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Any volunteers?

Republicans used to celebrate voluntarism and service. What happened?

by [Benjamin Soskis](#)

During a campaign rally in Montana a few weeks ago, President Trump was praising the effectiveness of his sloganeering when he made a quick, unfortunate detour. “Thousand points of light?” he [quizzed the crowd](#), referring to the phrase George H.W. Bush popularized to evoke the power of voluntary service. “I never quite got that one. What the hell is that? Has anyone ever figured that one out?” The remarks earned quick [rebukes](#) from an older generation of Republican stalwarts, not merely for the lack of respect they showed toward the ailing 94-year-old former president but for the insult to America’s sacrosanct tradition of volunteerism. Even Jesse Jackson, who had sought the Democratic nomination to run against Bush for president in 1988, rushed to defend the “points of light” phrase, [explaining](#) that it represented “a thousand ways people could serve and share.”

Trump’s comments might have stung, but they should not have come as a surprise. That’s because, since the beginning of the 2016 campaign and during the first years of his presidency — a period when presidents have traditionally promoted personal service and charitable effort to unify the nation — such themes have been almost entirely absent from Trump’s public rhetoric. If he hopes to “make America great again,” he’s made it clear that acts of service and sharing won’t play much of a role.

His silence reflects a broader one: In today’s GOP, high-profile public commitments to volunteerism are out of fashion. At least since the Progressive Era, the defense of voluntary service, of private associational activity in all its varied forms, and of charity and philanthropy has been a key conservative trope. Figures from Herbert Hoover to [Richard Nixon](#) to George W. Bush celebrated volunteerism for its own sake — and as an alternative to tax-funded public welfare. Sure, some of these politicians used a mollifying dose of Tocqueville to mask the severity of their regressive policies; after all, private charitable efforts have never been adequate to address the nation’s most pressing social ills. But for many conservative luminaries, this “[voluntarism fantasy](#),” as the Roosevelt Institute’s Mike Konczal has termed it, was not simply a ruse. It reflected a consistent ideological commitment, one that led its proponents, from Teddy Roosevelt onward, to champion the essential place of charitable and voluntary efforts and to propose means of encouraging them. But you don’t see a vigorous embrace of that attitude from leading GOP officeholders today. And Trump and his supporters don’t seem to mind.

Ronald Reagan’s speech accepting the Republican presidential nomination in 1980 was a typical paean to civic involvement. It [pledged](#) to restore “the American spirit of voluntary service, of cooperation, of private and community initiative.” Once in office, Reagan established a White

House Office of Private Sector Initiatives to help do so. George H.W. Bush went beyond hymning the “thousand points of light” to oversee the establishment of the Commission on National and Community Service. His son defined himself as a “compassionate conservative” on the campaign trail, promising billions to help charities serve “the least, the last and the lost,” and he sought to make good on that vow in the White House with the creation of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Through such pledges, these presidents drew into their orbit, if sometimes only at the edges, a corps of policy advisers and intellectuals publicly committed to the volunteerist project.

Often, the rhetoric outpaced reality — money and manpower were not always available for the GOP volunteerism cause. The party’s enthusiasm for civil society generally took a back seat to the conservative priorities of shrinking government, lowering taxes, deregulating industry and boosting the military. So even while Reagan [celebrated](#) the American tradition of “neighbor helping neighbor,” the budget cuts he championed slashed federal support for many nonprofits at a moment when demand for their services was dramatically increasing. Some prominent advocates of civil society [dismissed](#) George H.W. Bush’s efforts to promote community service as “voluntarism lite” that asked little of citizens and committed few resources. And the billions that George W. Bush [promised](#) to foster charitable and community initiatives [never fully materialized](#). In June 2001, tax incentives that had targeted charitable giving were stripped from a trillion-dollar tax cut bill to make way for the repeal of the estate tax. Meanwhile, [according to](#) the deputy director of Bush’s faith-based initiative, the project foundered because it never had more than a “minimal” commitment from the president or “snoring indifference” from the rest of the GOP, and so couldn’t overcome “knee-jerk Democratic opposition.”

Yet even such disappointments now hold a certain retrospective allure. That’s because these days, the Republican leadership does not seem committed even to a show of support for volunteerism. At a recent event at the American Enterprise Institute, Marvin Olasky, the Texas writer and academic who helped sell “compassionate conservatism” to George W. Bush, [lamented](#) that while the acolytes of the conservative Gingrich Revolution in the 1990s publicly underscored the importance of community empowerment through the strengthening of civil society, [the tea party movement](#) has shown little interest in those ideas. That’s true: Right-wing political rhetoric has recently focused almost entirely on the rollback of governmental authority without signaling support for the voluntary action that, Reagan argued, would fill the gap.

