of decision makers. These arguments over the purpose of education demonstrate how fundamental schooling is to constructing social norms and *social imaginaries*, the patterned, pre-reflexive way that people envision and understand a collective, social existence (Steger & James, 2013). The stakes are high for the type of society fostered. Thus, education is central to social tensions and policy decisions.

At the end of the Cold War, decision makers from industry, education, and nonprofits collaborated to advance the aims of U.S. supremacy by promoting the civic objective of education, especially in tertiary institutions. Civic engagement efforts across educational institutions advanced due to the support of formal political processes, particularly as a result of the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. These legislative acts created the Corporation for National and Community Service and national service initiatives, such as Learn and Serve America, and funded the development and institutionalization of service-related programs and offices on postsecondary campuses (Battistoni, 2013). Then, for a 2012 report, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (National Task Force on Civic

Learning and Democratic Engagement), cross-sector leaders collaborated to express that combining the practices of service and learning could advance the competing purposes of education (i.e., national, economic, cultural, social, and youth development) while simultaneously addressing the growing polarization in the country. As a result of these legislative acts and this report, among others, service-learning, as a pedagogy and practice that combines academic study with community-based learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996), has flourished (Butin, 2006). No doubt, its success partly lies in the fact that it has offered a model of education that has historically received bipartisan and bicameral support (see Rost-Banik & Perrotti, 2021; Warner 1995). The possibilities for hands-on learning, community engagement, and nation building are vast, especially when emphasis is placed on people fulfilling their civic duties.

Civic engagement has become an umbrella term to depict students' education, service, and community work that aims to develop their civic identities—the ongoing knowledge and skill development required to be an informed and effective member of communities and democracy (Schnaubelt et al., 2023). To do so, civic engagement combines service and community work with civic education. Examples of this include educating students about the importance of voting, learning about the U.S. constitution and the processes of government, and participating in democracy through practices, such as volunteering and organizing (Schnaubelt et al., 2023).

Scholars have affirmed the value of higher education civic engagement via studies revealing a range of positive learning outcomes for students (Saltmarsh et al., 2021), including a focus on cultivating civic-minded individuals (Beaumont et al., 2006; Bringle & Wall, 2020; Chittum et al., 2022). For example, service has been credited with bringing people together to work toward the common good, encouraging greater understanding of one another, assisting those in need, and helping develop people's interests and skills (Astin et al., 2000). Studies have also revealed benefits for community partners (Perrotti, 2021). With such outcomes, civic engagement has become both a way to address each of the main arguments over education's purpose *and* a way to ameliorate deep division. In short, civic engagement is positioned in rhetoric and policy as a social good, producing wins for all involved.

While civic engagement scholarship has primarily focused on student learning and development, there is a dearth of literature that analyzes the underlying values and practices of civic engagement. This is the point of departure for the current study. Though much early literature made claims of an inherent connection

between higher education civic engagement and social justice (Wade, 2000; Warren, 1998), postsecondary service programs have ignored the ways in which the political discourse and action that support their existence can undermine their liberatory intents (Rost-Banik & Perrotti, 2021). Thus, we are interested in the policies that have given legitimacy to civic engagement in higher education today and the values associated with developing students' civic identities.

In this article we examine two recent national reports—one from academia and one from the federal government—that call for increasing civic education and national civilian service. Our analysis illuminates the ways in which political discourse is used to frame national crises that then conjure a social imaginary wherein specific policy and practices of civic education and national service are justified. We argue that this discourse not only conceals what types of political actions are possible, but also determines parameters of eligibility for who receives the resources necessary for survival. The reports under investigation have profound implications for higher education civic engagement, further tethering higher education to U.S. nationalism and imperialism (Billig, 2017; Immerwahr, 2019).

Political Discourse as Theory and Method

Political actors, those with legitimate political power and authority in a society, significantly impact people's everyday experiences through the laws and policies they enact, setting a course of action in a society (Okulska & Cap, 2010). But how our daily lives are shaped does not necessarily begin with the implementation of laws and policies. Rather, our personal experiences manifest through the discourse that political actors use. Discourse, in general, can be defined as a 'characteristic way of saying, doing, and being' (Gee, 2014, p. 47) within a context, and can help decode how and why the same words can have varied meanings based on the context and speaker. More specifically, political discourse is intent on persuading or dissuading people to take a specific action (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Pelclová & Lu, 2018).

Decision makers, particularly politicians, use political discourse to shape public opinion about what kinds of policies should be implemented (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Van Dijk, 1997). Further, they enact legislation and appropriate funding to make the actions they propose through political discourse possible. Because the political arena has propelled civic engagement within higher education, we use political discourse analysis to make sense of two recent reports from

decision makers that call for exponentially increasing national civilian service. This methodological approach is unique as there is a dearth of research within the civic engagement realm that has used any form of discourse analysis to explore civic engagement within higher education. The studies published at the time of this writing range from an examination of discourse related to calls for increased advocacy and civic engagement produced through social media during social movements in Ghana (Nartey, 2022), to dissertation studies that have explored representations of diversity and inclusion language in higher education community engagement (Pasquesi, 2019), and how public discourse shapes local civic engagement practices within neighborhoods (Odell, 2004). While not political discourse analysis, these civic engagement studies used either discourse analysis or critical discourse analysis to explore the significance of the role of discourse within the civic engagement realm.

Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) explain that political discourse appears in response to situations, especially moments of crisis, as a way of pushing for particular actions. And because crises are socially produced and discursively constituted (De Rycker & Mohd Don, 2013), those who employ political discourse use arguments to '*provide people with reasons for acting* in particular ways' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p.3, *emphasis* in original). They make a case for deciding to support or oppose a particular course of action, be it returning to the status quo or engaging in significant reform. In the process of advocating for a proposed action, actors use discourse that asserts: (a) a distinct representation of reality, often used as a premise for actions to take, and (b) a social imaginary for how society ought to be (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012).

We refer to the social imaginary as a patterned, pre-reflexive way that people envision and understand a collective, social existence, including obligations, rights, and duties associated with that existence (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Steger & James, 2013). This collective recognition of the world can be transformed through everyday cultural practices, including discourse (Appadurai, 1996). For example, it is common for people to have pre-reflexive parameters around conceptions of "the local," "the national," or "the global." According to Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), the social imaginary is often present in political discourse and can become entangled with decision makers' representation of reality. The representation of reality depicts what actually exists, while the social imaginary describes the world as it could be, a possible future. Even though both representations of reality and social imaginaries give people reasons for action, the distinction between the two is important. When actors work to enforce a collective

recognition of the imaginary as though it is a reality that already exists, they obfuscate the reasons for action. In short, politicians can use their power through discourse to manipulate people's opinion for particular political gains (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Okulska & Cap, 2010).

A common example of the distinction between representations of reality and social imaginaries can be observed in political campaign speeches. A political candidate presents an imaginary of the nation with her already in office. She works to galvanize collective recognition of the obligations, rights, and duties that she would be granted in this role by painting a vision of how others' lives would look like with her at the helm. How she understands the world, what she believes about it, and how she would like it to be, are put forth as arguments for taking certain actions. Because politicians have the power to influence people to jointly recognize an imaginary rather than reality, political discourse analysis is a helpful tool to better understand how and why particular actions are being proposed, as well as how specific discourse generates support for those actions (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Okulska & Cap, 2010).

Ideally, within political discourse, the arguments for taking certain actions have been through a process of deliberation wherein alternative proposals and counterarguments have been considered. The challenge, however, is twofold. First, the reasons for proposed actions are shaped by existing structures. Second, the choices may be presented in ways that make anything other than the proposed conclusion seem unreasonable. Thus, it is crucial to critique political discourse for the ideas proposed as well as the values, beliefs, and interests that undergird them. Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) warn that when proposed actions serve distinct interests, ideological elements are involved. The problem with ideology within political discourse is that the ideas, beliefs, and concerns of particular social groups can become the general—and unquestioned—ideas, beliefs, and concerns of larger social bodies, thereby having a significant influence on social life. Political discourse analysis can help expose how decision makers use ideologies to achieve, maintain, and renew social dominance, especially through policy and budgets.

Data sources
Our data consist of two reports published in 2020: *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing Democracy for the 21st Century,* written by the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship and *Inspired to Serve*, authored by the National Commission on Military, National and Public Service. Throughout the rest of this

article, we will refer to the reports respectively as *Our Common Purpose* and *Inspired to Serve*.

To better understand the two reports under investigation, it is important to consider how they came to fruition and who composed them. *Our Common Purpose* was a joint initiative of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, which together established the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship in 2018. The Commission, made up of 35 people from an array of academic institutions, think tanks, investment firms, foundations, and nonprofits was formed to 'consider what it means to be a good citizen in the 21st century, and to ask how all of us might obtain the values, knowledge, and skills to become still better citizens' (p. iv). They met for two years and held listening sessions across the U.S. to learn about the pressing issues surrounding citizenship, including barriers to participation. Their report offered six strategies and 31 recommendations to encourage 'democratic citizenship,' which they believe hold the possibilities of overcoming the 'democratic deficits' (p. 20) facing the U.S.

Inspired to Serve was commissioned by Congress and the President, within the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, with the mandate to 'conduct a review of the military selective service process' and 'consider methods to increase participation in military, national, and public service in order to address national security and other public service needs of the Nation' (as cited in National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service, 2020, p. 1). To fulfill the mandate, 11 appointed Commissioners met with experts and stakeholders, held public hearings across the U.S., including on postsecondary campuses, and read public comments. The Commissioners penned 49 recommendations, with implementation guidance, to increase military and civilian service.

