
BOWLING ALONE

THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL
OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Robert D. Putnam

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To Ruth S. ...
and to the ...
Louis Werner ...
exemplars of the ...

CHAPTER I

Thinking about Social Change in America

NO ONE IS LEFT from the Glenn Valley, Pennsylvania, Bridge Club who can tell us precisely when or why the group broke up, even though its forty-odd members were still playing regularly as recently as 1990, just as they had done for more than half a century. The shock in the Little Rock, Arkansas, Sertoma club, however, is still painful: in the mid-1980s, nearly fifty people had attended the weekly luncheon to plan activities to help the hearing- and speech-impaired, but a decade later only seven regulars continued to show up.

The Roanoke, Virginia, chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been an active force for civil rights since 1918, but during the 1990s membership withered from about 2,500 to a few hundred. By November 1998 even a heated contest for president drew only fifty-seven voting members. Black city councillor Carroll Swain observed ruefully, "Some people today are a wee bit complacent until something jumps up and bites them." VFW Post 2378 in Berwyn, Illinois, a blue-collar suburb of Chicago, was long a bustling "home away from home" for local veterans and a kind of working-class country club for the neighborhood, hosting wedding receptions and class reunions. By 1999, however, membership had so dwindled that it was a struggle just to pay taxes on the yellow brick post hall. Although numerous veterans of Vietnam and the post-Vietnam military lived in the area, Tom Kissell, national membership director for the VFW, observed, "Kids today just aren't joiners."¹

The Charity League of Dallas had met every Friday morning for fifty-seven years to sew, knit, and visit, but on April 30, 1999, they held their last

get through to some people. . . . Not only are Americans flocking into bowling leagues and garden clubs, they are satisfying their gregarious urges in countless neighborhood committees to improve the local roads and garbage collections and to hound their public servants into doing what the name implies.⁵

The civic-minded World War II generation was, as its own John F. Kennedy proclaimed at his inauguration, picking up the torch of leadership, not only in the nation's highest office, but in cities and towns across the land. Summarizing dozens of studies, political scientist Robert E. Lane wrote in 1959 that "the ratio of political activists to the general population, and even the ratio of male activists to the male population, has generally increased over the past fifty years." As the 1960s ended, sociologists Daniel Bell and Virginia Held reported that "there is more participation than ever before in America . . . and more opportunity for the active interested person to express his personal and political concerns."⁶ Even the simplest political act, voting, was becoming ever more common. From 1920, when women got the vote, through 1960, turnout in presidential elections had risen at the rate of 1.6 percent every four years, so on a simple straight-line projection it seemed reasonable, as a leading political scientist later observed, to expect turnout to be nearly 70 percent and rising on the nation's two hundredth birthday in 1976.⁷

By 1965 disrespect for public life, so endemic in our history, seemed to be waning. Gallup pollsters discovered that the number of Americans who would like to see their children "go into politics as a life's work" had nearly doubled over little more than a decade. Although this gauge of esteem for politics stood at only 36 percent, it had never before been recorded so high, nor has it since. More strikingly, Americans felt increased confidence in their neighbors. The proportion that agreed that "most people can be trusted," for example, rose from an already high 66 percent during and after World War II to a peak of 77 percent in 1964.⁸

The fifties and sixties were hardly a "golden age," especially for those Americans who were marginalized because of their race or gender or social class or sexual orientation. Segregation, by race legally and by gender socially, was the norm, and intolerance, though declining, was still disturbingly high. Environmental degradation had only just been exposed by Rachel Carson, and Betty Friedan had not yet deconstructed the feminine mystique. Grinding rural poverty had still to be discovered by the national media. Infant mortality, a standard measure of public health, stood at twenty-six per one thousand births—forty-four per one thousand for black infants—in 1960, nearly four times worse than those indexes would be at the end of the century. America in *Life* was white, straight, Christian, comfortable, and (in the public square, at least) male.⁹ Social reformers had their work cut out for them. However, en-

gagement in community affairs and the sense of shared identity and reciprocity had never been greater in modern America, so the prospects for broad-based civic mobilization to address our national failings seemed bright.

The signs of burgeoning civic vitality were also favorable among the younger generation, as the first of the baby boomers approached college. Dozens of studies confirmed that education was by far the best predictor of engagement in civic life, and universities were in the midst of the most far-reaching expansion in American history. Education seemed the key to both greater tolerance and greater social involvement. Simultaneously shamed and inspired by the quickening struggle for civil rights launched by young African Americans in the South, white colleges in the North began to awaken from the silence of the fifties. Describing the induction of this new generation into the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, sociologist Doug McAdam emphasizes their self-assurance:

We were a "can do" people, who accomplished whatever we set out to do. We had licked the Depression, turned the tide in World War II, and rebuilt Europe after the war. . . . Freedom Summer was an audacious undertaking consistent with the exaggerated sense of importance and potency shared by the privileged members of America's postwar generation.¹⁰

The baby boom meant that America's population was unusually young, whereas civic involvement generally doesn't bloom until middle age. In the short run, therefore, our youthful demography actually tended to dampen the ebullience of civil society. But that very bulge at the bottom of the nation's demographic pyramid boded well for the future of community organizations, for they could look forward to swelling membership rolls in the 1980s, when the boomers would reach the peak "joining" years of the life cycle. And in the meantime, the bull session buzz about "participatory democracy" and "all power to the people" seemed to augur ever more widespread engagement in community affairs. One of America's most acute social observers prophesied in 1968, "Participatory democracy has all along been the political style (if not the slogan) of the American middle and upper class. It will become a more widespread style as more persons enter into those classes."¹¹ Never in our history had the future of civic life looked brighter.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT to civic and social life in American communities is the subject of this book. In recent years social scientists have framed concerns about the changing character of American society in terms of the concept of "social capital." By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital—tools and training that enhance individual productivity—the core idea of

social capital theory is that social networks (or a college education, or physical capital, or a college education, or physical capital) enhance individual productivity (both individual and collective) and the productivity of individuals and groups.

Whereas physical capital refers to properties of individuals and individuals—social networks and the benefits that arise from them. In that sense social capital has been called "civic virtue." The difference is to the fact that civic virtue is more power work of reciprocal social relations. A social individual is not necessarily rich in social capital.

The term *social capital* itself has been invented at least six times over the years, to the ways in which our lives are made known use of the concept was not by a practical reformer of the Progressive Era, rural schools in West Virginia. Writing community involvement for successful social capital" to explain why. For Hanifan, social

those tangible substances (that is, people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and cooperation among the individuals and families of the community) which the individual is helpless socially, if left to contact with his neighbor, and then with the accumulation of social capital, which needs and which may bear a strategic improvement of living conditions for the community as a whole will benefit while the individual will find in the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship

Hanifan's account of social capital has been taken up in later interpretations, but has attracted no notice from other social scientists. But like sunken treasure recurrently rediscovered, the same idea was independently rediscovered by sociologists to characterize the club membership in the 1960s by urbanist Jane Jacobs to laud neighborhood life in the 1970s by economist Glenn Loury, and in the 1980s by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and by economist Ekehart Schlicht to understand the role of social capital in economic development embodied in social networks. Sociology

social capital theory is that social networks have value. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups.

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.

The term *social capital* itself turns out to have been independently invented at least six times over the twentieth century, each time to call attention to the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties. The first known use of the concept was not by some cloistered theoretician, but by a practical reformer of the Progressive Era—L. J. Hanifan, state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia. Writing in 1916 to urge the importance of community involvement for successful schools, Hanifan invoked the idea of “social capital” to explain why. For Hanifan, social capital referred to

those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit. . . . The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself. . . . If he comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the coöperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors.¹²

Hanifan’s account of social capital anticipated virtually all the crucial elements in later interpretations, but his conceptual invention apparently attracted no notice from other social commentators and disappeared without a trace. But like sunken treasure recurrently revealed by shifting sands and tides, the same idea was independently rediscovered in the 1950s by Canadian sociologists to characterize the club memberships of arriviste suburbanites, in the 1960s by urbanist Jane Jacobs to laud neighborliness in the modern metropolis, in the 1970s by economist Glenn Loury to analyze the social legacy of slavery, and in the 1980s by French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu and by German economist Ekkehart Schlicht to underline the social and economic resources embodied in social networks. Sociologist James S. Coleman put the term

firmly and finally on the intellectual agenda in the late 1980s, using it (as Hanifan had originally done) to highlight the social context of education.¹³

As this array of independent coinages indicates, social capital has both an individual and a collective aspect—a private face and a public face. First, individuals form connections that benefit our own interests. One pervasive strategem of ambitious job seekers is “networking,” for most of us get our jobs because of whom we know, not what we know—that is, our social capital, not our human capital. Economic sociologist Ronald Burt has shown that executives with bounteous Rolodex files enjoy faster career advancement. Nor is the private return to social capital limited to economic rewards. As Claude S. Fischer, a sociologist of friendship, has noted, “Social networks are important in all our lives, often for finding jobs, more often for finding a helping hand, companionship, or a shoulder to cry on.”¹⁴

If individual clout and companionship were all there were to social capital, we'd expect foresighted, self-interested individuals to invest the right amount of time and energy in creating or acquiring it. However, social capital also can have "externalities" that affect the wider community, so that not all the costs and benefits of social connections accrue to the person making the contact.¹⁵ As we shall see later in this book, a well-connected individual in a poorly connected society is not as productive as a well-connected individual in a well-connected society. And even a poorly connected individual may derive some of the spillover benefits from living in a well-connected community. If the crime rate in my neighborhood is lowered by neighbors keeping an eye on one another's homes, I benefit even if I personally spend most of my time on the road and never even nod to another resident on the street.

Social capital can thus be simultaneously a "private good" and a "public good." Some of the benefit from an investment in social capital goes to bystanders, while some of the benefit redounds to the immediate interest of the person making the investment. For example, service clubs, like Rotary or Lions, mobilize local energies to raise scholarships or fight disease at the same time that they provide members with friendships and business connections that pay off personally.

Social connections are also important for the rules of conduct that they sustain. Networks involve (almost by definition) mutual obligations; they are not interesting as mere “contacts.” Networks of community engagement foster sturdy norms of reciprocity: I’ll do this for you now, in the expectation that you (or perhaps someone else) will return the favor. “Social capital is akin to what Tom Wolfe called ‘the favor bank’ in his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*,” notes economist Robert Frank.¹⁶ It was, however, neither a novelist nor an economist, but Yogi Berra who offered the most succinct definition of reciprocity: “If you don’t go to somebody’s funeral, they won’t come to yours.”

Sometimes, as in these cases, reciprocity is *specific*: I'll do this for you if you do that for me. Even more valuable, however, is a norm of *generalized* rec-

proximity: I'll do this for you with the confidence in the confident expectation that you'll do it for me on the road. The Golden Rule is the first rule. Equally instructive is the T-shirt slogan of the volunteer Fire Department at public breakfasts: "If you don't come to our breakfast, we'll come to you." If you don't reciprocate, the firefighters seem to think, we'll recognize the underlying norm of reciprocity and come even if you don't. When 500 people are strangers, she too was relying on reciprocity.

A society characterized by general distrustful society, for the same reason, we don't have to balance every exchange. Trustworthiness lubricates a diverse set of people tends to produce engagement and social capital formation. As L. J. Hanifan and his colleagues norms of reciprocity can facilitate economic and political dealing is embedded incentives for opportunism and mafioso trade, with its extreme power in the knit ethnic enclaves. Dense social networks cultivating reputation—an essential

Physical capital is not a single thing. Physical capital are not interchangeable. An open space is not as physical capital in our national security as it is for national defense, and the carrier is not as physical capital in our national security as it is in the omelet. Similarly, social capital — the norms of reciprocity — comes in many different uses. Your extended family represents a different use of social capital than your Sunday school class, the regulars who play on the college teammates, the civic organizations, the chat group in which you participate, and the experiences recorded in your address book.

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iprocity: I'll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road. The Golden Rule is one formulation of generalized reciprocity. Equally instructive is the T-shirt slogan used by the Gold Beach, Oregon, Volunteer Fire Department to publicize their annual fund-raising effort: "Come to our breakfast, we'll come to your fire." "We act on a norm of specific reciprocity," the firefighters seem to be saying, but onlookers smile because they recognize the underlying norm of generalized reciprocity—the firefighters will come even if you don't. When Blanche DuBois depended on the kindness of strangers, she too was relying on generalized reciprocity.

A society characterized by generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society, for the same reason that money is more efficient than barter. If we don't have to balance every exchange instantly, we can get a lot more accomplished. Trustworthiness lubricates social life. Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity. Civic engagement and social capital entail mutual obligation and responsibility for action. As L. J. Hanifan and his successors recognized, social networks and norms of reciprocity can facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. When economic and political dealing is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism and malfeasance are reduced. This is why the diamond trade, with its extreme possibilities for fraud, is concentrated within close-knit ethnic enclaves. Dense social ties facilitate gossip and other valuable ways of cultivating reputation—an essential foundation for trust in a complex society.

