

# "Philanthropy and Citizenship"

by Michael S. Joyce  
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## What Is Good Citizenship?

Philanthropy is an essential part of a much larger and more encompassing activity, namely, American citizenship. Now, when I mention "citizenship," the first thing that comes to mind is probably not philanthropy or private voluntary activity of any kind, but more than likely political activity of some sort—particularly voting.

The essence of citizenship—or at least so it seems from the hectoring swarms of voter education and turn-out drives that descend upon us every election year—is to vote faithfully and thoughtfully, after acquainting ourselves with all the policy prescriptions of the various candidates for office. To be a good citi-

zen, in other words, demands that we wade through those mind-numbing charts of policy positions regularly published each election year, which dutifully set Candidate X's 17-point plan for reducing the deficit side-by-side with Candidate Y's 21-point plan for doing the same.

Citizenship thus understood is necessarily an episodic, infrequent, to say nothing of onerous duty. Its chief purpose seems to be to turn over to supposedly qualified experts the "real" business of public life—namely, designing and launching public programs of all sorts, which will bestow upon the victims of poverty or AIDS or discrimination or some other insidious force the tender mercies of

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# "Philanthropy and the Free Society"

by Kimberly O. Dennis  
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The non-profit, or "independent sector," is growing at a tremendous pace in America. It is becoming an increasingly significant part of our public and private life. Total giving by individuals, corporations, and foundations has risen over 250 percent—from less than \$10 billion in the mid-1950s to well over \$100 billion today. Another index of growth is the fact that there are now nearly one million non-profit organizations operating across the country. And as members of the baby boom generation age and inherit from their parents, roughly \$8 trillion in wealth will pass from one generation to the next. This is bound to bring another enormous infusion of funds into the independent sector.

As the independent sector grows, its relationship with the for-profit and the public sector will become even more important. But unless we have a philosophical perspective about what the proper role of this sector generally ought to be, we won't be able to judge whether it is performing as it should. It is my contention that philanthropy and the independent sector are most effective when they promote independence rather than dependence, economic growth over redistribution, and private initiative as opposed to public undertakings. These may not sound like terribly profound or controversial ideas, but they are considered quite radical by much of the philanthropic community. This is because the

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bureaucrats, policy experts, social therapists and others who claim to be uniquely able to cope with such problems by virtue of professional training. Once a citizen has voted, he is supposed to get out of the way and let the experts take over. Small wonder, then, that Americans today feel profoundly alienated from the realm of public life and that citizenship understood as voting holds so little appeal.

Genuine citizenship involves active participation in that vast realm of human affairs known as *civil society*. This is a far more expansive field for human endeavor than the political sphere, for civil society encompasses *all* the institutions through which we express our interests and values, outside of and distinct from government. Thus civil society includes our activities in the marketplace, including acquiring pri-

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vate property, holding a job, and earning a living. It includes what we do as loving members of our families; as students or concerned parents within our schools; as worshipful attendees at our churches; and as faithful members of neighborhood associations, clubs, and voluntary associations of all sorts. This broader understanding of citizenship also encompasses the full range of philanthropic activity, including committing energy and resources to helping others.

## Teaching the Lessons, Singing the Songs

Clearly, citizenly activity within civil society occurs not episodically or infrequently, as with voting, but regularly and constantly, in countless small ways that are so much a part of the texture of our everyday lives that we are almost unaware of them. Every time we attend church, go to a PTA meeting, help a

charity drive, or perform faithfully and well a task at work, we are being decent citizens. In further contrast to voting, which supposedly engages chiefly our abstract reasoning and objective judgment about candidates and policies, citizenship in this larger sense engages the full human being. That is, the institutions of civil society appeal to and sustain our spirit and heart, as much as our mind.

Heart and spirit are nurtured by the songs and fairy tales of home, the lessons of Sunday Bible class, the instruction at school, the gentle advice and perhaps criticism of a neighbor, a mentor, or a friend—all of which enrich us, all of which create bonds and obligations, all of which demand that we, in turn, teach the lessons and sing the songs to others.

Through these countless, subtle, daily interactions, our civil institutions give form

and substance to the everyday qualities and values without which life itself would be impossible—honesty, perseverance, self-restraint, personal responsibility, service to others—by rewarding them when they appear, punishing when they don't, and by mercifully and willingly sustaining those who may fall behind, in spite of good-faith efforts to live by civil society's rules. Sound civil institutions insure that those cherished values are passed on to the next generation, by surrounding the maturing child and young person with constant, quiet messages of reaffirmation and reinforcement.