In this study, we focus on the two reports' common goals of expanding national service and civic education, especially in relation to higher education. Efforts to increase national civilian service slots have been proposed in the three legislative years subsequent to the release of the reports but have yet to pass. Nonetheless, the reports have proliferated across different sectors. *Our Common Purpose* has been featured on the PBS Newshour and in numerous university lectures, primarily through spokesperson Danielle Allen, a political theorist and a Chairperson of the Commission. *Inspired to Serve* has been cited by organizations connected to higher education's civic engagement work, further supporting the growth of national civilian service and service-learning as well as accompanying fiscal appropriations. Specifically, in July 2022, drawing on *Inspired to Serve,* AmeriCorps submitted a report to Congress detailing steps necessary to reinstate

federal funding for service-learning (see AmeriCorps, 2022). Campus Compact, a national coalition of U.S. colleges and universities aimed at promoting the public purposes of higher education, also amplified *Inspired to Serve's* calls for increased national civilian service through its affiliation with the Coalition for Service-Learning, an entity comprised of over 160 education and youth development organizations. The Coalition has actively advocated for *Inspired to Serve's* recommendation of restoring funding ($250 million annually) to Learn and Serve America (Coalition for Service-Learning, 2023). Additionally, Service Year Alliance (2021), a nonprofit that works toward making national service a common expectation for every young American, mirrored many of *Inspired to Serve's* recommendations in their 2021 publication *Reimagining National Service: A Roadmap to a Service Presidency*.

Through lectures, blog posts, policy briefs, and webinars, *Our Common Purpose* and *Inspired to Serve* have received additional attention from various coalitions, nonprofits, think tanks and advocacy organizations, including the Brookings Institution, Education Reform Now, the National Conference on Citizenship, Partnership for American Democracy, and the Volcker Alliance. The proliferation of the reports across multiple sectors have legitimized and reinforced the reports' recommendations.

Data analysis
Political discourse analysis guided our analysis of the reports in that we paid close attention to how arguments for proposed actions were framed. However, because political discourse analysis is a subfield, we also drew upon elements of critical discourse analysis to help determine how language was being used (Fairclough, 2013). Particularly, we took note of the description of the text (i.e., what words are used, the values and ideas associated with them) as well the interpretation of the text based on the social context in which it was placed, including the power relations that help to explain its interactions within larger social forces (Fairclough, 2013; Okulska & Cap, 2010).

We recognized common historical narratives and ideologies embedded in the texts (e.g., political obligation, nationalism). We also observed that some of the contextual dynamics for how the reports represented reality were mentioned while others were entirely omitted. We examined the similarities and differences between the documents, maintaining curiosity for how the actors and the institutions they represented shaped the purpose and framing of each document. As an example, both reports frame the U.S. as being in a moment of crisis to rationalize a growth in

national civilian service, yet neither report mentions the crisis of capitalism, a challenge that even economists have begun to articulate (Wolff, 2016). Another example provides a distinction between the reports: *Our Common Purpose* notes significant racial disparities with the U.S. as a major contention but *Inspired to Serve* omits the naming of race entirely. Despite the crises articulated, both reports argue that the U.S. has a historical commitment to service that, if rekindled, could solve the crises they name.

Following Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), we parsed the discourse into *circumstantial premises*, *goal premises*, *value premises*, and *claims* to understand the arguments and justifications for increasing national civilian service and civics education. Circumstantial premises describe the world as it currently is while goal premises position the world as a future vision, an imaginary. Value premises describe the beliefs and mores that support the goal premises and the claims, or proposed actions. We then used the historical and social context of higher education, civic engagement, national policy, and the economy to explain the relationship between the text and the larger social forces in which it is embedded. The relationships between the text and the broader social context clarified the decision makers' representations of reality (circumstantial premises), social imaginaries (goal premises), and proposed actions (claims). This process allowed us to focus on the text that specified growing national service and civics education—and with what mechanisms—while also pointing out the rationales used to substantiate these claims.

We understand the authors of each report (representing academia, the federal government, military, nonprofits, and business) as decision makers who shape and legitimate dominant narratives and policy directions about the nation, civic education, and national civilian service (van Dijk, 1997; van Leeuwen, 2007). Our findings illustrate how political discourse is used to frame a social imaginary wherein increased national service and civics education shape people into "good citizens" who love and are loyal to the country. We contend that decision makers' rhetoric implies a hierarchy, positioning those who are perceived as "good citizens" as deserving of the basic resources required for survival. Relatedly, by employing this particular political discourse, decision makers preempt other, more liberatory, social imaginaries and actions.

To ensure trustworthiness in our findings, we acknowledge that as the authors of this article and analysts of the political discourse, we are an active part of the discourse presented (Okulska & Cap, 2010). We have over two decades of experience in the field of higher education civic engagement across various roles

and institutions, including as undergraduate service-learners, as community-engaged graduate students, and as staff and faculty within community engagement offices and departments. In other words, we '[belong] to the discourse stage' (Okulska & Cap, 2010, p. 5). Thus, our academic and professional experiences informed our analysis of the reports. To further account for trustworthiness in our analysis, we were intentional in applying Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) strategy of separating the discourse into circumstantial premises, goal premises, value premises, and claims to understand the arguments and justifications for increasing national civilian service and civics education. This 'methodological separation' (Okulska & Cap, 2010, p. 5) of first establishing data and describing its textual features before interpreting the data is a common practice in political discourse analysis to account for trustworthiness (Chilton, 2007).

Findings

The two reports under investigation describe the U.S. in crisis or impending crisis, for slightly different reasons. From there, they provide a combined 80 recommendations (31 in *Our Common Purpose* and 49 in *Inspired to Serve*) for addressing the crises noted. Amidst all the recommendations, the reports share two in common, both of which impact higher education and set the stage for developing "good citizens": (a) prioritize and invest in civic education, including service-learning, and (b) establish a universal expectation for young people to fulfill a year of national service. We first describe the contours of the crises that the two groups understand the U.S. to be in (circumstantial premises). Then, we expose the value premises and goal premises (social imaginary) of both groups, which lead to recommendations (claims) put forth. Finally, we focus on the implications these recommendations have for higher education generally, and civic engagement specifically.