Physical capital is not a single "thing," and different forms of physical capital are not interchangeable. An eggbeater and an aircraft carrier both appear as physical capital in our national accounts, but the eggbeater is not much use for national defense, and the carrier would not be much help with your morning omelet. Similarly, social capital—that is, social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity—comes in many different shapes and sizes with many different uses. Your extended family represents a form of social capital, as do your Sunday school class, the regulars who play poker on your commuter train, your college roommates, the civic organizations to which you belong, the Internet chat group in which you participate, and the network of professional acquaintances recorded in your address book.

Sometimes "social capital," like its conceptual cousin "community," sounds warm and cuddly. Urban sociologist Xavier de Souza Briggs, however, properly warns us to beware of a treacly sweet, "kumbaya" interpretation of social capital.¹⁷ Networks and the associated norms of reciprocity are generally good for those inside the network, but the external effects of social capital are by no means always positive. It was social capital, for example, that enabled Timothy McVeigh to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. McVeigh's network of friends, bound together by a norm of reciprocity, enabled him to do what he could not have done alone. Similarly, urban gangs, NIMBY

("not in my backyard") movements, and power elites often exploit social capital to achieve ends that are antisocial from a wider perspective. Indeed, it is rhetorically useful for such groups to obscure the difference between the pro-social and antisocial consequences of community organizations. When Floridians objected to plans by the Ku Klux Klan to "adopt a highway," Jeff Coleman, grand wizard of the Royal Knights of the KKK, protested, "Really, we're just like the Lions or the Elks. We want to be involved in the community."¹⁸

Social capital, in short, can be directed toward malevolent, antisocial purposes, just like any other form of capital.¹⁹ (McVeigh also relied on physical capital, like the explosive-laden truck, and human capital, like bomb-making expertise, to achieve his purposes.) Therefore it is important to ask how the positive consequences of social capital—mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness—can be maximized and the negative manifestations—sectarianism, ethnocentrism, corruption—minimized. Toward this end, scholars have begun to distinguish many different forms of social capital.

Some forms involve repeated, intensive, multistranded networks—like a group of steelworkers who meet for drinks every Friday after work and see each other at mass on Sunday—and some are episodic, single stranded, and anonymous, like the faintly familiar face you see several times a month in the supermarket checkout line. Some types of social capital, like a Parent-Teacher Association, are formally organized, with incorporation papers, regular meetings, a written constitution, and connection to a national federation, whereas others, like a pickup basketball game, are more informal. Some forms of social capital, like a volunteer ambulance squad, have explicit public-regarding purposes; some, like a bridge club, exist for the private enjoyment of the members; and some, like the Rotary club mentioned earlier, serve both public and private ends.

Of all the dimensions along which forms of social capital vary, perhaps the most important is the distinction between *bridging* (or inclusive) and *bonding* (or exclusive).²⁰ Some forms of social capital are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups. Examples of bonding social capital include ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based women's reading groups, and fashionable country clubs. Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement, many youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organizations.

Bonding social capital is good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity. Dense networks in ethnic enclaves, for example, provide crucial social and psychological support for less fortunate members of the community, while furnishing start-up financing, markets, and reliable labor for local entrepreneurs. Bridging networks, by contrast, are better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion. Economic sociologist Mark Granovetter has pointed out that when seeking jobs—or political allies—the

"weak" ties that link me to distant acquaintances from mine are actually more valuable than the strong ties to relatives and intimate friends whose social capital is, as Xavier de Souza-Eisenberg notes, bridging social capital is crucial for getting things done.

Moreover, bridging social capital promotes reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital tends to be at the founding of a community. In the case of Bedford, Massachusetts, Thomas Greene noted:

We come from all the diverse parts of the world, and to be taught in our turn. We are all here to learn, and we shall learn to know each other, and to overcome many of the prejudices which have been fostered by each other had fostered. . . . In the process of learning, we sometimes learn to love each other, and to whom we do not in so many places. We turn to our homes and firesides, and to the people toward one another, because we are all here to be better.²²

Bonding social capital constitutes a form of social capital, whereas bridging social capital promotes a form of social capital, by creating strong in-group ties and reducing antagonism, as Thomas Greene and others have noted. For that reason we might expect negative consequences with this form of social capital. Nevertheless, bridging and bonding social capital can coexist.

Many groups simultaneously bridge and bond. The black church, for example, bridges across the same race and religion across class lines, while created to bridge cleavages among different groups along religious and gender lines. It also bridges along geography, gender, age, and religion, as well as education and ideology. In short, bonding social capital creates categories into which social networks can be organized along dimensions along which we can compare and contrast.

It would obviously be valuable to have a taxonomy of these various forms of social capital. In the face of global warming, we must make do with what we have, find, not merely lament its deficiencies. The social networks in America—even at a single point in time—are no reliable, comprehensive, nationwide

"weak" ties that link me to distant acquaintances who move in different circles from mine are actually more valuable than the "strong" ties that link me to relatives and intimate friends whose sociological niche is very like my own. Bonding social capital is, as Xavier de Souza Briggs puts it, good for "getting by," but bridging social capital is crucial for "getting ahead."²¹

Moreover, bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves. In 1829 at the founding of a community lyceum in the bustling whaling port of New Bedford, Massachusetts, Thomas Greene eloquently expressed this crucial insight:

We come from all the divisions, ranks and classes of society . . . to teach and to be taught in our turn. While we mingle together in these pursuits, we shall learn to know each other more intimately; we shall remove many of the prejudices which ignorance or partial acquaintance with each other had fostered. . . . In the parties and sects into which we are divided, we sometimes learn to love our brother at the expense of him whom we do not in so many respects regard as a brother. . . . We may return to our homes and firesides [from the lyceum] with kindlier feelings toward one another, because we have learned to know one another better.²²

Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40. Bonding social capital, by creating strong in-group loyalty, may also create strong out-group antagonism, as Thomas Greene and his neighbors in New Bedford knew, and for that reason we might expect negative external effects to be more common with this form of social capital. Nevertheless, under many circumstances both bridging and bonding social capital can have powerfully positive social effects.

Many groups simultaneously bond along some social dimensions and bridge across others. The black church, for example, brings together people of the same race and religion across class lines. The Knights of Columbus was created to bridge cleavages among different ethnic communities while bonding along religious and gender lines. Internet chat groups may bridge across geography, gender, age, and religion, while being tightly homogeneous in education and ideology. In short, bonding and bridging are not "either-or" categories into which social networks can be neatly divided, but "more or less" dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital.

It would obviously be valuable to have distinct measures of the evolution of these various forms of social capital over time. However, like researchers on global warming, we must make do with the imperfect evidence that we can find, not merely lament its deficiencies. Exhaustive descriptions of social networks in America—even at a single point in time—do not exist. I have found no reliable, comprehensive, nationwide measures of social capital that neatly

distinguish “bridgingness” and “bondingness.” In our empirical account of recent social trends in this book, therefore, this distinction will be less prominent than I would prefer. On the other hand, we must keep this conceptual differentiation at the back of our minds as we proceed, recognizing that bridging and bonding social capital are not interchangeable.

“SOCIAL CAPITAL” is to some extent merely new language for a very old debate in American intellectual circles. Community has warred incessantly with individualism for preeminence in our political hagiology. Liberation from ossified community bonds is a recurrent and honored theme in our culture, from the Pilgrims’ storied escape from religious convention in the seventeenth century to the lyric nineteenth-century paeans to individualism by Emerson (“Self-Reliance”), Thoreau (“Civil Disobedience”), and Whitman (“Song of Myself”) to Sherwood Anderson’s twentieth-century celebration of the struggle against conformism by ordinary citizens in *Winesburg, Ohio* to the latest Clint Eastwood film. Even Alexis de Tocqueville, patron saint of American communitarians, acknowledged the uniquely democratic claim of individualism, “a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.”²³

Our national myths often exaggerate the role of individual heroes and understate the importance of collective effort. Historian David Hackett Fischer’s gripping account of opening night in the American Revolution, for example, reminds us that Paul Revere’s alarm was successful only because of networks of civic engagement in the Middlesex villages. Towns without well-organized local militia, no matter how patriotic their inhabitants, were AWOL from Lexington and Concord.²⁴ Nevertheless, the myth of rugged individualism continues to strike a powerful inner chord in the American psyche.

Debates about the waxing and waning of “community” have been endemic for at least two centuries. “Declensionist narratives”—postmodernist jargon for tales of decline and fall—have a long pedigree in our letters. We seem perennially tempted to contrast our tawdry todays with past golden ages. We apparently share this nostalgic predilection with the rest of humanity. As sociologist Barry Wellman observes,

It is likely that pundits have worried about the impact of social change on communities ever since human beings ventured beyond their caves. . . . In the [past] two centuries many leading social commentators have been gainfully employed suggesting various ways in which large-scale social changes associated with the Industrial Revolution may have affected the

structure and operation of communities and the consequences of large-scale changes in the nineteenth century. Analysts have kept asking the same question apart.²⁵

At the conclusion of the twentieth century, we are in this sense of civic malaise. We were reasonably optimistic about the prospects, hardly a surprise after an expansion of community that we were not equally convinced that we were better off naturally. Of baby boomers interviewed in 1988, 60 percent of the parents’ generation was better in terms of “being helpful to others in the community,” as compared to 40 percent who thought their own generation was better. Fully 70 percent were worse off because of “less involvement in community.” Three-quarters of the U.S. workforce said that “the selfishness” of the “selfishness” were “serious” or “extremely serious.” In 1996 only 8 percent of all Americans said that “the average American” were improving, as compared to 40 percent who thought we were becoming less trustworthy. We had become less civil over the preceding ten years, 70 percent thought people had become more civil. Sixty percent of the surveys in 1999 two-thirds of Americans said that “the world” had worsened in recent years, that social and moral values were declining, growing up, and that our society was focused on the individual, not community. More than 80 percent said that “the community” was weaker, even if that put more demands on the individual. Concern about weakening community bonds was a major theme, but a decent respect for the opinion of our fellow citizens should explore the issue more thoroughly.

It is emphatically not my view that community has been weakened steadily throughout our history—over the last hundred years. On the contrary, American history is a story of ups and downs in civic engagement, *not just* a story of decline and renewal. As I have already hinted in the opening chapter, the memory of the bonds of community in America is weaker, and as I shall argue in the concluding chapter, the reverse the decline of the last several decades.

Nevertheless, my argument is, at least in part, a challenge to tradition, so it is important to avoid simple generalizations. The theme of this book might lend itself to gauzy generalizations. It should be transparent. Is life in communities as we experience it so different after all from the reality of American history?

structure and operation of communities. . . . This ambivalence about the consequences of large-scale changes continued well into the twentieth century. Analysts have kept asking if things have, in fact, fallen apart.²⁵

At the conclusion of the twentieth century, ordinary Americans shared this sense of civic malaise. We were reasonably content about our economic prospects, hardly a surprise after an expansion of unprecedented length, but we were not equally convinced that we were on the right track morally or culturally. Of baby boomers interviewed in 1987, 53 percent thought their parents' generation was better in terms of "being a concerned citizen, involved in helping others in the community," as compared with only 21 percent who thought their own generation was better. Fully 77 percent said the nation was worse off because of "less involvement in community activities." In 1992 three-quarters of the U.S. workforce said that "the breakdown of community" and "selfishness" were "serious" or "extremely serious" problems in America. In 1996 only 8 percent of all Americans said that "the honesty and integrity of the average American" were improving, as compared with 50 percent of us who thought we were becoming less trustworthy. Those of us who said that people had become less civil over the preceding ten years outnumbered those who thought people had become more civil, 80 percent to 12 percent. In several surveys in 1999 two-thirds of Americans said that America's civic life had weakened in recent years, that social and moral values were higher when they were growing up, and that our society was focused more on the individual than the community. More than 80 percent said there should be more emphasis on community, even if that put more demands on individuals.²⁶ Americans' concern about weakening community bonds may be misplaced or exaggerated, but a decent respect for the opinion of our fellow citizens suggests that we should explore the issue more thoroughly.

It is emphatically not my view that community bonds in America have weakened steadily throughout our history—or even throughout the last hundred years. On the contrary, American history carefully examined is a story of ups and downs in civic engagement, *not just downs*—a story of collapse *and* of renewal. As I have already hinted in the opening pages of this book, within living memory the bonds of community in America were becoming stronger, not weaker, and as I shall argue in the concluding pages, it is within our power to reverse the decline of the last several decades.