As Trump’s Montana remarks suggest, his White House has doubled down on that neglect. “Trump is a complete outlier in American history,” says John Bridgeland, who served as director of the White House Domestic Policy Council under George W. Bush and wrote a book that [traces](#) how presidents have promoted America’s volunteerist tradition. “In the first years of presidents on both sides of the aisle, there’s been a long tradition of awakening the nation to the recognition that it is through their [private] actions and through civil society . . . that they have the opportunity to serve.”

This would be an especially good time to get that message out: After a post-9/11 spike, volunteering rates for adults have [declined](#) over the past decade, dropping by more than two percentage points, to 25.5 percent, from 2006 to 2015, according to a recent study by the Do Good Institute.

If themes of service and sharing haven't made it into Trump's public rhetoric, his first two budget proposals [showed](#) how little regard he has for the presidential tradition of boosting them. For instance, he's twice proposed eliminating the Corporation for National and Community Service, which houses the agency that administers AmeriCorps, among other programs, and has [favored](#) slashing funding to federal departments and agencies that channel billions to the nation's nonprofits — from organizations that provide affordable housing to those that support arts education to those that promote conservation.

True, Congress ignored many of these suggested cuts when crafting its own budget. But lawmakers' support for volunteerism has been largely defensive and remedial; few aggressive legislative champions of civil society have emerged in recent years. (One exception might be Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, who [spearheaded](#) the Social Capital Project to measure declines in social cohesion and associational life in the United States over the past few decades. Rep. [Chris Smith](#), R-N.J., is another.)

The devaluation of volunteerism was on display during the debates over the tax bill passed in December by the GOP-led Congress. Leaders of the nonprofit sector from both the left and the right mobilized an aggressive lobbying effort to persuade lawmakers to extend the charitable deduction to all taxpayers, not just to itemizers. But the campaign fizzled on Capitol Hill, and the final Tax Cuts and Jobs Act contained provisions, such as the doubling of the standard deduction, that reduced tax incentives to give and that some analysts [predicted](#) would lead to dramatic drops in charitable giving. So far, it's unclear if these dire forecasts will be borne out — though preliminary signs are not especially encouraging. A recent report from the Fundraising Effectiveness Project, for instance, [estimated](#) that giving was down 2.4 percent in the first quarter of 2018, compared with the same period last year.

One could forgive nonprofit leaders if they seemed demoralized after the tax bill's passage. It also featured other provisions that highlighted the contempt with which many lawmakers regard some of the nonprofit sector's most prominent institutions. The law, for instance, targets elite private colleges and universities (some 30 schools that have more than \$500,000 in endowment per student, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Amherst, are now subject to a tax on their endowment income) and imposes excess-compensation taxes on nonprofit executives. In the bill, right-wing economic populism seems to have been directed almost entirely toward nonprofit institutions.

Nonprofit leaders [attributed](#) these indignities to the sector's lack of influence with the GOP. As Diana Aviv, then chief executive of one of the nation's largest charities, Feeding America, explained, "We clearly didn't have the clout." They also reflect the marginalization of conservative and libertarian intellectuals and policy advisers like Richard Cornuelle, William Schambra and Stephen Goldsmith, who, in the past, made the case for volunteerism in the public square. But the diminished status of volunteerism isn't just a function of changing power dynamics within conservative circles. It's also a result of forces altering the entire political spectrum.

One is an increased spirit of partisanship that has infiltrated the nonprofit sector, as it has nearly every other realm of American life. The past half-century has witnessed what the political

scientist Jeffrey Berry calls an “advocacy explosion,” a massive proliferation of private, professionalized, Washington-based nonprofit organizations specifically designed to shape national policy; these groups, some [research](#) suggests, have increased polarization. In the 1960s and 1970s, a handful of progressive advocacy organizations developed, dedicated to protecting environmental resources and promoting the rights of consumers, women and minorities. These in turn inspired conservative policy groups; the ensuing decades have produced a philanthropically funded partisan arms race, with each side appropriating the other’s organizational innovations, such as the establishment of separate institutional arms to handle lobbying.