Framing national crises
The writers of *Our Common Purpose* and *Inspired to Serve* frame the U.S. as either in crisis or needing to prepare for crisis. Examining the language used to describe the crises in the two reports reveals the values and beliefs embedded in the rationales that undergird proposed actions. In *Our Common Purpose,* the crises include threats to constitutional democracy, democratic service, and a lack of trust in our civic and political institutions. In *Inspired to Serve*, the crises include risks

to national security and a lack of qualified people to serve in the military. Both reports emphasize that reinvigorating the history and culture of service in the U.S. is the answer to addressing the critical needs of the nation.

Our common purpose

The 'prevailing sense of crisis' (p. 10) in the U.S., according to the authors of *Our Common Purpose*, is 'a constitutional democracy that feels to many increasingly unresponsive, nonadaptive, and even antiquated' (p. 1). The Commission asserts that trust between people and with U.S. institutions needs to be reestablished by 'find[ing] our way back to love of country and one another' (p. 10) and recommitting to the nation's foundation as a constitutional democracy. They are quick to note that this is not the first time the nation has experienced such a crisis. In fact, they note that scholars have referred to the Reconstruction period as the country's 'second founding' of a constitutional democracy and the civil rights movement as the 'third founding' (p. 3). The current crisis is just as critical: 'We on this Commission believe the profoundly challenging conditions of the 21st century *pose an urgent threat to the future of our democratic way of life* and thus require a "fourth founding"' (p. 3, *emphasis* added). In other words, these "challenging conditions" might make the promise of a constitutional democracy even worse if it does not undergo renewal.

According to the report, the multiple stressors of the 21ˢᵗ century are both the factors that have led to the crisis as well as the factors that will influence the outcome of the nation's 'rise or fall' (p. 1). These stressors, which the Commission notes existed before COVID-19 but were exacerbated because of the pandemic, include 'a fragmented media environment, profound demographic shifts, artificial intelligence and other technological advances, economic inequality, centralized power, and climate change' (p. 10). The Commission is upfront in providing data (circumstantial premises) that support their focus on these stressors: low approval ratings for Congress, low voter turnout, growing cynicism in online culture, flagging trust in institutions, waning belief in the importance of living in a democracy, and significant political partisanship. Additionally, they write:

> Income and wealth inequality levels have exceeded those on the eve of the Great Depression. Social mobility has stagnated. Inequities continue to track lines of race, gender, and ethnicity, revealing deep structural unfairness in our society. A surge in white nationalism, anti-Semitism, and anti-immigrant vitriol has flooded our politics with sentiments corrosive to the

ethic of a democratic society, while people of color continue to confront barriers to opportunity and participation. (p. 1-2)

As the authors represent this reality, they point out that economic inequality is the central factor amidst the stressors. They blame the 21st century pressures primarily on two dynamics: (a) a lack of (in-person) political and civic engagement from Americans, and (b) the 'real and perceived influence' (p. 12) of money in political campaigns and media. These two factors (circumstantial premises), according to the report authors, result in a cynical and 'vicious circle' (p. 12) that largely benefits the wealthy (value premise).

Despite the social stressors and the dynamics that shape them, the Commission explains that in forums all across the nation, people were not completely disheartened. Instead, the Commission also 'heard a yearning to believe again in the American story, to feel connected to one another' (p. 2). Here, they draw upon perceptions of the past to envision a future. People shared examples of engaging in their 'democratic responsibilities' and working to connect 'long-standing divides' (p. 2). Thus, the authors state that there is a 'sense of hopefulness that the situation can be changed…by working together in communities…[to] rebuild the shared trust and trustworthiness that are necessary to the healthy functioning of a constitutional democracy' (p.12). The authors focus on trust and working together despite discord and inequality (value premises) to argue for the recommendations (claims) they suggest will produce their social imaginary (goal premise)–'reinvent[t] American democracy' and renew the 'civic wealth' so that people will 'organize for action and [be] willing to nurture bonds of community and love of country' (p. 12).

Inspired to serve
Rather than beginning by naming a crisis and then arguing for a particular action as a response, the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service reverses the order of the argument. They begin by asserting the circumstantial premise of a strong history and culture of service in the U.S. and imbibing a goal premise by asking the reader to envision the possibilities that would exist if the culture of service were enhanced. Citing that approximately 24 million people engage in military, national or public service, the authors encourage readers to 'imagine what more could be done if significantly more people were inspired and able to answer the call to serve' (p. 1). The authors suggest that the culture of service could be drawn upon to address 'critical national needs—security, disaster

response, education, conservation, health care, housing and more' (p. 1). Service, the report argues, is the solution, the 'keystone of a strategy to meet critical national needs, ensure the Nation's security and defense, improve the quality of life for all Americans, invigorate civil society, and strengthen America's democracy' (p. 10). However, the Commission contends that there are three overarching obstacles preventing more people from serving: (a) awareness of the possibilities to serve, (b) aspiration toward service, and (c) access to opportunities for service. The reality represented (circumstantial premises) highlights that the nation has needs that are not being met and, further, that the country's human resources are being underutilized toward meeting these needs.