Nevertheless, my argument is, at least in appearance, in the declensionist tradition, so it is important to avoid simple nostalgia. Precisely because the theme of this book might lend itself to gauzy self-deception, our methods must be transparent. Is life in communities as we enter the twenty-first century really so different after all from the reality of American communities in the 1950s and

1960s? One way of curbing nostalgia is to count things. Are club meetings really less crowded today than yesterday, or does it just seem so? Do we really know our neighbors less well than our parents did, or is our childhood recollection of neighborhood barbecues suffused with a golden glow of wishful reminiscence? Are friendly poker games less common now, or is it merely that we ourselves have outgrown poker? League bowling may be passé, but how about softball and soccer? Are strangers less trustworthy now? Are boomers and X'ers really less engaged in community life? After all, it was the preceding generation that was once scorned as "silent." Perhaps the younger generation today is no less engaged than their predecessors, but engaged in new ways. In the chapters that follow we explore these questions with the best available evidence.

THE CHALLENGE of studying the evolving social climate is analogous in some respects to the challenge facing meteorologists who measure global warming: we know what kind of evidence we would ideally want from the past, but time's arrow means that we can't go back to conduct those well-designed studies. Thus if we are to explore how our society is like or unlike our parents', we must make imperfect inferences from all the evidence that we can find.

The most powerful strategy for paleometeorologists seeking to assess global climate change is to triangulate among diverse sources of evidence. If pollen counts in polar ice, and the width of southwestern tree rings, and temperature records of the British Admiralty all point in a similar direction, the inference of global warming is stronger than if the cord of evidence has only a single strand. For much the same reason, prudent journalists follow a "two source" rule: Never report anything unless at least two independent sources confirm it.

In this book I follow that same maxim. Nearly every major generalization here rests on more than one body of independent evidence, and where I have discovered divergent results from credible sources, I note that disparity as well. I have a case to make, but like any officer of the court, I have a professional obligation to present all relevant evidence I have found, exculpatory as well as incriminating. To avoid cluttering the text with masses of redundant evidence, I have typically put confirmatory evidence from multiple studies in the notes, so skeptical "show me" readers should examine those notes as well as the text.²⁷

I have sought as diverse a range of evidence as possible on continuities and change in American social life. If the transformation that I discern is as broad and deep as I believe it to be, it ought to show up in many different places, so I have cast a broad net. Of course, social change, like climatic change, is inevitably uneven. Life is not lived in a single dimension. We should not expect to find everything changing in the same direction and at the same speed, but those very anomalies may contain important clues to what is happening.

...of the last century, like the ...
...and ...
...After ...
...were ...
...self-help ...
...at the ...
...to remember ...
...social capital—the ways ...
...strangers—are varied.

So our review of trends ...
...across various sectors of ...
...begin by charting American ...
...and public affairs. We ...
...clubs and community ...
...organizations, such as unions and ...
...almost infinite variety of informal ...
...bowling leagues, bar cliques and ...
...the changing patterns of ...
...volunteering, honesty, reciprocity ...
...samples to the decline of ...
...the Internet.

In each domain we shall ...
...dies, but in each we shall ...
...that have swept across American ...
...nant theme is simple: For the first ...
...ful tide bore Americans into ...
...communities, but a few decades ago—
...versed and we were overtaken ...
...noticing, we have been pulled apart ...
...ties over the last third of the century.

The impact of these tides ...
...and consequences and what we might ...
...rest of this book. Section III explores ...
...from overwork to suburban sprawl ...
...lution, from racism to television ...
...divorce. Some of these factors turn ...
...in the erosion of social capital, but ...
...critical sources of our problem.

Whereas section III asks "What ...
...tal turns out to have forceful, even ...
...pects of our lives. What is at stake ...
...frissons of community pride. We ...
...and neighborhoods don't work so well.

our economy, our democracy, and even our health and happiness depend on adequate stocks of social capital.

Finally, in section V we turn from the necessary but cheerless task of diagnosis to the more optimistic challenge of contemplating possible therapies. A century ago, it turns out, Americans faced social and political issues that were strikingly similar to those that we must now address. From our predecessors' responses, we have much to learn—not least that civic decay like that around us can be reversed. This volume offers no simple cures for our contemporary ills. In the final section my aim is to provoke (and perhaps contribute to) a period of national deliberation and experimentation about how we can renew American civic engagement and social connectedness in the twenty-first century.

BEFORE OCTOBER 29, 1997, John Lambert and Andy Boschma knew each other only through their local bowling league at the Ypsi-Arbor Lanes in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Lambert, a sixty-four-year-old retired employee of the University of Michigan hospital, had been on a kidney transplant waiting list for three years when Boschma, a thirty-three-year-old accountant, learned casually of Lambert's need and unexpectedly approached him to offer to donate one of his own kidneys.

"Andy saw something in me that others didn't," said Lambert. "When we were in the hospital Andy said to me, 'John, I really like you and have a lot of respect for you. I wouldn't hesitate to do this all over again.' I got choked up." Boschma returned the feeling: "I obviously feel a kinship [with Lambert]. I cared about him before, but now I'm really rooting for him." This moving story speaks for itself, but the photograph that accompanied this report in the *Ann Arbor News* reveals that in addition to their differences in profession and generation, Boschma is white and Lambert is African American. That they bowled together made all the difference.²⁸ In small ways like this—and in larger ways, too—we Americans need to reconnect with one another. That is the simple argument of this book.

SECTION TWO

Trends in Civic Engage and Social Capi

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CHAPTER 2

Political Participation

THE CHARACTER of Americans' involvement with politics and government has been transformed over the past three decades. This is certainly not the only alteration in the way we connect with our communities. It is not even the most dramatic and unequivocal example of change. But it is the most widely discussed, and it is thus a good place to begin.

With the singular exception of voting, American rates of political participation compare favorably with those in other democracies. We have multiple avenues for expressing our views and exercising our rights—contacting local and national officials, working for political parties and other political organizations, discussing politics with our neighbors, attending public meetings, joining in election campaigns, wearing buttons, signing petitions, speaking out on talk radio, and many more. Not all of us do all these things, but more of us are active in these ways than are citizens in many other advanced democracies. We are reminded each election year that fewer voters show up at the polls in America than in most other democracies: our turnout rate ranks us just above the cellar—narrowly besting Switzerland, but below all twenty-two other established democracies.¹ Nevertheless, Americans are fairly active politically outside the ballot booth. However, our interest here is not “How are we doing compared with other countries?” but “How are we doing today compared with our own past?” The answer to that question is less encouraging.

We begin with the most common act of democratic citizenship—voting. In 1960, 62.8 percent of voting-age Americans went to the polls to choose between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. In 1996, after decades of slip-

page, 48.9 percent of voting-age Americans chose among Bill Clinton, Bob Dole, and Ross Perot, very nearly the lowest turnout in the twentieth century. Participation in presidential elections has declined by roughly a quarter over the last thirty-six years. Turnout in off-year and local elections is down by roughly this same amount.²

For several reasons, this widely reported fact understates the real decline in Americans' commitment to electoral participation. For most of the twentieth century Americans' access to the voting booth was hampered by burdensome registration requirements. The conventional explanation for our low turnout as compared with other democracies points precisely to the hurdles of registration. Over the last four decades, however, registration requirements in America have been greatly relaxed. The nationwide introduction of "motor voter" registration, on which states have collectively spent \$100 million to try to swell the ranks of new voters, is merely the most visible example of this trend. Turnout has declined despite the fact that the most commonly cited barrier to voting has been substantially lowered.³ Even facing a lower hurdle, fewer Americans are making the jump.

A second qualification is even more important. For much of our history many people in the South, especially blacks, were disenfranchised. To provide an accurate picture of how current voting rates compare with those of the past, figure 1 traces presidential turnout in southern and nonsouthern states over most of the history of the American Republic.

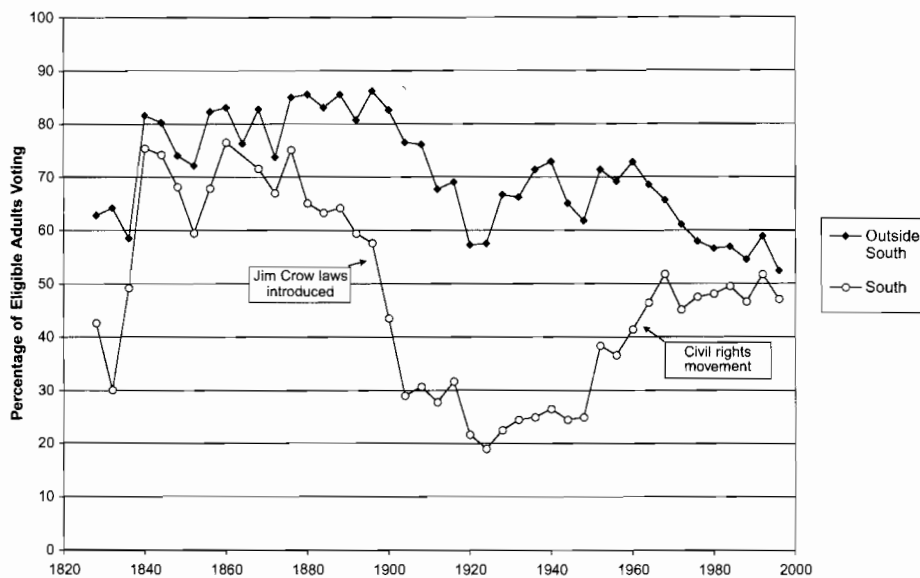


Figure 1: Trends in Presidential Voting (1828–1996), by Region

From the end of the nineteenth century virtually all African Americans in the South were prevented from voting by Jim Crow laws. This Jim Crow disenfranchisement reduced turnout in the South and America for the next seventy years. Since most states disenfranchised millions with other means, the effective turnout during the first half of the twentieth century was for fewer Americans who were free to vote.⁴

With the civil rights movement and the Voting Rights Act, millions of newly enfranchised Americans came to the polls for the first time in the twentieth century. This influx of new voters partially masked the decline in turnout in the American electorate.⁵ In effect, America's turnout rose for the inclusion of southern blacks and fell for the exclusion of the rest of us who had been actually exercising it.

Outside the South the slide in turnout began in the 1880s, now, the longest decline in American presidential election turnout was substantially lower than the decline in elections in nearly two centuries.⁶ Even in the 1990s (except for the period of forced disenfranchisement) turnout was very nearly the lowest in 164 years. In short, turnout for many American citizens freely abstained.

Who are these nonvoters, and why do they not vote? Explanations have been offered—growing political apathy, mobilization, fraying social bonds, political polarization, the ups and downs of individual economic conditions, the long-run decline in turnout is due to the fact that more people came of age before or during the New Deal than during the previous generations who came of age later.

Because generational change will continue, we should pause briefly here to consider how these changes are interrelated. As a matter of fact, the changes from the rise of rap music to the decline in turnout are some combination of two very different types of social change. It is not unusual to change their tastes and habits in a generation. A sort of social change can occur quickly. The tastes and habits of millions of Americans, young and old, changed in the 1990s, the automotive industry, and it can be transformed in a different way. Sometimes we call this type of change "cultural change," detectable within each age cohort.

From the end of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth virtually all African Americans (along with some poor whites) in southern states were prevented from voting by poll taxes, literacy tests, fraud, and violence. This Jim Crow disenfranchisement of southern blacks in the 1890s decimated turnout in the South and artificially depressed the national average for the next seventy years. Since most standard measures of turnout lump those disenfranchised millions with other nonvoters, those measures understate the effective turnout during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century among Americans who were free to vote.⁴

With the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, millions of newly enfranchised men and women in the South were able for the first time in the twentieth century to exercise the right to vote. This influx of new voters partially masked the decline in turnout among the rest of the American electorate.⁵ In effect, American national turnout figures took credit for the inclusion of southern blacks in the electorate, obscuring the fact that fewer and fewer of the rest of us who had had the right to vote all along are now actually exercising it.

Outside the South the slide in electoral participation since 1960 is, by now, the longest decline in American history, and voting in the 1996 and 1998 elections was substantially lower than in any other presidential and off-year elections in nearly two centuries.⁶ Even within the South, turnout in 1996 was (except for the period of forced disenfranchisement between 1896 and 1964) very nearly the lowest in 164 years. In short, not in nearly two centuries have so many American citizens freely abstained from voting as in the past few years.

Who are these nonvoters, and why are they missing in action? Many explanations have been offered—growing distrust of government, declining party mobilization, fraying social bonds, political dealignment, and many more. Beneath the ups and downs of individual elections, however, virtually all the long-run decline in turnout is due to the gradual replacement of voters who came of age before or during the New Deal and World War II by the generations who came of age later.