This has made it increasingly easy to regard the nonprofit sector as a realm in which to seek partisan advantage and to settle partisan scores. In the deliberations over the tax bill, for instance, Republicans advocated weakening the Johnson Amendment, which since 1954 has prohibited charities from engaging in direct electioneering. They did not succeed, but they are still pushing for this change. (It is no mystery why this nonprofit issue, one championed by the Christian right, is the only one that the president has [taken up with enthusiasm](#) : He sees civil society as another battlefield in an all-encompassing partisan war.)

For the right, that political tribalism has been amplified by a long-running tension between conservative celebration of individual voluntary action and ambivalence toward nonprofit institutions. The latter was stoked when nonprofits went through an intensive bout of professionalization, beginning in the 1960s, largely as a means of securing government grants and contracts; many of the Great Society programs, for instance, were implemented through nonprofits. This funding surge contributed to what Irving Kristol [lamented](#) as the rise of a “new class” of professionals, who, allied with the “upper levels of the government bureaucracy,” were supposedly hostile to capitalism and favored a more expansive welfare state. Conservatives increasingly characterized nonprofits as merely another special interest group “feeding at the public trough,” in the words of former Heritage Foundation president Edward Furler.

Conservative resentment helps to explain the endowment income tax on elite universities and the excise taxes on nonprofit pay above \$1 million. True, the impulse to suppress volunteerism that threatens one’s political interests isn’t new: Federalists and Jeffersonians [battled](#) over the public charters and funding of charitable institutions. More recently, the Nixon and Reagan administrations sought to “defund the left,” in the words of conservative activist Richard Viguerie, by targeting federal support of progressively aligned nonprofits. But unlike in the past, that impulse is now no longer counterbalanced by public exhortations to other forms of volunteerism or charity.

Politics in the nonprofit world isn’t the only problem; another is the blurring of boundaries between the nonprofit and for-profit sectors. Over the past decade, charities, their financial backers and their political sponsors (Democrats as well as Republicans) have increasingly been drawn to social entrepreneurs who sought to harness the power of the market for philanthropic ends — whether through promoting microcredit or through incentivizing the production of low-cost drugs for the developing world. These [philanthrocapitalists](#) have done significant good. Yet in the past, the distinction between nonprofit and private efforts helped voluntary associations publicly articulate their civic purpose. Those dichotomies are now less clear — and that purpose is harder to defend. Indeed, when the market is considered the most effective philanthropic

instrument, it's easy for the championing of the free-enterprise system to [serve](#) as a substitute for the vigorous promotion of civil society.

Progressives might be tempted to welcome the right's waning public support for volunteerism; perhaps stripping away the mask reveals Ayn Rand's leer behind Tocqueville's smile. That's an understandable response, given the chasm that's opened between conservative rhetoric and action on the issue. But it's flawed for two related reasons.

First, it's too absolute a dismissal of conservatism's genuine attachment to volunteerism and of the possibility for bipartisan policies that could nurture it. Support for civil society represents a promising point of overlap between the anti-statist localism of the right and the grass-roots community empowerment of the left. Second, it fails to see the real advantages of the current empty bully pulpit. Given the toxicity of the political discourse Trump generates, if he did frequently invoke service and sharing, those concepts might become tainted during his administration. The fact that volunteerism isn't closely aligned with the "make America great again" agenda creates the space for lower-profile, but still significant, work across the aisle. In late July, for instance, a bipartisan group of lawmakers in the House [introduced](#) the Everyday Philanthropist Act, which would allow for the creation of "flexible giving accounts," a pre-tax payroll deduction for employee giving. Trump didn't comment on it.

So maybe it's not so terrible that the president seems to care so little for the American tradition of neighbor helping neighbor. "The good news is that there are extremely visible and unprecedentedly strong efforts to promote civil society," notes Bridgeland; they just aren't breaking through to the chyron on CNN. He points to the [Service Year Alliance](#), an organization on whose board he serves, which is seeking to make a year of community service a common expectation for Americans; its grand ambition is to grow national service opportunities to 1 million positions by the nation's 250th birthday on July 4, 2026. The group's advisory leadership council contains a mix of Republican and Democratic luminaries — Condoleezza Rice and Madeleine Albright, Robert Gates and Jack Lew . After Trump's election, Bridgeland believed that the cause of national service could help bridge the political divide, "bringing people together in common purpose." He reached out to the Trump White House but had no luck piquing its interest.

Bridgeland hopes to fill 100,000 service positions in the United States by next year. "I see more energy than ever in the civic and nonprofit sectors," he insists. "What we are lacking today is political leadership." It's a testament to our strange civic moment that those two statements are not necessarily at odds.

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