The Commission offers a reason for the underutilized human resource of service that, if corrected, would address the nation's needs: 'the Nation is failing to prepare the next generation of Americans to participate actively in the U.S. civic and democratic life' (p. 14) due to a lack of federal prioritization and funding of civic education and service-learning. The evidence provided for this circumstantial premise is that '22 percent of American adults cannot name any of the three branches of government, and 37 percent cannot name or do not know any of the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution' (p. 14). The Commission admits that increased resources for STEM education have resulted in decreased funding for civic education, thus leaving Americans with limited knowledge of governmental structures and functions. Moreover, low awareness and lack of access to service are 'preventing more Americans from actively serving the Nation' (p. 25).

A weak aspiration to serve is another principal concern identified by the Commission. Despite emphasizing the strong history and continued culture of service in the U.S., the authors articulate a deep worry: the low percentage of youth who are eligible and aspire to serve in the military. The report references Army Marketing Research Group data (circumstantial premises) that reveal only 29 percent of youth aged 17 to 24 are eligible to join the military without a waiver for issues such as 'physical and mental health, grooming standards, criminal records, education and aptitude, and drug use' (p. 32). Fewer yet, about one percent (465,000 youth), are actually interested in serving. This concern shapes the recommendations the authors pose that closely link military with civilian service.

By inverting how they structure the argument, the authors present a palatable situation: they want to prevent a national crisis. Yet when uncovering the premises used, it becomes clearer that they perceive the crisis as the dearth of qualified people who are willing to serve in the military.

Critiquing representations of reality

Examining how the authors represent reality is crucial since, as Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) caution, there is a difference between realities and imaginaries. The authors of both reports are deliberate in the crises they name and those they omit, thereby invoking particular imaginaries, emotions, and associated actions. However, by limiting how they represent reality, they foreclose alternative imaginaries and actions.

Our common purpose

The authors name two dynamics (lack of civic participation and oversized monetary influence in politics and media) as influencing the stressors that determine the fate of constitutional democracy. They note that these dynamics (circumstantial premises) have led to a lack of trust in government institutions (value premise). Highlighting the circumstantial premise and value premise opens questions about why and how the present conditions exist and what governmental and institutional policies and practices have contributed to them. Examining the report's representation of reality requires acknowledging that politicians have passed legislation cutting taxes for the wealthiest, deregulated businesses, reduced spending on social welfare programs, and placed barriers on unionization (Steger, 2023). Further, the inquiry illuminates that the Supreme Court has granted corporations political agency, enabling them to spend unlimited funds on elections (Greenhouse, 2018). These institutional actions have shaped disparate capacities to participate in service activities, engage in public forums, and influence policy. But these influential decisions are omitted from the account.

The report authors' imaginary is 'an essential reinvention of American democracy—as well as the civic wealth that exists in a populace that is able to organize for action and willing to nurture bonds of community and love of country' (p. 12). Their description of a healthy constitutional democracy means that political institutions and the general public trust and rely upon one another to virtuously reinforce one another's participation, responsiveness, and responsibility to one another.

Ironically, even though the authors argue for heightened trust and civic participation, they readily admit, 'We do not naively claim that more democracy simply in the form of more participation will solve our problems' (p. 3). In other words, even with increased involvement, there is no certainty that income and wealth inequality, white nationalism, anti-immigrant stances, climate change, and

so on would decrease. Instead, the authors maintain that the democratically established parameters of the U.S. Constitution, especially the separation of power between the three branches of government, will suffice.

Painting reality as a crisis of confidence in the U.S. Constitution and the government and relying on the values of returning to a 'love of country and one another' (p. 10) is powerful, but this representation ignores important factors that, if included, may lead to arguments for different actions.

Inspired to serve
The authors stress that service from all Americans is needed to meet national needs but that there are obstacles to serving, including that people's aspirations for service have not been cultivated through adequate civics education. Probing this representation of reality, it is curious that the authors emphasize the minority of American adults who cannot name branches of government instead of the 78 percent who can. They also omit research that references one million people who are actively involved in civic-work projects (Levine, 2013). Given the definition that the authors use for service—'a personal commitment of time, energy, and talent to a mission that contributes to the public good by protecting the Nation and its citizens, strengthening communities, or promoting the general social welfare' (p. 1)—a rational question would be how anyone can be excluded from this definition, and thus, why the concern about a lack of civic knowledge and participation?

One reason the Commission portrays this particular version of reality is likely due to the responsibility they were given. Charged by the National Defense Authorization Act to 'consider methods to increase participation in military, national, and public service in order to address national security and other public service needs of the Nation' (p. 1), the authors' frame of reality was already structured by Congressional mandate. Blaming the country's unmet needs on a lack of civic education, which they assert has led to inadequate military, national, and public service (circumstantial premises), the report authors rationalize that service (claim) will inspire the patriotism (value premise), that is foundational to (what they perceive as) the duties of citizenship (goal premise).