Because generational change will be an important theme in our story, we should pause briefly here to consider how social change and generational change are interrelated. As a matter of simple accounting, any social change—from the rise of rap music to the decline of newspapers—is always produced by some combination of two very different processes. The first is for many individuals to change their tastes and habits in a single direction simultaneously. This sort of social change can occur quickly and be reversed just as quickly. If large numbers of Americans, young and old, fall in love with sport utility vehicles, as they did in the 1990s, the automotive marketplace can be quickly transformed, and it can be transformed in a different direction just as quickly. Sociologists sometimes call this type of change “intracohort,” because the change is detectable within each age cohort.

The second sort of social change is slower, more subtle, and harder to reverse. If different generations have different tastes or habits, the social physiology of birth and death will eventually transform society, *even if no individual ever changes*. Much of the change in sexual mores over the last several decades has been of this sort. Relatively few adults changed their views about morality, and most of those who did actually became more conservative. In the aggregate, however, American attitudes toward premarital sex, for example, have been radically liberalized over the last several decades, because a generation with stricter beliefs was gradually replaced by a later generation with more relaxed norms. Sociologists call this type of change "intercohort," because the change is detectable only across different age groups. Precisely because the rhythm of generational change is slower paced, it is more nearly inexorable.⁷

Most social change involves both individual and generational processes. The use of new technology, like the telephone or the Internet, illustrates this sort of mixture. When the innovation is introduced, many people try out the new phone or the new Web browser. As individuals change their behavior, virtually none of the early growth in usage is attributable to generational change. Change is, however, easier for young people, so the immediate impetus for growth is dampened by the ingrained habits of older generations. Many middle-aged Americans today recall how reluctantly their parents picked up the phone for a long-distance call, well after long-distance rates had fallen. Gradually, generational differences became the dominant feature of this social change. Virtually all of the decline in personal letter writing over the past several decades is attributable not to individuals' changing their habits, but to the replacement of one generation accustomed to communicating with distant friends and relatives in writing by a younger generation more accustomed to picking up the phone.⁸

The distinction between intracohort and intercohort change is crucial to understanding what's been happening to turnout in America over the last thirty years. Very little of the net decline in voting is attributable to individual change, and virtually all of it is generational. Throughout their lives and whatever their station in life and their level of political interest, baby boomers and their children have been less likely to vote than their parents and grandparents. As boomers and their children became a larger and larger fraction of the national electorate, the average turnout rate was inexorably driven downward.⁹

This generation gap in civic engagement, as we shall see, is common in American communities these days. It is one reason why the decline in turnout continues so ineluctably, seeming to defy all efforts to reverse it (such as motor voter registration) and why the trend is pervasive, affecting not just presidential politics, but also state and local elections and even voting on bond issues. Whatever the ups and downs of individual candidates and issues, each campaign's efforts to get out the vote must begin at a lower base level, for every year

the Grim Reaper removes another swath of voters from the electorate.

Voting is by a substantial margin the most common form of civic activity, and it embodies the most fundamental principle of democracy. Not to vote is to withdraw from the political process. In the mining pit, voting is an involuntary activity, a change. Compared to demographical change, it is much more likely to be interested in politics, to go to school, to attend community school, to attend demonstrations, and to cooperate with others. It is sometimes hard to tell whether voting encourages volunteering or vice versa, although some research suggests that voting itself encourages volunteering and is hardly a small matter for Americans, with 25 percent or more.¹⁰

On the other hand, in some important ways, voting is a mode of political participation. Based on the evidence, the current forms of participation in American politics are misleading to understand citizen participation. Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady argue that it is misleading to understand citizen participation as a mix of different mix of gratification and a different mix of gratification. . . . [V]oting is simply the most visible symptom of a deeper trouble in the body politic that the voting booth that Americans are in.

POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE and interest in politics are both declining, and for more active forms of involvement. If you are a player and don't care about the game, you are not playing yourself. Encouragingly, Americans are about as likely to know, for example, who their representatives or who their senators are as they were 20 years ago. On the other hand, we are much less likely to know, and since civics knowledge is boosted by education, civics knowledge has not improved at all. Today's graduate in the 1940s.¹²

Roughly every other month from 1960 to 1990, Americans, "Have you recently been to a political meeting?"

the Grim Reaper removes another swath of the most politically engaged generation in the American electorate.

Voting is by a substantial margin the most common form of political activity, and it embodies the most fundamental democratic principle of equality. Not to vote is to withdraw from the political community. Moreover, like the canary in the mining pit, voting is an instructive proxy measure of broader social change. Compared to demographically matched nonvoters, voters are more likely to be interested in politics, to give to charity, to volunteer, to serve on juries, to attend community school board meetings, to participate in public demonstrations, and to cooperate with their fellow citizens on community affairs. It is sometimes hard to tell whether voting causes community engagement or vice versa, although some recent evidence suggests that the act of voting itself encourages volunteering and other forms of good citizenship. So it is hardly a small matter for American democracy when voting rates decline by 25 percent or more.¹⁰

On the other hand, in some important respects voting is not a typical mode of political participation. Based on their exhaustive assessment of different forms of participation in American politics, political scientists Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady conclude that "it is incomplete and misleading to understand citizen participation solely through the vote. . . . Compared with those who engage in various other political acts, voters report a different mix of gratification and a different bundle of issue concerns as being behind their activity. . . . [V]oting is *sui generis*." Declining electoral participation is merely the most visible symptom of a broader disengagement from community life.¹¹ Like a fever, electoral abstention is even more important as a sign of deeper trouble in the body politic than as a malady itself. It is not just from the voting booth that Americans are increasingly AWOL.

POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE and interest in public affairs are critical preconditions for more active forms of involvement. If you don't know the rules of the game and the players and don't care about the outcome, you're unlikely to try playing yourself. Encouragingly, Americans in the aggregate at century's end are about as likely to know, for example, which party controls the House of Representatives or who their senators are as were their grandparents a half century ago. On the other hand, we are much better educated than our grandparents, and since civics knowledge is boosted by formal education, it is surprising that civics knowledge has not improved accordingly. The average college graduate today knows little more about public affairs than did the average high school graduate in the 1940s.¹²

Roughly every other month from 1974 to 1998 Roper pollsters asked Americans, "Have you recently been taking a good deal of interest in current

events and what's happening in the world today, some interest, or not very much interest?" Popular interest in current events naturally tends to rise and fall with what's in the news, so this chart of attention to public affairs looks like the sawtooth traces left by an errant seismograph. Beneath these choppy waves, however, the tide of the public's interest in current events gradually ebbed by roughly 20 percent over this quarter century. Similarly, another long-term series of annual surveys found that political interest steadily slumped by one-fifth between 1975 and 1999.¹³ Scandals and war can still rouse our attention, but generally speaking, fewer Americans follow public affairs now than did a quarter century ago.

Even more worrying are intergenerational differences in political knowledge and interest. Like the decline in voting turnout, to which it is linked, the slow slump in interest in politics and current events is due to the replacement of an older generation that was relatively interested in public affairs by a younger generation that is relatively uninterested. Among both young and old, of course, curiosity about public affairs continues to fluctuate in response to daily headlines, but the base level of interest is gradually fading, as an older generation of news and politics junkies passes slowly from the scene. The fact that the decline is generation-specific, rather than nationwide, argues against the view that public affairs have simply become boring in some objective sense.

The post-baby boom generations—roughly speaking, men and women who were born after 1964 and thus came of age in the 1980s and 1990s—are substantially less knowledgeable about public affairs, despite the proliferation of sources of information. Even in the midst of national election campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, these young people were about a third less likely than their elders to know, for instance, which political party controlled the House of Representatives.¹⁴

Today's generation gap in political knowledge does not reflect some permanent tendency for the young to be less well informed than their elders but is instead a recent development. From the earliest opinion polls in the 1940s to the mid-1970s, younger people were at least as well informed as their elders were, but that is no longer the case. This news and information gap, affecting not just politics, but even things like airline crashes, terrorism, and financial news, first opened up with the boomers in the 1970s and widened considerably with the advent of the X generation. Daily newspaper readership among people under thirty-five dropped from two-thirds in 1965 to one-third in 1990, at the same time that TV news viewership in this same age group fell from 52 percent to 41 percent. Today's under-thirties pay less attention to the news and know less about current events than their elders do today or than people their age did two or three decades ago.¹⁵

• • •

VOTING IN AMERICA is down by about one-fifth, over the last two decades. Interest in politics and current events are declining. Americans campaign no less today than three or four decades ago, but in the elections of the 1990s, as many of us tried to persuade someone else to vote, we were less likely to vote ourselves. But this surface stability of interest in today's older generation are slightly higher than were their predecessors four decades ago. If today's older generation is more interested than youths were in the 1950s, civic engagement, if it persists, will flourish in the future.

Voting and following politics are not the only ways to participate in politics. In fact, they are not, strictly speaking, because they can be done utterly alone. But there is some thinning of the ranks of political participation in a stadium where the younger generation is taking seats, following the action and cheering. How about the grassroots gladiators of politics—posting signs, attending campaign rallies, canvassing on trends in partisan participation?

On the positive side of the ledger, the energy of these young people themselves are as strong as ever. At thirty to forty years these organizations are still in their professional. During presidential campaigns in the 1970s, more and more voters reported that they were active in major political parties. After a slump in the 1980s, vitality soared nearly to an all-time high in the 1990s ("vote") activities blossomed.¹⁷

Party finances, too, skyrocketed. In the 1980s and 1986, for example, the Democrats won the election of inflation, while the Republicans won the election of inflation. More money meant more staff, more candidate recruitment and training, and more political organizations, partisan and nonpartisan. The number of political organizations exploded over the last two decades. Nearly a new record by this standard of organizational growth has clearly tended to accelerate the "industry" (see figure 2) exhibits an exponential growth. The business of politics in America has become a big business.¹⁸

Yet viewed by the "consumers" of politics, the health of vigorous health seems a bizarre paradox.

SO VOTING IN AMERICA is down by about a quarter, and interest in public affairs by about one-fifth, over the last two or three decades. Not all measures of political interest are declining. Americans seem to follow national election campaigns no less today than three or four decades ago. During the national elections of the 1990s, as many of us said that we "talked about politics" or tried to persuade someone else how to vote as people did in the 1950s and 1960s. But this surface stability conceals a growing generation gap. Members of today's older generation are slightly *more* interested in electoral campaigns than were their predecessors four decades ago, while youths today are *less* interested than youths were in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁶ This generation gap in civic engagement, if it persists, will further depress political participation in the future.

Voting and following politics are relatively undemanding forms of participation. In fact, they are not, strictly speaking, forms of social capital at all, because they can be done utterly alone. As we have seen, these measures show some thinning of the ranks of political spectators, particularly at the end of the stadium where the younger generation sits. But most of the fans are still in their seats, following the action and chatting about the antics of the star players. How about the grassroots gladiators who volunteer to work for political parties, posting signs, attending campaign rallies, and the like? What is the evidence on trends in partisan participation?

On the positive side of the ledger, one might argue, party organizations themselves are as strong as ever at both state and local levels. Over the last thirty to forty years these organizations have become bigger, richer, and more professional. During presidential campaigns from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, more and more voters reported being contacted by one or both of the major political parties. After a slump from 1980 to 1992, this measure of party vitality soared nearly to an all-time high in 1996, as GOTV ("Get out the vote") activities blossomed.¹⁷

Party finances, too, skyrocketed in the 1970s and 1980s. Between 1976 and 1986, for example, the Democrats' intake rose at more than twice the rate of inflation, while the Republicans' rose at more than four times the rate of inflation. More money meant more staff, more polling, more advertising, better candidate recruitment and training, and more party outreach. The number of political organizations, partisan and nonpartisan, with regular paid staff has exploded over the last two decades. Nearly every election year since 1980 has set a new record by this standard of organizational proliferation, and the pace of growth has clearly tended to accelerate. The growth chart for this political "industry" (see figure 2) exhibits an ebullience more familiar in Silicon Valley. The business of politics in America has never been healthier, or so it would seem.¹⁸

Yet viewed by the "consumers" in the political marketplace, this picture of vigorous health seems a bizarre parody. The rate of party identification—the

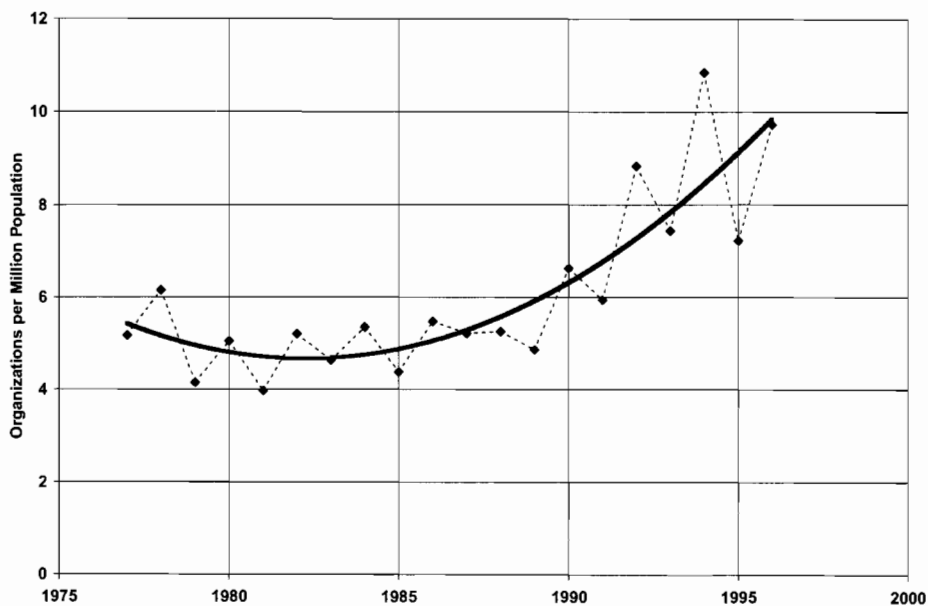


Figure 2: Political Organizations with Regular Paid Staff, 1977-1996

voter's sense of commitment to her own team—fell from more than 75 percent around 1960 to less than 65 percent in the late 1990s. Despite a partial recovery in the late 1980s, at century's end party "brand loyalty" remained well below the levels of the 1950s and early 1960s. What is more, this form of political engagement is significantly lower in more recent cohorts, so that as older, more partisan voters depart from the electorate to be replaced by younger independents, the net attachment to the parties may continue to decline.¹⁹ Again, the Grim Reaper is silently at work, lowering political involvement.