Through our vast, complex web of civil institutions, in short, we grow and develop into complete human beings—learning to suppress our often chaotic and destructive impulses; to express our connectedness and mutual obligation to each other; to reach beyond ourselves to higher aspirations, reflecting nobler impulses. Those institutions sustain us, but we in turn must sustain

them, for without unremitting, steadfast citizenly involvement, they are doomed to wither and die.

## The Collapse of Civil Society

That America was blessed with a robust, vigorous civil society was once understood to be vital to its health and success. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is the classic expression of wonder and admiration at the incredible energy generated by the vast array of civic institutions spread across the face of our young nation. Everywhere he looked in 19th century America, he noted that our citizens had formed associations, committees, and clubs to tackle one or another of the problems facing them in this undeveloped wilderness. Through such citizenly activity, Tocqueville believed, Americans expressed and sustained their civil freedom, accomplished an enormous range of tasks, and, most important, developed fully as rooted, connected human beings.

Tocqueville's admiration for the liberty-sustaining, life-affirming energy of civil society, is, of course, by no means shared by our intellectual and cultural elites today. Instead of citizenship as a vigorous, multifaceted participation in civil society, we are urged to constrict our view of citizenship to the lonely, sporadic act of the isolated voter. What to Tocqueville appears as a vast, pluralistic upwelling of groups expressing boundless civic energy appears to our elites to be a wasteful, chaotic, misguided jumble of amateurish groups meddling unwelcomed in social policy. What to him appears as vigorous, coherent, value-affirming civic associations appears to them as oppressive, stultifying, retrograde, rights-violating social tyrannies.

To our intellectual and cultural elites, the virtue of the constricted, "citizen-as voter" notion is clear. It quietly and neatly removes public business from the messy world of active citizens and civic institutions, placing it instead into the neat, rational, smoothly humming world of the centralized, professionalized bureaucracies, wherein the elites themselves prevail. Indeed, it might be said without exaggeration that their central project is nothing less than the abolition of civil society. The story is told most eloquently by sociologist Robert Nisbet in *The Quest for Community*. Modernity, Nisbet argues, assails civil society both from below and from above. From

below, the authority of family, church, neighborhood, and school is quietly eroded by the proliferation of individual rights of all sorts, especially the right of self-expression—that is, expression of self with utter disregard, or contempt, for civil society. From above, civil institutions are pressured to surrender authority and function to the professional elites of the centralized, bureaucratic state. Caught in a pincers movement between individual rights and the central state, Nisbet noted, the intermediate associations of civil society struggle and languish.

What has been the result of the modern assault on civil society? Look at the vast array of social ills bearing down upon us: the explosion of illegitimate births and single parenthood, the spread of sexually trans-

institutions weaken further, and the problem is compounded—as is the demand from our elites for more government programs. This sad, ironic cycle—the prime example of the doctrine of "unintended consequences"—is perhaps the central paradox of our time.

## Taking Control of Our Lives Again

I believe, however, that we are nearing the end of this futile cycle. As Irving Kristol reminded us in a recent *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, people are increasingly disenchanted with the manifest impotence of government—its utter inability to perform even the most rudimentary duties assigned to it, such as securing our

sick and tired of supporting the bloated, corrupt, centralized bureaucracies into which our social therapists are organized to insure that power and accountability flow to them, rather than to the citizens of the United States.

Americans are clearly willing and eager to take control of their daily lives again—to make critical life choices for themselves, based on their own common sense and folk wisdom—to assume once again the status of proud, independent, self-governing citizens intended for them by the Founders and denied them by today's social service providers and bureaucracies. In short, Americans are ready for what might be called "a new citizenship," which will liberate and empower them.

This impulse toward a new citizenship is, of course, nothing more—or less—than a return to the older, far more encompassing notion of citizenship that figured so prominently in Tocqueville's teaching. If properly channeled and directed, this impulse may in fact lead directly to the resuscitation of civil society—a regeneration of that vast network of vibrant, liberty-sustaining, life-affirming institutions that once covered the face of this nation.

What sorts of measures will be required, if we are to accomplish this revitalization of civil society?

First, we must be prepared once again to regard ourselves as genuinely self-governing citizens, willing and able to reassume control of our daily lives and to make critical choices for ourselves. We must not allow others to dismiss us as helpless victims or passive clients.