By tying national security and public service needs to a lack of civic education and increased apathy, the report authors intertwine evidence for their perception of current reality with their vision of a future reality. They name obstacles that prevent more people from participating in service (circumstantial premises) and then detail their imaginary (goal premise), stating:

> By 2031, 70 years after President Kennedy's call to "ask what you can do for your country," every 18-year-old will be asked—and be well prepared to answer—the following question: "How will you serve our country?" (p. 11)

This imaginary draws upon the history of national service with the hope of inciting renewed patriotism toward a similar effort. Notably, the discourse does not account for federal decisions that have manufactured the nation's "needs" and the accompanying opportunities for involvement. In other words, there are other imaginaries for which to argue.

Ideologies behind proposed actions: Shaping "good citizens" for the nation
As previously noted, in political discourse, the values, beliefs, and norms embedded in the representation of reality and the social imaginary pave the way for supporting or opposing specific actions. Actors present reality and an imaginary in a specific way to justify, or argue for, particular actions to be taken (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). The authors of both reports under investigation envision enhanced civic education that will encourage a year of service—whether military or civilian—to become the norm. Drawing on ideas about the obligations that accompany the rights of those who live in the U.S., the reports emphasize that prioritizing and investing in civic education and establishing a universal expectation for young people to fulfill a year of national service will shape "good citizens." Just as it is important to question the reality presented, it is also crucial to examine the ideologies behind proposed actions.

Our common purpose
The authors of *Our Common Purpose* argue that one of the strategies to address the 'democratic deficits' (p. 20) of the 21st century and build a civic infrastructure that ensures the survival of the American constitutional democracy is to 'demand engagement from all who reside in the United States, whatever their legal citizenship status may be' (p. 20). Participation in the common good, or an 'obligation to interests greater than one's own,' is posited as an attribute of a 'prosocial contributor' and so-called 'good citizen' (p. 65). The authors have an expansive definition of citizenship—all residents of the U.S. can offer positive contributions to the community, whether legally documented or not—and they stress that political obligation accompanies the rights that people acquire when they reside in a nation. This is where the ideology behind the proposed service expansion

becomes apparent. Instituting national service (claim) is the expression of political obligation (goal premise) that can enliven for all residents patriotism and a 'love of country' (value premises) which will ensure a constitutional democracy (circumstantial premise plus goal premise) (p. 63).

The authors recommend embedding this patriotism into the civic infrastructure by instituting $10,000 'baby bonds' (p. 58) that the government would create for every child born in the U.S. Those who perform a year of national service would be paid from the savings accrued from the bond; for those who do not participate, the funds would go back to the government.

Inspired to serve

The Commission on Military, National, and Public Service argues for a service year to 'become a new rite of passage to adulthood' (goal premise) (p. 2). To impress the imaginary of young Americans 'realiz[ing] their obligations as citizens' (p. 3), the authors propose several actions (claims), such as instituting comprehensive civic education, including service-learning; designating an Executive Cabinet-level lead and corresponding council to advise the President on military, national, and public service; creating an online service platform for people to find and apply for service opportunities; and establishing a national awareness campaign to improve, increase, and extend the marketing of various forms of service. The authors note that the online platform would allow people to register their interests, skills, and certifications so that they could be matched with various needs as well as be mobilized in a time of a national emergency, including both natural disasters and war. A specific skillset they desire is cybersecurity to combat (future) attacks on U.S. satellites, election systems, and other institutions (p. 80). They argue that young people, including Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) cadets, should be trained in cybersecurity, and further, 'that Congress authorize and appropriate funds to create a Civilian Cybersecurity Reserve pilot program' (p. 81).

The national awareness campaign that the authors propose not only connects back to the concern about the number of youth who are eligible and interested in military service but also to the data (circumstantial premise) that reveals that 4.5 million people between the ages of 16-24, referred to as 'opportunity youth and Tribal communities,' are 'neither enrolled in school nor employed' (p. 55-56). The report authors cite that many of the youth experience houselessness, foster care, poverty, and the criminal justice system, and thus 'could benefit greatly from national service opportunities' (value premises) (p. 55). They propose (claim) that 'Congress appropriate funding to double by 2031 the number of opportunities in

existing national service programs that engage opportunity youth and Tribal communities' (p. 55-56). The authors make explicit that many programs engaging with young people offer basic needs like food and transportation but that the Corporation for National and Community Service, the entity that runs AmeriCorps, is not required to do this. They recommend providing financial support to programs that offer wraparound services for youth, cautioning that exclusion (value premise) from the proposed national service expansion (claim), will result in increased social problems (goal premise).

Discussion

Throughout *Our Common Purpose* and *Inspired to Serve*, the authors rely on crises to support their recommendations of exponentially expanding national service and civics education. However, as we illuminate, embedded in their representations of reality (circumstantial premises) are specific mores (value premises) and social imaginaries (goal premises) that bolster their proposed actions (claims). Parsing the political discourse into circumstantial premises, value premises, goal premises, and claims allows readers to critically question why the authors argue for certain actions and how they envision the U.S. and world.