Beyond party identification, at the grassroots level attending a campaign meeting or volunteering to work for a political party has become much rarer over the last thirty years. From the 1950s to the 1960s growing numbers of Americans worked for a political party during election campaigns, ringing doorbells, stuffing envelopes, and the like. Since 1968, however, that form of political engagement has plunged, reaching an all-time low for a presidential election year in 1996. Attendance at political meetings and campaign rallies has followed a similar trajectory over the last half century—up from the 1950s to the 1960s, instability in the 1970s, and general decline since the 1980s.²⁰ (Figure 3 charts these trends.) In short, while the parties themselves are better financed and more professionally staffed than ever, fewer and fewer Americans participate in partisan political activities.

How can we reconcile these two conflicting pictures—organizational

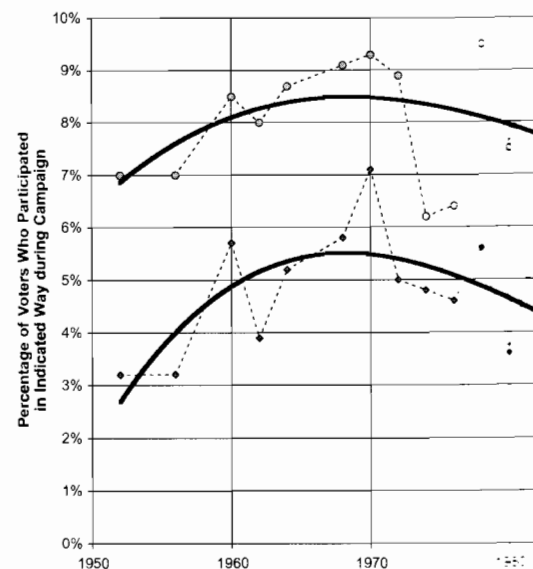


Figure 3: Citizen Participation in Campaign

health, as seen from the parties, and organizations' side? One clue to this paradox is the fact that fewer and fewer Americans are contacted by a party in the latest campaign. The number of Americans who worked for a party in that same campaign has also declined. The twentieth century witnessed an accelerating trend toward more and more contacts but fewer and fewer party workers. By 1996, the number of party workers was less than the equivalent figure in 1968.²¹

At first blush one might admire the growth of the professionalizing industry. Each "worker" seems to be doing more and more "contacts." In reality, however, this trend is evidence of the increasing commercialization of politics in America. The trend is, in fact, less and less likely to be a visible, identifiable, and more and more likely to be an anonymous, impersonal force. Less and less party activity involves volunteerism and partisanship. More and more involves the skilled use of effective mass marketing. This trend goes hand in hand with the growth of direct-mail fund-raising and professionalized campaign reform to channel financial support to parties. In the period that citizen involvement in party activity was declining, half, spending on presidential nomination campaigns increased from \$35 million in 1964 to over \$700 million in 1996. The increase even in constant dollars. The bottom line is that the

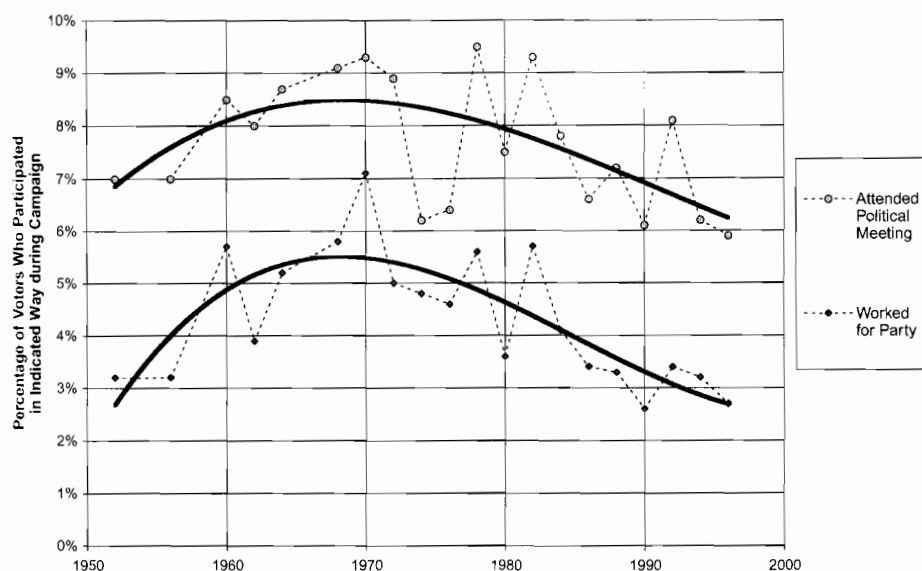


Figure 3: Citizen Participation in Campaign Activities, 1952–1996

health, as seen from the parties, and organizational decay, as seen from the voters' side? One clue to this paradox is the ratio of voters who say they have been *contacted* by a party in the latest campaign to voters who say that they have *worked* for a party in that same campaign. The last three decades of the twentieth century witnessed an accelerating trend toward more and more voter contacts but fewer and fewer party workers. By 1996 this ratio was 2.5 times greater than the equivalent figure in 1968.²¹

At first blush one might admire the growing "productivity" in this flourishing industry. Each "worker" seems to be producing more and more "contacts." In reality, however, this trend is evidence of the professionalization and commercialization of politics in America. The "contacts" that voters report are, in fact, less and less likely to be a visit from a neighborhood party worker and more and more likely to be an anonymous call from a paid phone bank. Less and less party activity involves volunteer collaboration among committed partisans. More and more involves the skilled (and expensive) techniques of effective mass marketing. This trend goes hand in hand with the explosive growth of direct-mail fund-raising and political action committees (PACs) formed to channel financial support to party organizations. During the same period that citizen involvement in party activities was slumping by more than half, spending on presidential nomination and election campaigns exploded from \$35 million in 1964 to over \$700 million in 1996, a nearly fivefold increase even in constant dollars. The bottom line in the political industry is this:

Financial capital—the wherewithal for mass marketing—has steadily replaced social capital—that is, grassroots citizen networks—as the coin of the realm.²²

On reflection, then, the contrast between increasing party organizational vitality and declining voter involvement is perfectly intelligible. Since their “consumers” are tuning out from politics, parties have to work harder and spend much more, competing furiously to woo votes, workers, and donations, and to do that they need a (paid) organizational infrastructure. Party-as-organization and party-in-government have become stronger, even as the public has grown less attached to the parties.²³ If we think of politics as an industry, we might delight in its new “labor-saving efficiency,” but if we think of politics as democratic deliberation, to leave people out is to miss the whole point of the exercise.

Participation in politics is increasingly based on the checkbook, as money replaces time. While membership in a political club was cut in half between 1967 and 1987, the fraction of the public that contributed financially to a political campaign nearly doubled. “Nationalization and professionalization have redefined the role of citizen activist as, increasingly, a writer of checks and letters,” conclude political scientist Verba and his colleagues. “Whatever puzzles there may be concerning the trajectory of participation over the past few decades, there was an unambiguous increase in the amount of money donated to politics over the period from the late 1970s to the late 1980s.”²⁴ There may be nearly as many fans in the political stadium nowadays, but they are not watching an amateur or even a semipro match. Whether the slick professional game they have become accustomed to watching is worth the increasingly high admission price is another matter.

SO FAR we have been considering political participation from the important but limited perspective of partisan and electoral activities. For most Americans, however, national election campaigns occupy only a small part of their time and attention. What about trends in political participation outside the context of national elections, especially at the local level? Until recently we lacked any systematic evidence of long-term trends in how involved Americans are in community affairs. However, a recently retrieved archive of unparalleled depth enables us to track in great detail a wide range of civic activities.

Roughly every month from 1973 through 1994 the Roper survey organization presented thousands of Americans with a simple checklist of a dozen different civic activities—from signing a petition or attending a public meeting to working for a political party or running for office.²⁵ “Which, if any, of these things have you happened to do in the past year?” the pollsters asked. Some of the activities are relatively common: each year across these two decades roughly one in three of us has signed a petition and roughly one in six has attended a public meeting on town or school affairs. On the other hand, some

items on the checklist are quite rare. For example, fewer than one in a hundred has run for public office in the past year, and fewer than more than four hundred thousand Americans have ever written a letter to Congress for compiling detailed information on the political scene over the past two decades.

How did patterns of civic and political participation change over the past two decades? The answer is simple: *The frequency of civic and political involvement measured in the Roper survey has declined sharply since the 1970s*. The most common—petition signing—to the least common—running for office—Americans are playing virtually every aspect of civic and political life less frequently than we did two decades ago.

Consider first the new evidence on political participation. (Figure 4 charts these trends.) Americans are now roughly half as likely to work for a political party or to give a political speech in the 1990s as in the 1970s. In the 1970s, national campaigns were for millions of Americans a part of national deliberation. Campaigning was a serious business, not merely witnessed. Now for almost all Americans, campaigning is something that happens around us, a part of everyday life, a fleeting image on a television screen, a distant sound from these campaign activities, a distant sound. The dropout rate in the voting booth itself is

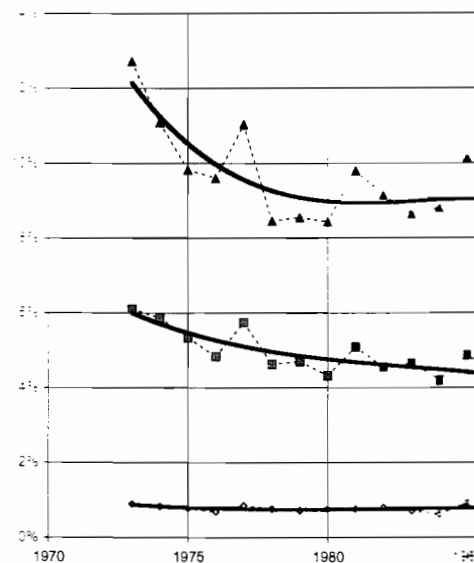


Figure 4: Trends in Civic Engagement 1970-1994

items on the checklist are quite rare. For example, fewer than one American in a hundred has run for public office in the past twelve months. Altogether these more than four hundred thousand interviews provide exceptionally rich raw material for compiling detailed civic statistics for Americans over more than two decades.

How did patterns of civic and political participation change over this period? The answer is simple: *The frequency of virtually every form of community involvement measured in the Roper polls declined significantly, from the most common—petition signing—to the least common—running for office.* Americans are playing virtually every aspect of the civic game less frequently today than we did two decades ago.

Consider first the new evidence on trends in partisan and campaign activities. (Figure 4 charts these trends.)²⁶ In round numbers, Americans were roughly half as likely to work for a political party or attend a political rally or speech in the 1990s as in the 1970s. Barely two decades ago election campaigns were for millions of Americans an occasion for active participation in national deliberation. Campaigning was something we did, not something we merely witnessed. Now for almost all Americans, an election campaign is something that happens around us, a grating element in the background noise of everyday life, a fleeting image on a TV screen. Strikingly, the dropout rate from these campaign activities (about 50 percent) is even greater than the dropout rate in the voting booth itself (25 percent).

