



YOUTH ENVIRONMENT SERVICE (YES) POLICY BRIEF

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OVERVIEW



Today, we face a trifecta of challenges. A global pandemic that is destabilizing the world economy. A climate emergency that is swelling to unprecedented proportions. And diminishing trust that government and democracy can manage any of it effectively, particularly among youth. How we meet these challenges in the next few years may well determine the prospects of a generation, the extent of the disruption we face from climate change, and the future of democracy.

While the development of a vaccine is promising, it will be many months of continued instability before the economy is again running at capacity. During this process, the prospects for young people are particularly discouraging. We need to make investment in young people a cornerstone of the recovery plan.

Simultaneously, the scale of the effort demanded to address the climate crisis in the few years we have left to do so is unprecedented. Reducing carbon in the atmosphere to levels that keep global climate change within the 1.5 degree goal will require massive investment in carbon capture; restoration and regeneration of wildlands; adaptation of our infrastructure and way of life; and more. We need an unprecedented mobilization of diverse communities, and particularly youth, to confront these issues.

Perceptions of the declining legitimacy of democratic governance — particularly among youth — pose distinct challenges. The populations of democratic societies are increasingly skeptical both of their institutions and their collective futures. This scenario calls for an urgent series of reforms aimed at rebuilding social cohesion, renewing the public square in the digital age, and renovating democratic institutions. Moreover, it requires solutions that address the pressing concerns surrounding economic recovery at a moment of soaring disparity and job loss in the wake of the global pandemic.

To those ends, we are proposing the creation of a Youth Environment Service (YES) program. This program is a response to the climate emergency, the dire economic impact COVID-19 has had and will continue to have on young people, and youth disengagement from the democratic process. By empowering young people to work on the most critical crises that confront their generation through a public service corps or jobs program, they can both transform the environmental landscape and help reforge more cohesive, purpose-driven democratic societies. YES thus helps restore their own faith in democracy, while furthering the path toward economic recovery.

YES aims to:

- Develop young people's knowledge and leadership.
- Build up skills and opportunity.
- Bring open and accountable deliberation back to policymaking.
- Help restore democratic legitimacy.
- Help rebuild social solidarity and a sense of shared destiny for rising generations.

The economic recovery will require significant investment, but rather than welfare and paycheck support, let's put young people to work fighting the most important battle of our lifetime.

YES can help restore the next generation's faith in America's capacity to solve the world's biggest challenges while re-stitching together the diverse fabric of our nation. For young people, this moment is a challenge. We can use it to renew how we govern and how we live.

ORIGINS OF THE YOUTH ENVIRONMENT SERVICE PROGRAM



TOP LEFT: Helle Thorning-Schmidt and Mario Monti. BOTTOM LEFT: The Renewing Democracy for the Digital Age working group participates in a Civic Imagination Project workshop led by Henry Jenkins, the project's principal investigator. BOTTOM RIGHT: Henry Jenkins of the Civic Imagination and Francis Fukuyama. Eli Zatoranski / Eli Zatoranski Photography

The YES Campaign grew out of the Berggruen Institute's 2019 reform plan, "Renewing Democracy in the Digital Age." This plan was developed by a broad range of democratic practitioners and reform theorists, including Francis Fukuyama, Mario Monti, and Helle Thorning-Schmidt. YES is a top priority for the Berggruen Institute's Future of Democracy program in 2021. In the next six months, the Berggruen Institute will continue to engage diverse stakeholders, hold open discussions, and host deliberative assemblies.

YES originated in a pre-COVID context, and initially responded to a drastically different set of concerns and circumstances from the ones we face today. Initially, YES emerged as an effort to address young people's frustration with the political process and their lack of opportunity to develop the skill sets necessary to engage in meaningful dialogue with one another in a multicultural, diverse environment. YES aimed to bring them together around a common project focused on national environmental service, a project that could enable the development of those critical skill sets and competencies. YES retains a focus on new forms of democratic participation for youth populations, and will explore possibilities toward that end through governing bodies known as deliberative assemblies or "people's assemblies."

While YES was in development, the pandemic hit, and brought with it a massive economic shock for the current youth population. In the wake of COVID-19's effects, it became clear that YES would need to prominently foreground an economic recovery component in order to support the current youth population and prevent them from becoming a lost generation.