The authors of the two reports draw upon the ideology of political obligation to the country to bolster their recommendations of expanded civic education and national service. At a base level, political obligation refers to the duty of people to obey the laws of a country (Parekh, 1993). Yet, the authors of both reports employ rhetoric that presumes a civic responsibility that goes beyond obeying laws. In effect, they argue that students should be taught via civics education that in exchange for the rights the country supplies, young people should contribute to the common good through national service.

The report authors propose national service as a two-fold strategy: (a) to ensure national security, and (b) to create a way to distinguish those deemed worthy of basic needs amongst increasing precarity. Addressing the first strategy, *Inspired to Service* explicitly names "national security" as reason (circumstantial premise) to expand national service (p. 2). Examining the premises for this recommendation uncovers assumptions made about the needed size, scope, and force of the U.S. military. While the report details how military size has changed over the years based on existing wars, it is notable that the U.S. has higher military spending than all other nations and has the third largest military in the world (USA Facts Team,

2024). With roughly 2.5 million military personnel (Military One Source, 2022) and over 750 foreign military bases across 80 nations (Bledsoe, 2023), scholars and activists contest the expanse of the U.S military and advocate for demilitarization in numerous locations (Cachola et al., 2019; Kirk, 2018). Demilitarization, 'an unmaking of that which came before, of ways of thinking and feeling and seeing that made a military solution thinkable and desirable,' has taken place in multiple nations outside of the U.S. (Bickford, 2013, p. 20). Still, the authors of *Inspired to Serve* propose strengthening national emergency mobilization, citing the U.S. Department of Defense's (DoD) emphasis on military readiness and preparedness, including 'defending the homeland from attack' and 'deterring adversaries from aggression' against U.S. interests' (p. 109). The report states that in order to meet these objectives, the DoD maintains a strategy of 'building a more lethal force by prioritizing preparedness for war' (p. 109).

Meanwhile, the authors of *Our Common Purpose* allude to national security by contending that 'the profoundly challenging conditions of the twenty-first century pose an urgent threat to the future of our democratic way of life' (p. 3). The authors propose addressing threats to the nation by 'inspir[ing] a culture of commitment to constitutional democracy and one another' (p. 9). Mechanisms to reach this goal include 'establish[ing] a universal expectation of a year of national service' and 'invest[ing] in civic educators and civic education for all ages and in all communities' (p. 9). They envision a future wherein 'cohorts of service corps alumni will be created who represent diverse views and backgrounds but share a common experience of service to the nation' (p. 58). This "civic culture" via national service and civic education seems reminiscent of banal nationalism, a form of nationalism that goes mostly unnoticed yet builds allegiance and patriotism in a way that makes military solutions both plausible and appealing (Billig, 2017).

Turning to the second strategy, distinguishing between those deemed worthy of basic needs amidst increasing precarity, it is important to note that people often enlist in national service—whether military or civilian—to feed their families and access higher education. Data reveals that those entering military service are disproportionately from the South and West and are Black, American Indian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, with women of color being overrepresented (Office of People Analytics, 2020). The characteristics of recruits parallel those experiencing economic disadvantage (Shrider & Creamer, 2022). Cowen (2006) cautions how the exchange of national service for social service 'builds loyalties' (p. 180) that can drive a wedge between those participating and those who can afford not to. Thus, when authorizing the connection of survival resources to

national service, decision makers encourage political obligation to the nation that is raced, classed, and gendered.

Even though the *Inspired to Serve* report does not explicitly mention race or class, the reference to 'opportunity youth and Tribal communities' (p. 55) serves as a politically neutral and racially coded phrase for low-income youth of color (Bennett & Walker, 2018; Mitchell & Perrotti, 2023). This rhetoric insinuates that leaders are worried that 'opportunity youth and Tribal communities' (p. 55) will not contribute to the economy in socially acceptable ways, and therefore, should be recruited into national service. Similar language and rationales were used during the passage of the legislation that brought AmeriCorps into existence (Rost-Banik & Perrotti, 2021). This reveals that authors' recommendations connect to an imaginary of surveillance on political obligation tethered to race and class.

The ideology of political obligation also makes assumptions about people's contributions to the public good, marking some contributions as worthy and others not. The reports praise participation in AmeriCorps as adding to the public good yet omit how most hosts for AmeriCorps members are nonprofits that receive foundation funding, focus on small reforms that maintain the maldistribution of wealth for those funders, and employ elite professionals, thereby prioritizing credentials over the knowledge and experience of those the nonprofits purport to serve (INCITE, 2007; Spade, 2015). The reports also laud national service but fail to mention how those among its ranks have been mobilized to protect the interests of corporations and state agencies that threaten water, land, and life at places like Standing Rock, Mauna Kea, and cities all across the U.S. during Black Lives Matter protests. Meanwhile, activities like playing softball in the park, helping a sibling with homework, watching the comings and goings of various people on the block, deescalating neighborhood disputes, protecting natural resources, checking on elderly neighbors, resisting police brutality, and so on, are not recognized as advancing the common good. Despite alternative examples that foster networks of care and promote the well-being of society, the reports argue for forms of service that directly center a national imaginary bolstered by both banal and conscious nationalism (Billig, 2017).