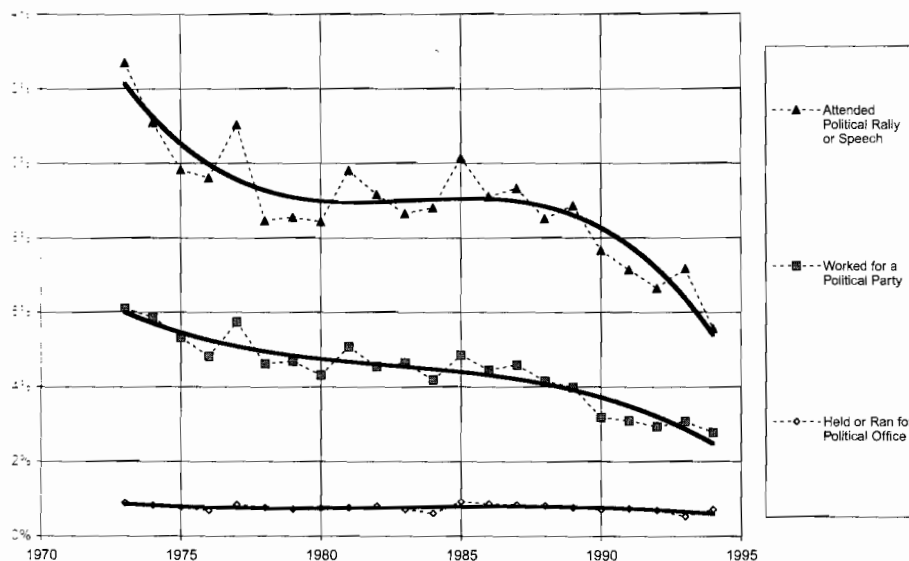


Figure 4: Trends in Civic Engagement I: Partisan Activities

The new evidence also includes a much more demanding measure of political involvement—that is, actually running for or holding office. So few people ever become this involved politically that it takes a social microscope like that provided by the Roper archive to discover that even this intense form of participation has faded. Over the last two decades the number of office seekers in any year at all levels in the American body politic—from school board to town council—shrank by perhaps 15 percent.²⁷ As a result of this decline, Americans lost more than a quarter million candidates annually to choose among. It is impossible to know what price we paid collectively for the loss of those potential grassroots leaders—not only in terms of talent and creativity, but also in terms of competitive pressure on incumbent officeholders—but it is hard to believe that there was no loss at all.

That Americans in recent years have deserted party politics is perhaps not astonishing news, for antiparty sentiments had become a commonplace of punditry even before Ross Perot rode the antiparty bandwagon to national prominence in 1992. But how about communal forms of activity, like attending local meetings, serving local organizations, and taking part in “good government” activities? Here the new evidence is startling, for involvement in these everyday forms of community life has dwindled as rapidly as has partisan and electoral participation. (The relevant evidence is summarized in figure 5.) The pattern is broadly similar to that for campaign activities—a slump in the late 1970s, a pause in the early 1980s, and then a renewed and intensified decline from the late 1980s into the 1990s.

Between 1973 and 1994 the number of Americans who attended even one public meeting on town or school affairs in the previous year was cut by 40 percent. Over the same two decades the ranks of those who had served as an officer or a committee member for a local club or organization—*any* local club or organization—were thinned by an identical 40 percent. Over these twenty years the number of members of “some group interested in better government” fell by one-third.²⁸

Like battlefield casualties dryly reported from someone else’s distant war, these unadorned numbers scarcely convey the decimation of American community life they represent. In round numbers every single percentage-point drop represents two million fewer Americans involved in some aspect of community life every year. So, the numbers imply, we now have sixteen million fewer participants in public meetings about local affairs, eight million fewer committee members, eight million fewer local organizational leaders, and three million fewer men and women organized to work for better government than we would have had if Americans had stayed as involved in community affairs as we were in the mid-1970s.

Keep in mind, too, that these surveys invited people to mention *any* local organization—not only “old-fashioned” garden clubs and Shriners lodges with their odd hats, but also trendy upstarts, like environmental action committees

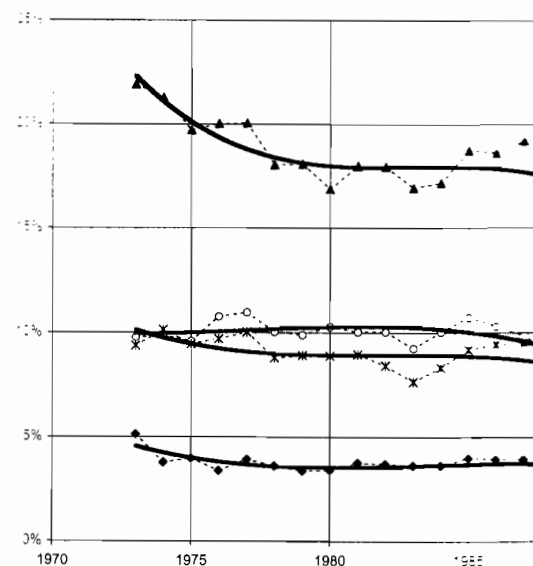


Figure 5: Trends in Civic Engagement II: Community Involvement

and local branches of the antiabortion movement. They had attended *any* public meeting on town or school affairs in the previous year—not merely droning sessions of the town council, but also protests against condom distribution in the school, or the local recycling committee. Year after year, fewer and fewer Americans took part in deliberations that constitute grassroots democracy. The erosion of America’s civic infrastructure simply evaporated in the mid-1990s.

Finally, the Roper surveys also shed light on the decline of public expression—signing petitions, writing letters to the editor, and making a speech. Once a common form of political activity, it has become less common over these two decades. (This is most visible in the case of petitions, the most common form of political activity measured.) This decline is also clear in the case of letters to the editor. The chart is essentially flat for the first half of the period, then declines downward in the second half. Much smaller in absolute terms, the claim to have given a speech or written a letter to the editor in a newspaper or magazine within the previous year shows a similar downward trend at this degree of magnification, though the decline is less sharp.

The changes in American political participation

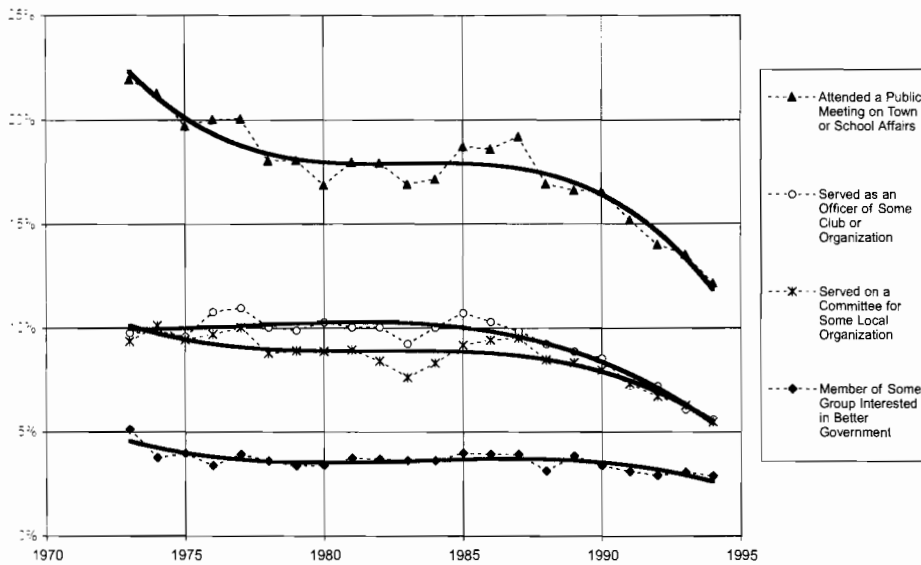


Figure 5: Trends in Civic Engagement II: Communal Participation

and local branches of the antiabortion movement. People were asked whether they had attended *any* public meeting on town or school affairs in the last year—not merely droning sessions of the planning board, but also angry protests against condom distribution in the high school or debates about curbside recycling. Year after year, fewer and fewer of us took part in the everyday deliberations that constitute grassroots democracy. In effect, more than a third of America's civic infrastructure simply evaporated between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s.

Finally, the Roper surveys also shed light on trends in various forms of public expression—signing petitions, writing Congress, writing an article or a letter to the editor, and making a speech. Once again, each of these types of activity has become less common over these twenty years. (See figure 6 for details.) This is most visible in the case of petition signing, because it is the single most common form of political activity measured in the Roper surveys, but the decline is also clear in the case of letters to Congress. In both cases, however, the chart is essentially flat for the first half of this period and then steadily downward in the second half. Much smaller proportions of the population claim to have given a speech or written a letter to the editor or an article for a newspaper or magazine within the previous year, so clear trends are harder to spot at this degree of magnification, though here too the general tendency is downward.²⁹

The changes in American political participation traced in the Roper

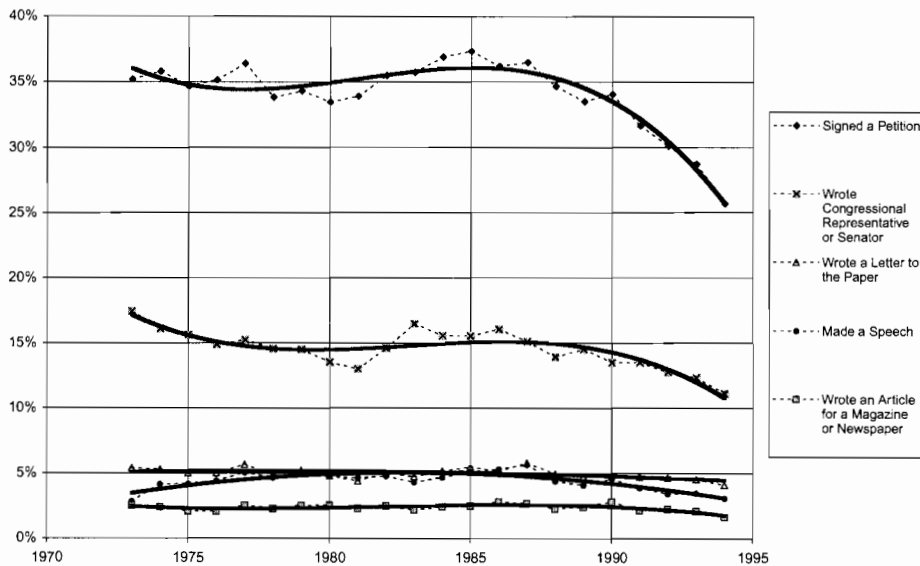


Figure 6: Trends in Civic Engagement III: Public Expression

archive are not identical across all forms of involvement. In some cases, such as attending a public meeting or a political rally, the trend is more or less steadily downward across the two decades, but in other cases, such as signing a petition, the drop is concentrated in the latter half of the period. And in some cases, such as running for office or writing an article for a magazine or newspaper, the decline is quite modest. Across the entire repertoire, however, the decline appears to have accelerated after 1985. Across the twelve separate activities, the average decline was 10 percent between 1973–74 and 1983–84, compared with 24 percent between 1983–84 and 1993–94.

The fraction of the American public utterly uninvolved in any of these civic activities rose by nearly one-third over these two decades. In 1973 most Americans engaged in at least one of these forms of civic involvement every year. By 1994 *most did not engage in any*. Thirty-two million fewer American adults were involved in community affairs in the mid-1990s than would have been involved at the proportional rate of two decades earlier.

We can get a better clue as to the implications of this loss of community life by arraying the dozen activities according to the degree of decline. (See table 1.) Strikingly, the forms of participation that have withered most noticeably reflect organized activities at the community level. The verbs describing these modes of involvement in the top half of the table reflect action in cooperation with others: “serve,” “work,” “attend.” Each of these activities can be undertaken only if others in the community are also active. Conversely, the ac-

tivities (in the bottom half of the table) are, for the most part, actions that one can undertake on one's own. These activities merely require a pen or a piece of paper. The first activity in this section of the list is “write.”

In other words, the more that one can do on one's own, the greater the drop-off in my participation. If I am a civic dropout, I can still write or sign. On the other hand, if I am not a “committee,” and if no one else is, I cannot “attend.” In other words, it is precisely those forms of civic life that require coordination problems and free riding—those activities that most clearly *declined* most rapidly.³¹

One politically important consequence of this decline in behavior, like serving on committees, is that it reduces the “diverse” forms of behavior, like writing letters, that are available but only one to express himself. Citizens can no longer engage broader public interests, whereas the more active and correspondent to more narrow interests, which are needed to counterpoise moments of crisis and to resolve differences.

