GU POLITICS FELLOW DOROTHY S. McAULIFFE
DISCUSSION GROUP OUTLINE

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN AN ERA OF DISTRUST AND APATHY:
REVITALIZING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY THROUGH PUBLIC SERVICE

Discussion Group Synopsis

Trust in our democratic institutions and body politic is at an all time low, but there is great potential to restore the trust required of representative government by renewing our commitment to public service and expanding opportunities for civic engagement. Our current generation of young people has embraced a culture of community service and innovation. How can we capture and ignite the aspirations and commitment of our next generation to give back in a way that reinvigorates our democracy and elevates public service as a core American ideal and cultural expectation?

Throughout the discussion series, we will draw from examples in Virginia around expanding national service opportunities for young people and building a cultural value for public service. Policy initiatives of the McAuliffe Administration, as well Virginia’s recent gubernatorial election and House of Delegates election will be used as case studies and “real-world’ examples.

Week 1 – American Citizenship and the U.S. Higher Education System
Beginning with an overview of the Jeffersonian ideals of public education to ensure an educated and informed electorate, we will explore the relevance and modern-day applications of the American university system to our founding fathers’ ideals of model citizenry. How do we ensure that the public purposes and missions of higher education institutions advance the ideals of citizenship? How do we provide opportunities for service learning and civic engagement when more and more young people graduate with stifling long-term debt and many are reconsidering the value of higher education altogether?
Week 2 – America’s National Service Landscape
We will present an overview of our Federal national service programs (Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, etc.), and discuss issues concerning their historical context, funding, participation, and goals. We will explore the impact of these programs at different scales, examining how a national framework for service is implemented on the local level, and how state and federal systems can be leveraged to support community needs and challenges. How have national and international service programs built work cohorts across American economic and cultural divides, and affected college affordability, community revitalization, and worker shortages in key sectors - i.e. teachers, health care, law enforcement?

Week 3 – Citizenship and the Media
The ways in which we consume media have always had dramatic effects on our civic and political lives. Cable television and a seemingly infinite number of online news outlets allow voters to narrow the prisms through which they view current events, creating increasingly fragmented realities. How does our current media landscape shape our daily lives as citizens and either inhibit or promote civic engagement? What roles and responsibilities do media platforms (including social media) have in preserving and advancing our democracy? Do local and state issues rise to the level of media coverage necessary to inform the public? What does it mean to be an informed citizen today and what role might public service play in softening the hard edges of our current political realities?

Week 4 – Representation and Voting
Voting is just one act of civic engagement, but it is, in many ways, the most fundamental. Those who feel they are not adequately represented by government are less likely to productively engage in the responsibilities of citizenship. Super PACs, gerrymandering, and voter discrimination laws are eroding our faith in the representative system and diminishing our commitment to public service, especially among women and minority communities. How do we re-establish trust between representatives, government institutions, and voters? How does the structure of the political system either restrict or promote a healthy, engaged citizenry?

Week 5 – Civic Education
Public education is one of the cornerstone institutions of American democracy. Not only was it meant to create avenues of economic opportunity across socioeconomic lines and advance our economic strength as a nation, but it has historically fostered a strong, unified sense of national identity and prepared our youth for civic life. Are we now failing children in their development as citizens? Can we build a stronger culture of awareness and engagement in our K-12 schools by re-prioritizing civics and government curriculums? What are the implications and opportunities to restore interest and pathways to careers in public service if we’re focused on civic education as a nation?

Week 6 – Redefining Public Service in the 21st century
The degree of value that we assign to public service says a great deal about our civic culture. In many ways, public sector programs and employees have become increasingly demonized. What is behind the shifting perceptions of social goods and services? How does public financing play a role in defining and creating social good? What are the ways in which modern technology might enhance our collective understanding of social entrepreneurship, civic innovation, and public service?
Week 7 – Nonprofits, Corporations, and the Public Good
The roles of nonprofits, corporations, and government agencies form a complex web of public services. In what ways do these sectors overlap and intersect to support a secure, engaged, and participatory citizenry? What are the effects of public-private partnerships? How do the philanthropic goals of corporations either complement or conflict with the public good? How might increased service opportunities impact our understanding of the nonprofit sector and our commitment to public service and civic engagement?

Week 8 – Citizen Soldiers
Throughout western civilization, military service has been held up as the purest form of national service - for the men and women who serve, as well as the families who stay behind and sacrifice to protect our freedoms and our country. America currently has among the lowest levels of military participation, as a percentage of the population, that it ever has, while its all-volunteer force is overwhelming comprised of men and women from lower-income, immigrant and minority backgrounds. Less than 1% of current members of Congress, who oversee military spending and authorize war, have served in our military. What effect, if any, has this had on our sense of national identity and patriotism, our belief system, our commitment to democracy and America’s commitment to global leadership? What would a model for compulsory national service look like and how could it deepen our commitment to each other and affect citizenship in America and abroad? What would a universal national service requirement look like and how would it impact citizen engagement and public service?