Second, we must seek to restore the intellectual and cultural legitimacy of citizenly common sense as a way of understanding and solving problems. This suggests an effort to re-establish the dignity of traditional folk wisdom and everyday morality, with renewed emphasis on teaching and nurturing personal character—the customary guideposts of everyday life. This will mean taking on intellectually the radical skepticism about such "unscientific" approaches propagated by professional pseudo-scientists eager to preserve their intellectual hegemony.

Third, we must reinvigorate and reempower traditional, local institutions—families, schools, churches, neighborhoods—that provide training in and room for the exercise of genuine citizenship, that pass on folk

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mitted disease, the dramatic increase of violent crime in the streets, the rise of drug abuse, the decline of public education, the spread of irresponsible behavior in every realm of personal and professional conduct. What is the common thread? Very simply, the collapse of civil society—the decay of its institutions and values, and the loss of control they once exerted over human behavior.

But instead of trying to rejuvenate civil society, our elites instead call for more government programs—more bureaucratic experts and professionals to minister to the hurts allegedly inflicted on hapless victims by industrialism, racism, sexism, and so on—in the course taking away yet more authority from citizens and civil institutions. This leads to the vicious cycle described years ago by Nathan Glazer in his essay, "The Limits of Social Policy." As Glazer noted, the expansion of government social policy doesn't solve problems, it only makes them worse. Government intervention undermines and weakens the authority of the very civil institutions that had kept undesirable behavior within reasonable limits in the first place. As government programs push into a problem area, civil

unmolested passage down our own streets. He points to the strong revival of religious sentiment in America as evidence that we at long last are beginning to appreciate once again the vital role played by civil society's religious institutions and values in maintaining a decent, orderly society.

Other encouraging signs are to be found in recent election returns and surveys of public opinion. Reflect for a moment on the signals there: a massive, palpable discontent with all major governing institutions; the success of term limits and tax-and-spending limits in referenda across the nation; above all, the immense popularity of calls to return government directly to the people. The message, I believe, is clear: Americans are sick and tired of being treated as if they are incompetent to run their own affairs. They are sick and tired of being treated as helpless, pathetic victims of social forces that are seemingly beyond their understanding or control. They are sick and tired of being treated as passive clients by arrogant, paternalistic social scientists, therapists, professionals, and bureaucrats who claim exclusive right to minister to the hurts inflicted by hostile social forces. They are

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wisdom and everyday morality to the next generation, and that cultivate and reinforce personal character. This will require efforts to reform such local institutions, for often today's churches, schools, and related "mediating structures" have themselves succumbed to the view that Americans are mere clients or consumers of therapeutic social services.

Fourth, we must encourage the dramatic decentralization of power and accountability away from the bureaucratic "nanny state" in Washington, back to the states, localities, and revitalized "mediating structures." We should also strive to reinvest moral authority in such structures, rather than in corrupt intellectual and cultural elites in education, the media, and popular culture who regard traditional mediating structures as benighted purveyors of reactionary prejudices.

Finally, we must challenge on all fronts the political hegemony of the "helping" and "caring" professionals and bureaucrats who have penetrated so many aspects of our daily lives, and who profit so handsomely from the nanny state. We must dramatize their status as entrenched, corrupt special interests, more concerned about advancing narrow ideological agendas and protecting political prerogatives than about serving the public. This will require not only traditional approaches like policy research, but more innovative approaches as well—for instance, media and writing projects that capture the vivid, compelling human stories of those who suffer at the hands of paternalistic, arrogant bureaucrats and professionals, and the equally compelling human stories of those who have launched successful grassroots citizen empowerment projects.

What are the chances of successfully revitalizing civil society through this kind of active citizenship? It is easy to be pessimistic. After all, the entire weight of modernity seems to be behind the destruction of independent civil society. Nevertheless, I am hopeful. Tocqueville himself, after all, was not unacquainted with the destructive effects that modernity would have on civil institutions. Indeed, his purpose in writing *Democracy in America* was precisely to warn mankind about the impending storm of modernity and to tell us that the old, established institutions of civil society were in danger.

In America, however, he witnessed the remarkable spectacle of hitherto unrelated individuals—complete strangers—coming

together to form wholly new forms of civil institutions, in the very teeth of the modern storm. He understood and appreciated the fact that the impulse toward voluntary association and the yearning for genuine citizenship within civil society are not so easy to destroy.