The changing pattern of civic participation

Table 1: Trends in political and community activities

served as an officer of some club or organization
worked for a political party
served on a committee for some local organization
attended a public meeting on town or school
attended a political rally or speech
participated in at least one of these twelve activities
made a speech
wrote congressman or senator
signed a petition
was a member of some “better government” organization
held or ran for political office
wrote a letter to the paper
wrote an article for a magazine or newspaper

Source: Roper Social and Political Trends surveys, 1973–94

tivities (in the bottom half of the table) that have declined most slowly are, for the most part, actions that one can undertake as an individual. Indeed, most of these activities merely require a pen or a keyboard. for the most common verb in this section of the list is "write."

In other words, the more that my activities depend on the actions of others, the greater the drop-off in my participation.³⁰ Even if everyone else in my town is a civic dropout, I can still write my congressman—or even run for Congress myself. On the other hand, if I'm the only member of a committee, it's not a "committee," and if no one else comes to a meeting on the bond issue, it is not a "meeting," even if I show up. Knowing that, I may well back out, too. In other words, it is precisely those forms of civic engagement most vulnerable to coordination problems and free riding—those activities that brought citizens *together*, those activities that most clearly embody social capital—that have declined most rapidly.³¹

One politically important consequence is that "cooperative" forms of behavior, like serving on committees, have declined more rapidly than "expressive" forms of behavior, like writing letters. It takes (at least) two to cooperate, but only one to express himself. Collaborative forms of political involvement engage broader public interests, whereas expressive forms are more individualistic and correspond to more narrowly defined interests. Any political system needs to counterpoise moments for articulating grievances and moments for resolving differences.

The changing pattern of civic participation in American communities

Table 1: Trends in political and community participation

	Relative change 1973-74 to 1993-94
served as an officer of some club or organization	-42%
worked for a political party	-42%
served on a committee for some local organization	-39%
attended a public meeting on town or school affairs	-35%
attended a political rally or speech	-34%
<i>participated in at least one of these twelve activities</i>	-25%
made a speech	-24%
wrote congressman or senator	-23%
signed a petition	-22%
was a member of some "better government" group	-19%
held or ran for political office	-16%
wrote a letter to the paper	-14%
wrote an article for a magazine or newspaper	-10%

Source: Roper Social and Political Trends surveys, 1973-1994

over the last two decades has shifted the balance in the larger society between the articulation of grievances and the aggregation of coalitions to address those grievances. In this sense, this disjunctive pattern of decline—cooperation falling more rapidly than self-expression—may well have encouraged the single-issue blare and declining civility of contemporary political discourse.³²

These declines in participation appear all along the spectrum from hyper-activists to civic slugs. The fraction of the public who engaged in *none* of these dozen forms of civic participation rose by more than one-third over this period (from 46 percent in 1973 to 64 percent in 1994), while the band of civic activists who engaged in at least three different types of activity was cut nearly in half (from 20 percent to 11 percent). Moreover, these trends appear consistently in all sections of the population and all areas of the country—men and women, blacks and whites, central cities, suburbs, and rural areas, Northeast, South, Midwest, and West, upper class and lower class, and so on.

In absolute terms, the declines are greatest among the better educated. Among the college educated, attendance at public meetings was nearly halved from 34 percent to 18 percent. On the other hand, because the less educated were less involved to begin with, in relative terms their rates of participation have been even harder hit. Attendance at public meetings fell from 20 percent to 8 percent among those whose education ended in high school and from 7 percent to 3 percent among those who attended only elementary school. The last several decades have witnessed a serious deterioration of community involvement among Americans from all walks of life.

Let's sum up what we've learned about trends in political participation. On the positive side of the ledger, Americans today score about as well on a civics test as our parents and grandparents did, though our self-congratulation should be restrained, since we have on average four more years of formal schooling than they had.³³ Moreover, at election time we are no less likely than they were to talk politics or express interest in the campaign. On the other hand, since the mid-1960s, the weight of the evidence suggests, despite the rapid rise in levels of education Americans have become perhaps 10–15 percent less likely to voice our views publicly by running for office or writing Congress or the local newspaper, 15–20 percent less interested in politics and public affairs, roughly 25 percent less likely to vote, roughly 35 percent less likely to attend public meetings, both partisan and nonpartisan, and roughly 40 percent less engaged in party politics and indeed in political and civic organizations of all sorts. We remain, in short, reasonably well-informed spectators of public affairs, but many fewer of us actually partake in the game.

Might all this be explained as a natural consequence of rising public alienation from politics and declining confidence in political activity of all sorts? Perhaps the trends we have reviewed thus far simply reflect the fact that more Americans than ever before are “turned off” and “tuned out” from politics. Certainly political unhappiness of all sorts has mushroomed during these

past three decades. Americans in the mid-1990s expressed less confidence in the benevolence and responsiveness of their government than in the mid-1960s. One in four agreed then with sentiments like “I don’t like the way they’re running say in government” and “Public officials don’t care what the people think.” Three in four said that you *could* “trust the government to do what is right all or most of the time.” When asked about their confidence in themselves, Americans in the 1960s felt politically competent.

Such views nowadays seem antiquated. In the 1990s roughly three in four agreed with proportions agreeing and disagreeing with the government have been reversed. In the 1990s roughly three in four agreed that the government should do what is right most of the time. A dramatic transformation: In April 1966, with the Vietnam War raging in Cleveland, Chicago, and Atlanta, 66 percent of Americans agreed that “the people running the country don’t really care what the people think.” In December 1997, in the midst of the longest peacetime economic expansion in more than two generations, 57 percent of Americans agreed with that view.³⁴ Today’s cynical views may or may not reflect a return to the Pollyannaish views of the early sixties, but the cynicism is a far cry from the confidence necessary to motivate and sustain political participation.

So perhaps because of the dysfunctionality of the political system and the absence of large, compelling collective goals, Americans have turned our energies away from conventional politics in search of more effective channels. Whether the search for more effective channels for political affairs is as straightforward as that depends on one’s view of the trends in social and civic involvement.

past three decades. Americans in the mid-1960s were strikingly confident in the benevolence and responsiveness of their political institutions. Only about one in four agreed then with sentiments like "People like me don't have much say in government" and "Public officials don't care what people like me think." Three in four said that you *could* "trust the government in Washington to do what is right all or most of the time." Whether or not they were fooling themselves, Americans in the 1960s felt politically effective.

Such views nowadays seem antiquated or naive. In virtually every case the proportions agreeing and disagreeing with such ideas essentially have been reversed. In the 1990s roughly three in four Americans *didn't* trust the government to do what is right most of the time. A single comparison captures the transformation: In April 1966, with the Vietnam War raging and race riots in Cleveland, Chicago, and Atlanta, 66 percent of Americans *rejected* the view that "the people running the country don't really care what happens to you." In December 1997, in the midst of the longest period of peace and prosperity in more than two generations, 57 percent of Americans *endorsed* that same view.³⁴ Today's cynical views may or may not be more accurate than the Pollyannaish views of the early sixties, but they undermine the political confidence necessary to motivate and sustain political involvement.

So perhaps because of the dysfunctional ugliness of contemporary politics and the absence of large, compelling collective projects, we have redirected our energies away from conventional politics into less formal, more voluntary, more effective channels. Whether the story of our disengagement from public affairs is as straightforward as that depends on what we find when we turn next to trends in social and civic involvement.

CHAPTER 3

Civic Participation

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. . . . Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.¹

THESE LINES from Alexis de Tocqueville, a perceptive French visitor to early-nineteenth-century America, are often quoted by social scientists because they capture an important and enduring fact about our country. Today, as 170 years ago, Americans are more likely to be involved in voluntary associations than are citizens of most other nations; only the small nations of northern Europe outrank us as joiners.²

The ingenuity of Americans in creating organizations knows no bounds. Wandering through the *World Almanac* list of 2,380 groups with some national visibility from the Aaron Burr Society to the Zionist Organization of America, one discovers such intriguing bodies as the Grand United Order of Antelopes, the Elvis Presley Burning Love Fan Club, the Polish Army Veterans Association of America, the Southern Appalachian Dulcimer Association, and the National Association for Outlaw and Lawman History. Some of these groups may be the organizational equivalent of vanity press publications, but surveys of American communities over the decades have uncovered an impressive organizational vitality at the grassroots level. Many Americans today are actively in-

volved in educational or school service groups, work-related groups, such as labor unions and professional associations, religious groups (in addition to churches and synagogues), and social clubs, neighborhood or homeowners groups, and many other organizations. Generally speaking, this same array of associations has characterized Americans since at least the late nineteenth century.

Official membership in formal organizations is not always a measure of social capital, but it is usually regarded as a useful proxy for civic engagement. What can we learn from organizational membership trends? Americans' participation in the organized sector has increased steadily. Speaking, American voluntary associations fall into three broad categories: community based, church based, and government based. The most heterogeneous, all those social, civic, and cultural organizations—everything from B'nai B'rith to the Boy Scouts.

The record appears to show an impressive growth of voluntary associations over the last three decades. The number of organizations of national scope listed in the *World Almanac* more than doubled from 10,299 to 22,901 between 1960 and 1990. The count of the increase in population during the same period suggests that the number of organizations per capita has increased by more than one-third over three decades (see figure 7). Excited by this fact, some observers have hastily, of a "participation revolution" in American society. But the impression of a rapid growth in American participation is both confirmed and qualified—by numerous recent surveys of groups represented in Washington since the 1960s, and by the ever more groups speaking (or claiming to speak) for the interests of citizens.⁴

In fact, relatively few of the tens of thousands of new organizations whose proliferation is traced in figure 7 have large memberships. Many, such as the Animal Nutrition Research Society, the American Society on Uniform Traffic Accident Statistics, and the American Society of Traffic Engineers, have no individual members at all. In 1960, David Horton Smith, found that the *Encyclopedia of Associations* actually had no entries for groups with membership of national associations in the United States of more than a thousand. A comparable study of associations in 1990, the *Encyclopedia of Associations* had found a median membership of 100 members.⁵ In other words, over this quarter century the number of associations roughly tripled, but the average size of the largest associations one-tenth as large—more groups, but most of them small. The organizational eruption between the 1960s and the 1990s was one of letterheads, not a boom of grassroots participation.

Also revealing is the increasing percentage of organizations that are

volved in educational or school service groups like PTAs, recreational groups, work-related groups, such as labor unions and professional organizations, religious groups (in addition to churches), youth groups, service and fraternal clubs, neighborhood or homeowners groups, and other charitable organizations. Generally speaking, this same array of organizational affiliations has characterized Americans since at least the 1950s.³

Official membership in formal organizations is only one facet of social capital, but it is usually regarded as a useful barometer of community involvement. What can we learn from organizational records and social surveys about Americans' participation in the organized life of their communities? Broadly speaking, American voluntary associations may be divided into three categories: community based, church based, and work based. Let us begin with the most heterogeneous, all those social, civic, and leisure groups that are community based—everything from B'nai B'rith to the Parent-Teacher Association.

The record appears to show an impressive increase in the sheer number of voluntary associations over the last three decades. The number of nonprofit organizations of national scope listed in the *Encyclopedia of Associations* more than doubled from 10,299 to 22,901 between 1968 and 1997. Even taking account of the increase in population during this period, the number of national organizations per capita has increased by nearly two-thirds over the last three decades (see figure 7). Excited by this fact, some observers speak, perhaps too hastily, of a "participation revolution" in American politics and society. This impression of a rapid growth in American organizational life is reinforced—but also qualified—by numerous recent studies of the explosion of interest groups represented in Washington since the 1960s. What these studies reveal is ever more groups speaking (or claiming to speak) on behalf of ever more categories of citizens.⁴

In fact, relatively few of the tens of thousands of nonprofit associations whose proliferation is traced in figure 7 actually have mass membership. Many, such as the Animal Nutrition Research Council, the National Conference on Uniform Traffic Accident Statistics, and the National Slag Association, have no individual members at all. A close student of associations in America, David Horton Smith, found that barely half of the groups in the 1988 *Encyclopedia of Associations* actually had individual members. The median membership of national associations in the 1988 *Encyclopedia* was only one thousand. A comparable study of associations represented in the 1962 *Encyclopedia of Associations* had found a median size of roughly ten thousand members.⁵ In other words, over this quarter century the number of voluntary associations roughly tripled, but the average membership seems to be roughly one-tenth as large—more groups, but most of them much smaller. The organizational eruption between the 1960s and the 1990s represented a proliferation of letterheads, not a boom of grassroots participation.