Context and Background:

CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Experts, scholars, and policymakers concur that what lies ahead of us is a global climate emergency. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has advised that unless we take radical action before 2030, temperature change cannot be kept below 1.5°C. The IPCC 2018 Special Report warns:

Recent trends in emissions and the level of international ambition indicated by nationally determined contributions, within the Paris Agreement, deviate from a track consistent with limiting warming to well below 2°C. Without increased and urgent mitigation ambition in the coming years, leading to a sharp decline in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, global warming will surpass 1.5°C in the following decades, leading to irreversible loss of the most fragile ecosystems, and crisis after crisis for the most vulnerable people and societies.

Failure to act decisively in the face of this crisis will lead to severe disruptions to human society, including region-wide famine and water shortages, dramatic declines in health and wellbeing, economic and social breakdowns, mass climate migrations, and rising threats to international and human security. The predicted loss of life will be greater than in any previous international conflict and will likely accelerate over time.

The World Bank projects that by 2050, ecological crises in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia will produce 143 million climate migrants. We are already seeing the effects of this across the globe, and delaying in response to climate emergency will result in continued mass displacement that will directly impact the United States. In a recent report, the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) has identified the Southeastern United States and Caribbean as the highest-risk

sites for “tropical cyclone displacement.” CSIS also projects that climate-driven heat waves may produce more deaths than HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria in aggregate. To avert this scenario, the CSIS recommends investment in reducing the drivers of climate emergency, and urges the United States to assume a leadership position among global stakeholders currently addressing the climate crisis.

The climate crisis is also accelerating a Sixth Global Mass Extinction. The Intergovernmental Panel on Biological and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) advises that more than one million species are on the brink of extinction. We are on the edge of natural tipping points from which we may not soon or easily recover. The IPBES 2019 Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services observes:

The global rate of species extinction is already at least tens to hundreds of times higher than the average rate over the past 10 million years and is accelerating. [...] Climate change is already having an impact on nature, from genes to ecosystems. [...] Governance has at many levels moved slowly to further and better incorporate into policies and incentives the values of nature’s contributions to people. However, around the globe, subsidies with harmful effects on nature have persisted.

It is incumbent on us to heed these warnings, and to develop structures of governance that respond with appropriate speed, and at scale, to the global climate emergency.

America has a lot of work to do to repair alliances and re-establish itself as a trusted leader in the world. In addition to re-committing to the Paris Accord, making a war-time level investment in confronting climate change will show true leadership in the face of crisis. YES offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate American commitment to managing climate change.

In addition to being a purely domestic program, YES could potentially have an international component, either with developed countries or integrated with the Peace Corps in developing countries as well.



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Context and Background:

ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON YOUTH AND THE NEED FOR AN ECONOMIC RECOVERY PLAN



The far-reaching effects of Covid-19 have had a profound impact on the U.S. economy, and have driven a meteoric rise in unemployment.

According to the Brookings Institution, the quantity of labor force participants who were unemployed quadrupled over the four-month period beginning in January 2020. It is estimated that by 2021, nearly 2 million members of the U.S. population will have been unemployed for roughly eleven months. Over twice that number will have been unemployed for roughly six months.

This scenario disproportionately impacts youth, given that younger workers “are already three times more likely than adults over age 25 to be unemployed, largely due to structural barriers impeding young people from entering the labor market.” As a study from Mathematica shows, youth unemployment increased from 8.2% in January 2020 to 27.4% by April of this year.

The consequences of this economic shock will continue to reverberate for the current generation of youth for many years to come, possibly lowering their future earning potential and decreasing the likelihood that they will become homeowners.

Without massive investment in their future, young people today are in danger of becoming a lost generation. Youth

unemployment stands at [16.2%](#) — more than double the national rate. The over [1 million youth](#) who will experience unemployment during the recession are likely to lose more than \$20 billion in earnings over the next decade. More than that, youth are losing their faith in government and democracy, and in the possibility of an America that lives up to its promise.

A study released in August by the International Labour Organization (ILO), Youth & COVID-19, finds that the pandemic is:

...inflicting a heavy toll on younger workers, destroying their employment and undermining their career prospects. One in six young people (17 percent) who were employed before the outbreak, stopped working altogether, most notably younger workers aged 18-24 [...] Working hours among employed youth fell by nearly a quarter (i.e. by an average of two hours a day) and two out of five young people (42 percent) reported a reduction in their income.

To remedy this scenario, the ILO calls for:

urgent, targeted and smarter investments in decent jobs for youth, including in the protection of young people’s human rights; [and] employment and training guarantee programmes[.]

The private sector is ill-equipped to develop a coordinated response to provide economic opportunity, but with government leadership and policy incentives for public-private partnerships, YES can provide a pathway for youth to integrate into the labor force and begin developing both their earning potential and their civic engagement through a public service corps.