World events of the past decade only confirm Tocqueville's optimism. No movement ever undertook the eradication of civil society with more zeal or determination than Marxism, that totalitarian perversion of modernity. And yet beneath the seemingly smoothly humming state bureaucracies of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, there sprouted once again the seeds of civil society—churches, civic associations, unions, dissident groups, free presses. Even as the resolve of the free world halted Marxism's outward thrust, so from within, Marxism began to decay and crumble, as the nascent institutions of civil society flourished and spread. The liberation of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union soon made it apparent that modernity's "final offensive" against civil society had failed utterly.

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Let us take heart both from these events and from Tocqueville's hopeful teachings, as we undertake here in the United States the revitalization of civil society through the new citizenship. There can be no more urgent task, and there can be no higher philanthropic project, either for you as concerned citizens and volunteers or for me as a foundation professional, than the resuscitation of the civic sphere, which alone makes genuine philanthropy and genuine citizenship possible. 4

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independent sector is still deeply entrenched in the redistributionist, interventionist rhetoric that characterized the 1960s and 1970s.

## The Connection Between Capitalism and Charity

**T**he leaders of the independent sector would do well to remember that philanthropy does not exist in unfree societies. You don't see evidence of private philanthropy in Cuba; you never saw it in the Soviet Union; in fact, you don't even see much of it in Europe, where social services are largely provided by the state and where contributions to non-profit organizations are typically controlled by political parties. It is no coincidence, then, that America, one of the freest countries in the world, has by far the most active and generous independent sector.

I have met with many reformers who are interested in developing independent sectors in their countries. Those from formerly

communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union describe decades of economic and social deterioration and the terrible hardships they are enduring in the difficult struggle to become free. They have seen and read about the way the American independent sector responds to people in need, and they want to create the same kind of initiatives. Because I am the executive director of an organization that seeks to enhance the effectiveness of private philanthropy, they come to me and ask, "How do

we build a charitable, non-profit sector that can respond to the desperate economic and social needs of our citizens?"

My response is not the one they expect to hear. I tell them that the only way to create a prosperous non-profit sector is to create a prosperous for-profit sector. The money that goes to support hospitals, schools, civic organizations, the poor, and the disabled does not, as the saying goes, grow on trees. It can't be willed into existence by good intentions. It is generated by people who are

on welfare programs slowed, spending still increased in real terms). The theory is that people perceived a slowdown in government spending on public welfare, so they increased their charitable giving to compensate. If this theory is correct—that people gave more because they thought government was spending less—then the counter-part should be true. People will give less if they think government is spending more.

The other explanation for the explosion of private giving in the 1980s was that the

associations which "once made it possible for us to build a humane society and a free society together."

Though the independent sector has grown since Comeulle's book was published in 1965, so, too, has government. Why have they grown simultaneously? The answer, ironically, lies in the fact that rather than operating as an alternative to government action, the independent sector has become more closely linked with it. John D. Rockefeller III, announced in the late 1970s: "In so many fields of social need, the pioneering work of the [independent] sector has resulted in government's taking over responsibility for extending the services broadly, applying the sanction of law where needed, and assuming the major share of the financial burden." In other words, the non-profit, independent sector has become the breeding ground of government programs.

Rockefeller's view of the role of philanthropy has become mainstream. Thousands of non-profit organizations see their primary objective as the expansion of the influence and power of government. The NAACP, the Grey Panthers, the Children's Defense Fund, the Gay Men's Health Crisis, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Ms. Foundation for Women, the National Council of La Raza, the National Puerto Rican Coalition, the Native American Rights Fund, Operation PUSH, and the Older Women's League are just a few examples of special interest groups that are supported by philanthropic institutions, and which seek to increase public spending. Why spend \$100,000 on a soup kitchen to feed the hungry when you can spend the same amount to produce a study that will influence legislators to increase federal spending on food stamps for all? Your money is much more highly leveraged when it influences the way government allocates public resources than when it is spent directly on services for the poor.

And why worry about raising private funds to support your lobbying efforts when you can tap into the public treasury? Non-profit organizations seeking to convince Congress to spend more taxpayer money can actually get taxpayer money to pay for their efforts. One recent estimate is that some 60 percent of all non-profit revenues now come from government. This figure includes support for hospitals and schools, but it also includes support for cause-oriented groups like the Environmental Defense Fund and

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working to produce goods and provide services. Until you create wealth, you can't give it away. Until you have capitalism, you can't have charity.

Of course, the reason formerly communist countries haven't had much in the way of a for-profit sector is because the means of production have been owned by the state. They have been operated, ostensibly, for public good rather than private gain, but, as we have seen repeatedly throughout history, private gain is what makes the public good possible in the first place. In societies in which the government assumes responsibility for citizens' economic and social welfare and regulates the production and distribution of goods, there is simply no basis for private philanthropy, at least on any organized scale. (Charity, like many other "subversive" acts of individualism, remains underground.)