Conclusion

Our study departs from most of the civic engagement literature in that it examines the premises undergirding proposals for an exponential expansion of civic

engagement via civics education and national service. The report authors begin by detailing crises that the U.S. faces and cautioning that without increased civic education and national service, the U.S. will not be able to adequately respond to these crises. Citing civic apathy and waning interest in military service, the reports draw upon the history and culture of service in the U.S. to appeal to sensitivities of a forgotten era. They use values of hope, loyalty to the nation, and working together despite inequality and discord, as well as a social imaginary of a unified nation with a strong military and a robust civilian service corps, to justify their recommendations of a universal expectation of national service and increased civic education.

Using political discourse analysis, we find that the authors' representation of reality (what they call crises) is narrow, and their social imaginary bolsters an ideology that maintains global supremacy. Namely, the crises conjure a social imaginary that prescribes the conceivable recommendations of exponentially enhancing: (a) civic education through service-learning and studying government systems, and (b) national service via AmeriCorps or the military. This limits us to ambiguous objectives like learning the branches of government, understanding others, and addressing community needs (including war). These objectives sound decent on the surface, but when we parse the circumstantial premises from the value and goal premises, we realize that the authors overlook the ways that power and money inform how government functions, who should be understood and how, and what gets considered as community needs.

These dynamics are consequential for social relations, and most especially for social justice. First, by ignoring the ways that policies—and the values and practices that accompany them—have shaped the named crises, it is easier to sideline the more community-centric and contested ways people show up through service and community work (e.g., community and collective care, activism, organizing) (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Second, it is easier to completely dismiss efforts to change, or even abolish, the systems that construct the crises at local and global scales (e.g., von Eschen, 1997). Finally, the solution of national service for all residents overlooks how the nation and its systems have differentially treated its residents, the actions those participating in national service are asked to perform on behalf of the nation, and the atrocities the nation has committed domestically and internationally to maintain global political and economic power (e.g., Lutz, 2009). In sum, analyzing the political discourse employed opens up the possibility of seeing beyond the presentation of reality, allowing us to ask vital questions about

how and why the crises are framed as such, as well as to understand what type of social world is being invoked when particular actions are proposed.

In a world where contestations over civic and political engagement influence whether and how people and the planet are exploited for other people's gain, it remains crucial to examine the direction in which actions like national service are aimed. Do the actions work towards bolstering social control through surveillance, violence, and militarization or do they work towards liberation of all? In this process, how are boundaries drawn? For whom? What is considered as cared about versus a target for extraction or destruction? More specifically, given amplified globalization, should the reports under investigation only be concerned about the U.S. and those within its borders, or should there be greater care for people of all lands? Focus primarily on the U.S. not only denies how a large percentage of the U.S. population holds international social ties that are integral to their well-being, but it also ignores the reality of U.S. power within global interdependence. In fact, U.S. actions, policies, and practices drastically impact the realities and livelihoods of people throughout the world (Steger, 2023).

Notably, postsecondary campuses are a prime location where actors' social imaginaries and their prescribed actions play out. Tertiary institutions are mandated to have on-campus ROTC recruiting in order to receive federal funds, are tethered to DoD grants to fund research lines for technological innovations (Price, 2011), and currently are at the whim of a minority of powerful voices that wish to ban books, change diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, surveil curricula, and control race-conscious admissions practices as seen through everyday news reporting. The report authors' social imaginary confines higher education to operating as an extension of the state as opposed to being sites of activism against war, racism, sexism, and other forms of violence.

The report recommendations would actually enhance tertiary institutions' position in nation-building as campuses are more tightly woven into the effort of creating a seamless connection between military and civilian service. For example, the proposed online portal would register students' personal information and skills into a national database with the goal of enabling the government to easily recruit them from one stream of service to another in order to advance the nation's desires.

We are not suggesting abandoning national civilian service or civics education. Our society needs people, including college students, to check in on their neighbors, tutor youth in afterschool programs, work in food banks and homeless shelters, volunteer in communities after hurricanes, and, overall, ensure that resources are equitably redistributed when people are overlooked. However,

recreating the New Deal for the 21st century should not be the limit of our social and political imagination.

We maintain that employing national civilian service under the current mode of hierarchical social relations will not fundamentally move society toward greater justice. Instead, we need to envision and implement processes of caring—especially institutional care—that do not value bodies only if they perform specific obligations connected to state control, and ultimately, national supremacy. Social and political systems need to ensure that *all* denizens, regardless of status, background, ability, or belief, have the basic necessities of safe and stable housing, nutritious food, clean water, quality and free health care and education, and so on.

We encourage higher education civic engagement scholars, practitioners, and administrators to be bold in how they respond to these and other calls of increased national civilian service. If social justice is the aim of higher education civic engagement efforts, then national civilian service projects should oppose linking with efforts that espouse nationalist values.

Author biographies

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Carmine Perrotti is an Assistant Professor of Public and Community Service Studies at Providence College, his alma mater. His teaching and scholarship focus on a range of critical topics related to the philosophy, pedagogy, and practices of community-engaged teaching, learning, and research across U.S. higher education. Carmine also frequently collaborates with College Unbound. He holds a Ph.D. in Higher Education from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities and a Master in Public Policy from American University. Prior to pursuing his Ph.D., Carmine held various political appointments in the Obama-Biden Administration at the U.S. Department of Education.

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