Public service in YES is a smart investment in America’s future. Indeed, for every dollar invested in national service programs, approximately \$4 are returned to society in future benefits. Public service during adolescence and young adulthood, moreover, is associated with [improved health and wellbeing](#), and civic engagement and national service can contribute to [educational and occupational development](#) and [increased participation in democratic processes](#).

Public service in YES is a smart investment in America’s future.

Context and Background:

YOUTH DISILLUSIONMENT WITH THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS



Youth are keenly aware of the climate crisis and its profound implications for their future. The School Strike for Climate movement has sustained the largest global protest in human history over the past year. Numerous other protests and calls for action increasingly define the younger generation's agenda.

The Paris 2015 Climate Accord was a crucial first step toward addressing ecological decline. Reentering the Accord will do much to signal the nation's commitment to confronting this critical issue. Notably, even the Paris Accord envisioned escalating degrees of response to the climate emergency, calibrated to the severity of the situation. Today, technological and scientific solutions are emerging, but the development and implementation of these solutions needs to increase significantly to keep pace with the rate of climate change.

There is rising frustration and anger among youth about the response of governments to climate change and ecological breakdown, compounding already high distrust of democratic institutions and governance.

At the same time, there is clear indication that youth populations are seeking out opportunities and structures for increased civic participation. Harvard's Institute of Politics released its biannual national poll of 18- to 29-year-olds in October 2020, showing a historic degree of interest in voting in the 2020 election. 63% of respondents indicated that they would "definitely be voting." This demonstrates that despite disillusionment with the democratic process, youth populations remain enthusiastically interested in opportunities for civic engagement. The task before us is to structure and invest in those opportunities and to extend them to all youth demographics, including to those communities who have been historically underrepresented in spaces of political participation.

There is rising frustration and anger among youth about the response of governments to climate change and ecological breakdown, compounding already high distrust of democratic institutions and governance.

EXISTING POLICY PROPOSALS

The new Administration and Congress have signaled the prioritization of issues concerning both climate and youth. YES offers an opportunity to dovetail with and further build upon existing programs.

Below are two key proposals by the new Administration and Congress that the YES program can support, operate alongside, or integrate with.

A. PRESIDENT-ELECT JOE BIDEN'S PLAN FOR A CLEAN ENERGY REVOLUTION

Given the projections of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, when President-Elect Biden takes office, nine years will remain to prevent the most alarming effects of climate change from transpiring. To prevent the worst, President-Elect Biden has outlined a Plan for Clean Energy Revolution and Environmental Justice. Its key elements include:

- 1) Achieving net-zero emissions and 100% clean energy by 2050, including by investing in climate research and innovation and ensuring clean energy innovation specifically in communities most affected by climate change.
- 2) Making the planet more resilient to the changing climate through investments and rebuilding of smarter infrastructure, including energy and water infrastructure, buildings, bridges, and transportation.
- 3) Working with international allies to help resolve the climate crisis. Biden will lead an effort to ensure all countries advance their climate targets, ensuring they are transparent and enforceable, will recommit the United States back into the Paris Agreement, and will ensure that climate change is integrated into U.S. foreign policy, trade, and national security strategies.
- 4) Ensuring real and inclusive solutions to the communities most affected by climate change. Vulnerable communities, such as communities of color and low-

income communities are disproportionately affected by pollution and climate change, and this plan will ensure action is taken against polluters profiting and harming our environment, such as fossil fuel companies, by restricting access to clean water, air, and land.

- 5) Supporting communities and workers who powered our industrial revolution and economic growth.

President-Elect Biden's plan is predicated on two core ideas: the health of the economy and the environment are closely linked; and to ensure the thriving of both, the United States "urgently needs to embrace greater ambition on an epic scale." Engaging youth in achieving these goals must be part of this epic scale.