## The More Government Does, the Less We Do

Even in the United States, the more government does for people, the less they do for themselves. And the less they do for themselves, the more they need government—it is a vicious circle in which one government program begets another. Interestingly, during the 1980s, private giving in the U.S. increased tremendously. There were two primary explanations for this. One was the perceived cutback in public welfare during the Reagan administration (and I emphasize *perceived* here, because while the rate of growth in spending

economy was booming, due largely to tax cuts and deregulation. With increased prosperity, there was more to give away. If this theory is also correct, then it means that the more government regulates the economy—the more it interferes with the production of wealth—the less money there is for private charity.

It is evident in any case that a monolithic government is harmful in several related aspects: it restricts the private sector from operating freely to produce the maximum amount of prosperity for all through for-profit activity; it dampens the generation of wealth that makes charity possible; and it saps individuals of the initiative to take responsibility for their own and others' welfare.

We ought to pay particular heed to this last consequence, since so much of our heritage is based on the importance of voluntary action. The 19th-century French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville was among the first to note Americans' propensity for acting independently to accomplish public business and to form free associations for the purpose of enhancing civic life. He saw this as one of America's unique and defining characteristics.

But, as Richard Comeulle observed in *Reclaiming the American Dream* (1965), after the Great Depression and the introduction of the welfare state in the early 20th century, we began to ignore the independent institutions that played such a vital role in meeting public needs. And as government assumed more and more responsibilities, we began abandoning the private, non-profit

Planned Parenthood, which take government money and use it to "educate" people about the need for more government support for the causes they represent.

It should be pointed out, however, that government money doesn't come without strings. Government, too, uses its influence to get what it wants. To qualify for federal funding, religious day care centers have eliminated religious teaching, schools have adopted affirmative action programs, and hospitals have agreed to provide certain kinds of mandatory treatment. In what has been called the "government philanthropy nexus," leverage works both ways.

### The True Nature of Philanthropy

In the days of Aristotle and the early Greek philosophers, philanthropy didn't exist as we know it today. In fact, the closest concept was "beneficence." The difference is instructive: In ancient times doing

good, or helping others, was a personal matter, a reflection of one's character. It had nothing to do with large foundations that hand out multi-million dollar grants or organized charities that seek to help thousands of people. Rather, it referred to how you behaved toward your fellow neighbors.

In the centuries that followed, the concept of beneficence was dropped in favor of "charity" and the emphasis shifted from the character of the giver to that of the recipient. The objective of being charitable was not so much to become a better person but to be helpful to others in time of need. Though broader in scope and ambition than the classical Greek notion of beneficence, charity still implied individual acts of kindness and generosity by some individuals on

behalf of others, and the goal was to make sure that each individual had the opportunity to succeed within society.

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Today, charity, in turn, has been replaced in large part by "professional philanthropy." Professional philanthropy has less to do with individual redemption than with social reconstruction. The goal is not so much



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to help people succeed within society as to remake society so that no one is a failure. Instead of a humble effort to help people who are less fortunate, professional philanthropy has a much more grandiose aim, which is to act as a powerful catalyst for political, economic, and social change.

Somehow the idea of helping others has evolved from a personal exercise of individual virtue to an impersonal expression of public concern. Professional

has become less a matter of doing good than doing justice, with justice defined as the discovery and elimination of the social (as opposed to moral) causes of privation. Instead of helping people better themselves, professional philanthropy blames society for their condition. Instead of helping people succeed within the existing system, its aim is to root out inequities and promote systemic social change.

In Marvin Olasky's recent book, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, he gives an especially good account of how the emphasis on spiritual and material improvement has shifted to support for individuals to live any way they choose, without having to bear the consequences. Whereas once recipients of charity were expected to attend church or perform chores in return for the assistance they received, it is now more often than not that they are told it is not their fault they need help; they are victims of circumstance, and there is nothing they can do about it.

Instead of charitable efforts to enhance individual opportunity by helping people make the most of their talents and resources, we see more and more philanthropic initiatives that attempt to reform society through policies that redistribute wealth, level success, and even equalize self-esteem. Instead of expanding liberty by giving people the means to be self-sufficient, professional philanthropy tends to reward behavior that is inconsistent with such habits of virtue as liberty demands, including individual initiative, private enterprise, and personal responsibility.