In Western countries, the bulk of the population consists of people in blue and white collar jobs and the Biden Challenge seeks to strengthen their opportunities for social mobility so that we can leave a world better than we found it. What will it take to revitalize the socio-economic prosperity of this group, i.e. the middle class, which includes – by way of self-identification – blue- and white-collar workers? The answer is not only surprisingly simple, it actually happened during, what the French demographer Jean Fourastié called, Les Trente Glorieuses (1979), the three decades following the end of World War II when for the first time in history income inequality declined significantly and people enjoyed social mobility as never before. There are three main groups of reasons why this could happen.

First is the social-economic context characterized by affordable education for all, a diversified economy, and connectivity enhancing infrastructure, a triad coined by the Italian scholar Antonio Serra in … 1613 as the recipe for elevating populations at large out of their station in life. Between 1945 and 1975 higher education opened up to many, the economy thrived, and the American interstate highway system connected the various parts of the country in unprecedented ways. Important for our time, and not mentioned by Serra, is health care for all.

Second, and no less important, is the political courage to tax people and business and to regulate society and economy, to sidestep the private sector efforts to deregulate, and to not prostitute the trusteeship which
comes with public office in exchange for power and/or money. On both sides of the Atlantic, the marginal tax rate was high, corporate taxes were significant, and there was plenty government regulation to serve the reconstruction.

Third, and similarly important, is a civic education that provides people with a basic understanding of the position and role of government in society. That includes not only knowledge about the structure and functioning of government (e.g., the three branches, how a bill becomes a law etc.) but also knowledge of why we cannot live in our densely populated and highly urbanized societies without a government.

That the middle class is hollowed out can be explained by developments since the mid-1970s in these three areas. Higher education is less and less affordable and accessible, thus depriving intelligent youth from lower and middle-income families with the opportunity to get a degree and improve their life-earnings significantly (and in the process, of course, become productive taxpayers). As with so many other things, education has become commodified, more and more guided by market norms of profitability for the “owner” than by the social norm of loyalty to something bigger than oneself. It does not help that states have slashed higher education budgets and prodding public universities to be fundraisers rather than educators. Tax cuts since the 1980s have brought an illusion of “more money in your pocket” while starving those collective needs that are not considered profitable by the private sector. Deregulation since the early 1980s have brought the illusion of a smaller government, but at the price of opening up collective interests to manipulative and predatory behavior of private actors. Finally, civic education is down the drain, although I do not know why. We now have a citizenry that cannot really be blamed for no longer understanding government’s position and role in society. Blame is not productive, but it would help a lot when elected officeholders speak of the civil service with appreciation instead of playing upon popular and unsubstantiated fears of “unelected bureaucrats.” It would also help when superintendents of education and school principals make civic education a standard element in the 6th to 12th grade.

Associate justice of the Supreme Court, Oliver Wendell Holmes, said it thus: “When I pay taxes, I buy civilization.” To understand how profound yet simple this is, we desperately need to think differently about government as it is the only social actor left that has the legal authority to make binding decisions for all people in the sovereignty. The study of public
administration can be instrumental in the effort to support the Biden Challenge. It should not only focus on producing quantitative, evidence-based research that cannot be but retrospective, but also on developing visions of and for the future based on understanding why we cannot do without government (see my TEDx talk of February 2018 at https://youtu.be/wNm4GrmOcUQ) and why bureaucracy has become an indispensable pillar to democracy (see my little piece on that in April 2018 at https://statecrafting.net). I do so hope that the Biden Challenge will be the catalyst for rekindling what proved to be possible during the Glorious Thirty.

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