B. PANDEMIC RESPONSE AND OPPORTUNITY THROUGH NATIONAL SERVICE ACT

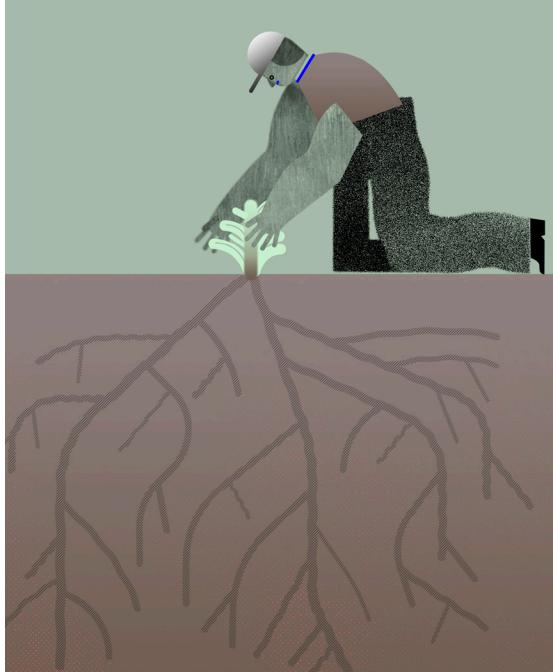
Recognizing the major role that national service can play in post-Covid economic recovery, Sens. Chris Coons (D-Del.), Jack Reed (D-R.I.), Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.), Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), Ed Markey (D-Mass.), Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), and Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) have proposed legislation to increase the scope and quantity of national service positions.

The Pandemic Response and Opportunity Through National Service Act would:

fund 750,000 national service positions over a three-year response and recovery period, in part to meet the projected need for as many as 300,000 public health workers. Under the bill, the number of AmeriCorps and national service positions could expand from 75,000 to 150,000 the first year and double to 300,000 in years two and three. The bill would also expand partnerships between AmeriCorps and federal health agencies and increase the AmeriCorps living allowance to ensure all Americans can step up to serve regardless of their financial circumstances. The Senators are actively working to include this bill in the next COVID-19 relief package set to be considered by the Senate.

This plan resonates deeply with the goals of the YES program, and presents opportunities for developing robust collaborations and joint initiatives.

YES PROGRAM AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



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A Youth Environment Service (YES) would provide opportunities for young people to work together across differences to protect the planet from climate catastrophe while furthering their democratic leadership, job skills, and capacity for common purpose.

YES addresses three primary objectives that demand our attention in the immediate future:

1 ENVIRONMENTAL GOALS:
to slow climate change and reverse mass extinctions.

2 ECONOMIC GOALS:
to develop job skills, particularly youth populations disproportionately impacted by the economic effects of COVID-19, and to advance sustainable development, particularly in areas that were left behind in the last era of globalization. Service programs have been shown to have significant long-term positive economic effects.

3 SOCIAL GOALS:
to promote the integration of youth from diverse communities and build solidarity by working towards a common cause.



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YES programs could encompass a range of service activities, from building flood resistance to installing solar panels and conducting basic research. Participants in a YES program could choose to spend a year engaging in one of a variety of environmental initiatives that could include:

- 1) Restoring wetlands, waterways, and seas through recovery projects.
- 2) Implementing regenerative agricultural efforts.
- 3) Converting the energy grid to renewable energy and smart alternatives.
- 4) Supporting climate adaption projects for vulnerable communities who are already suffering the effects of climate change and ecological disaster.
- 5) Conducting technological and scientific research to develop methods for trapping carbon, reducing emissions, and enhancing environmental innovation.
- 6) Participating in policy drafting, analysis, and advocacy aimed at increasing environmental protections.

YES would offer opportunities for every young person between 18- and 25-years-old to complete one year of compensated environmental service in a public service corps.

Each service would be developed nationally but could seek to address national or international environmental problems.

National governments could manage programs directly or in conjunction with international institutions and civil society.

Programs would be locally-driven to respond to the needs, decisions, and processes of local communities.

Specific program choices could be made through new forms of governing bodies known as deliberative assemblies or “people’s assemblies.” These assemblies serve as an alternative method of aggregating and deliberating popular interests from the electoral process. Preliminary [studies](#) have shown that such fora can be more effective at reaching agreement on contentious policies.

Public service in YES is a smart investment in America’s future. Indeed, for every dollar invested in national service programs, approximately \$4 are returned to society in future benefits. Public service during adolescence and young adulthood, moreover, is associated with improved health and wellbeing, and civic engagement and national service can contribute to educational and occupational development and a sense of citizenship.

YES also offers an opportunity to contribute to addressing racial injustice. The climate emergency has exacerbated the challenges faced by communities and people of color, and other marginalized communities, as they are more likely to lack access to fundamental environmental and health rights such as [clean air](#), [clean water](#), and [nutritious food](#). They are also more likely to live in areas vulnerable to [climate hazards](#) and threatened with [toxic waste](#). Women, youth, and the elderly are also disproportionately affected by climate change. Indeed, worldwide women make up [80% of those displaced](#) by climate change.

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@berggruenInst

www.berggruen.org

Bradbury Building

304 S. Broadway, Suite 500
Los Angeles, CA, 90013, USA