Also revealing is the increasing geographic concentration of national

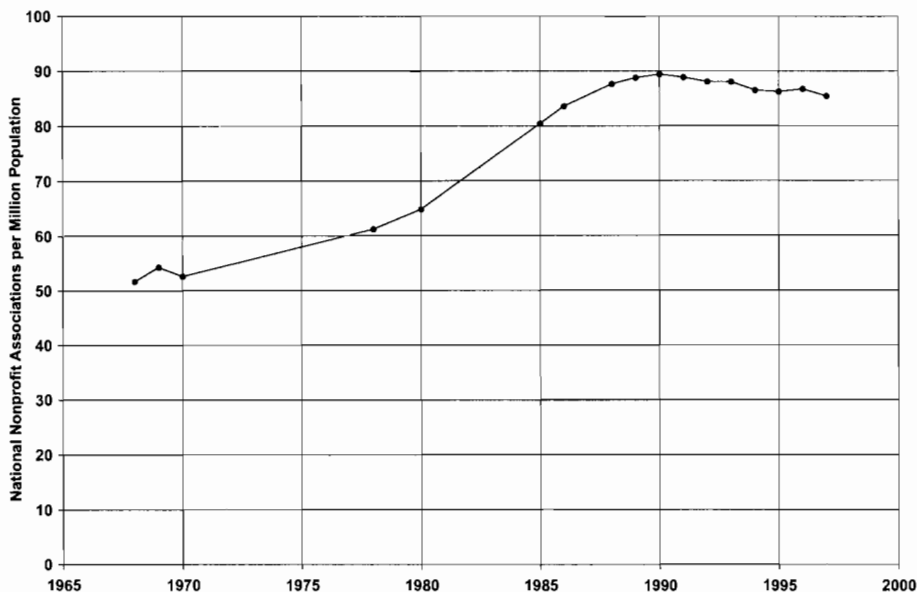


Figure 7: The Growth of National Nonprofit Associations, 1968–1997

headquarters. Membership organizations with local chapters and substantial grassroots activity are headquartered in places like Irving, Texas (Boy Scouts); New Haven, Connecticut (Knights of Columbus); Indianapolis, Indiana (American Legion and Kiwanis); Birmingham, Alabama (Civitan); Tulsa, Oklahoma (Jaycees); Oak Brook, Illinois (Lions Clubs); St. Louis, Missouri (Optimists); Baltimore, Maryland (NAACP); Kansas City, Missouri (the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Camp Fire Boys and Girls); Atlanta, Georgia (Boys and Girls Clubs); or even New York City (Hadassah and Alcoholics Anonymous). These venerable organizations are headquartered near important concentrations of their members.

The headquarters of the nation's largest organization and one of the most rapidly growing, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), however, is not in Florida or California or Arizona (where its constituents are concentrated), but at 6th and E Streets in Washington, a few minutes' walk from Capitol Hill. Similarly, the most visible newcomers to the national associational scene are headquartered within ten blocks of the intersection of 14th and K Streets in Washington: the Children's Defense Fund, Common Cause, the National Organization for Women, the National Wildlife Federation, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Wilderness Society, the National Right to Life Committee, and Zero Population Growth. The "new asso-

ciationism" is almost entirely a denizen of the new organizations are professional, not member-centered, locally based associations expressing policy views in the national political arena. The particular connection *among* individual members is weak.

Though these new groups often depend on voluntary citizens and may speak faithfully for them, they are not composed of citizen members in the same sense as a book reading group or a fraternal organization. The defining characteristic of a capital-creating formal organization is that its members can meet one another. Of eight national organizations founded in the early 1970s (including virtually all such organizations founded from the Agribusiness Accountability Foundation to the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Farm and Food Lobby and Young Americans for Freedom), only 25 percent had local chapters, and all, and another 12 percent had no more than one chapter, or an average of one for every two states. By contrast, the AARP had as many as one hundred local chapters in some states. For example, there are seven thousand local Rotary chapters in the United States; local "old-fashioned," chapter-based organizations like the AARP alone has nearly twice as many chapters as the new organizations combined.

Another survey of 205 national organizations found that less than one-third of them had chapters in more than one state. Of those that had chapters, only 10 percent had more than one chapter. Moreover, the survey found that the more chapters a group had, the less likely it was to be chapter-based. In fact, of the groups founded after 1965, barely one in ten had chapters, and members.⁹ These are mailing list organizations that are essentially contributing money to a national cause rather than membership in the newer groups means meeting one another.

These new mass-membership organizations are of great social and political importance. Probably the most dramatic example is the AARP, from four hundred thousand card-carrying members in the mid-1990s to over a million in the mid-1990s. But membership in the AARP requires only a few seconds annually—as for the AARP is politically significant, but it demands little of its members and contributes little to their social capital. The AARP's members belong to local chapters, and its political and social activities were on life support. The AARP's membership growth. In many respects, the AARP is common with mail-order commercial organizations. It is not a face-to-face association. Some of the new organizations have roots in commercial ventures. The AARP is

ciationism" is almost entirely a denizen of the Washington hothouse.⁶ The proliferating new organizations are professionally staffed advocacy organizations, not member-centered, locally based associations. The newer groups focus on expressing policy views in the national political debate, not on providing regular connection *among* individual members at the grass roots.

Though these new groups often depend on financial support from ordinary citizens and may speak faithfully on their behalf, they are not really composed of citizen members in the same sense that a church congregation or a reading group or a fraternal organization is. One distinctive feature of a social-capital-creating formal organization is that it includes local chapters in which members can meet one another. Of eighty-three public-interest groups in the early 1970s (including virtually all such organizations at the national level, from the Agribusiness Accountability Project to Zero Population Growth and from the American Civil Liberties Union and Common Cause to the Liberty Lobby and Young Americans for Freedom), two-thirds had no local chapters at all, and another 12 percent had no more than twenty-five chapters nationwide, or an average of one for every two states. Only nine of the eighty-three groups had as many as one hundred local chapters nationwide.⁸ By way of comparison, there are seven thousand local Rotary chapters in America, to take a typical "old-fashioned," chapter-based civic organization. In other words, *Rotary alone has nearly twice as many chapters as all eighty-three public-interest groups combined.*

Another survey of 205 national "citizens groups" in 1985 confirmed that less than one-third of them had chapters to which individual members belonged and paid dues. Moreover, the more recently founded the citizens group, the *less* likely it was to be chapter based, so that among all citizens' groups founded after 1965, barely one in four had chapters with individual members.⁹ These are mailing list organizations, in which membership means essentially contributing money to a national office to support a cause. Membership in the newer groups means moving a pen, not making a meeting.

These new mass-membership organizations are plainly of growing political importance. Probably the most dramatic example is the AARP, which grew from four hundred thousand card-carrying members in 1960 to thirty-three million in the mid-1990s. But membership in good standing in the AARP requires only a few seconds annually—as long as it takes to sign a check. The AARP is politically significant, but it demands little of its members' energies and contributes little to their social capital. Less than 10 percent of the AARP's members belong to local chapters, and according to AARP staff, the organization's grassroots activities were on life support even during the period of maximum membership growth. In many respects, such organizations have more in common with mail-order commercial organizations than with old-fashioned face-to-face associations. Some of the new organizations actually have their roots in commercial ventures. The AARP, for example, was originally founded

as a mail-order insurance firm.¹⁰ Similarly, although the American Automobile Association has the form of an association with members, it is essentially a commercial organization, providing services in exchange for fees.

The national administrators of such organizations are among the most feared lobbyists in Washington, in large part because of their massive mailing lists. Ironically, group involvement with government has exploded at the same time that citizen involvement with both government and groups has diminished. To be sure, political representation is not a new role for voluntary associations. Among the most energetic examples of voluntary association in American history are the abolitionist and temperance movements of the early nineteenth century. Much of the best (as well as some of the worst) in our current national politics is embodied in those advocacy organizations around 14th and K Streets.

From the point of view of social connectedness, however, the new organizations are sufficiently different from classic "secondary associations" that we need to invent a new label—perhaps "tertiary associations."¹¹ For the vast majority of their members, the only act of membership consists in writing a check for dues or perhaps occasionally reading a newsletter.¹² Few ever attend any meetings of such organizations—many never have meetings at all—and most members are unlikely ever knowingly to encounter any other member. The bond between any two members of the National Wildlife Federation or the National Rifle Association is less like the bond between two members of a gardening club or prayer group and more like the bond between two Yankees fans on opposite coasts (or perhaps two devoted L. L. Bean catalog users): they share some of the same interests, but they are unaware of each other's existence. Their ties are to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but *not* to each other.

So the vigor of the new Washington-based organizations, though they are large, proliferating, and powerful, is an unreliable guide to the vitality of social connectedness and civic engagement in American communities. Several illustrations may clarify.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, the number of independent veterans' organizations nearly tripled between 1980 and 1997. This was the single most vigorous sector of organizational growth during this period, at least measured by numbers of organizations. In fact, however, careful national surveys over this same period show that the rate of membership in veterans' organizations among American men and women *fell* by roughly 10 percent. This slump is not surprising, since the number of living veterans fell by 9 percent across these same eighteen years. Explosive growth of organizations claiming to speak on behalf of veterans coincided with declining involvement by veterans. Similarly, the number of trade unions cataloged in the *Encyclopedia of Associations* grew by 4 percent between 1980 and 1997, while the fraction of

employees belonging to unions plummeted. These trends suggest that organizations do not mean more membership.

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS have been the most dynamic of the associational world over the last several decades. One of the most dynamic associations, Greenpeace, is presumably reflecting major shifts in global environmental issues. Probing further reveals that membership is a poor measure of civic engagement. For example, the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) tripled its membership from 100,000 in 1980 to three hundred thousand in 1997. EDF has experienced a breathtaking expansion to "better market research" and "front-end prospecting" (providing a free gift for a donation) instead of "back-end prospecting" (which has been received). Greenpeace is the largest environmental organization in America, accounting for more than 20 percent of all national environmental groups at its peak. It has a highly aggressive direct-mail program. At that point, the program was about the spectacle of an environmental group temporarily cut back on direct-mail solicitations. Membership began to hemorrhage, and by 1997, membership had plummeted by 85 percent.¹³

Trends in numbers of voluntary associations provide a guide to trends in social capital, especially at the level of local chapters in which members can interact. Can we glean from organizations that do not have local chapters any community-based activity? The membership trends of the twentieth century reveal a strikingly different pattern for civic associations. This pattern is summarized in Figure 1. One of the changing membership rates for chapter-based organizations throughout the twentieth century is the case of the B'nai B'rith and the Knights of Columbus in the United States. In each case we measure membership as a fraction of the population—4-H membership as a fraction of all farm families, Hadassah membership as a fraction of all Jewish women. In the broad outline are a number of other organizations that have been active in American communities throughout the twentieth century.

For most of the twentieth century, growth in membership in such chapter-based associations was steady and growing, too, but our analysis here eliminates the membership rate as a percentage

employees belonging to unions plummeted by more than 35 percent.¹³ More organizations do not mean more members.

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS have been among the growth stocks in the associational world over the last several decades. In tracking the expansion of several of the most dynamic associations, we noted several periods of rapid growth, presumably reflecting major shifts in grassroots engagement with environmental issues. Probing further reveals that mail-order "membership" turns out to be a poor measure of civic engagement. For example, membership in the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) tripled from one hundred thousand in 1988 to three hundred thousand in 1995. EDF officials, however, attribute this breathtaking expansion to "better marketing efforts," including a switch to "front-end prospecting" (providing a free gift to nonmembers and then asking for a donation) instead of "back-end prospecting" (sending the gifts after donations have been received). Greenpeace became the largest environmental organization in America, accounting for more than one-third of all members in national environmental groups at its peak in 1990, through an extremely aggressive direct-mail program. At that point Greenpeace leaders, concerned about the spectacle of an environmental group printing tons of junk mail, temporarily cut back on direct-mail solicitation. Almost immediately their membership began to hemorrhage, and by 1998 Greenpeace membership had plummeted by 85 percent.¹⁴

Trends in numbers of voluntary associations nationwide are not a reliable guide to trends in social capital, especially for associations that lack a structure of local chapters in which members can actually participate. What evidence can we glean from organizations that *do* involve their members directly in community-based activity? The membership rolls of such associations across the twentieth century reveal a strikingly parallel pattern across many different civic associations. This pattern is summarized in figure 8, which is a composite of the changing membership rates for thirty-two diverse national, chapter-based organizations throughout the twentieth century, ranging from B'nai B'rith and the Knights of Columbus to the Elks club and the Parent-Teacher Association.¹⁵ In each case we measure membership as a fraction of the pool of members in the population—4-H membership as a fraction of all rural youth, Hadassah membership as a fraction of all Jewish women, and so on. Embodied in the broad outline are a number of crucial facts about associational life in American communities throughout the twentieth century.

For most of the twentieth century growing numbers of Americans were involved in such chapter-based associations.¹⁶ Of course, the U.S. population was growing, too, but our analysis here eliminates that inflation factor by considering the membership rate as a percentage of the relevant population. So the

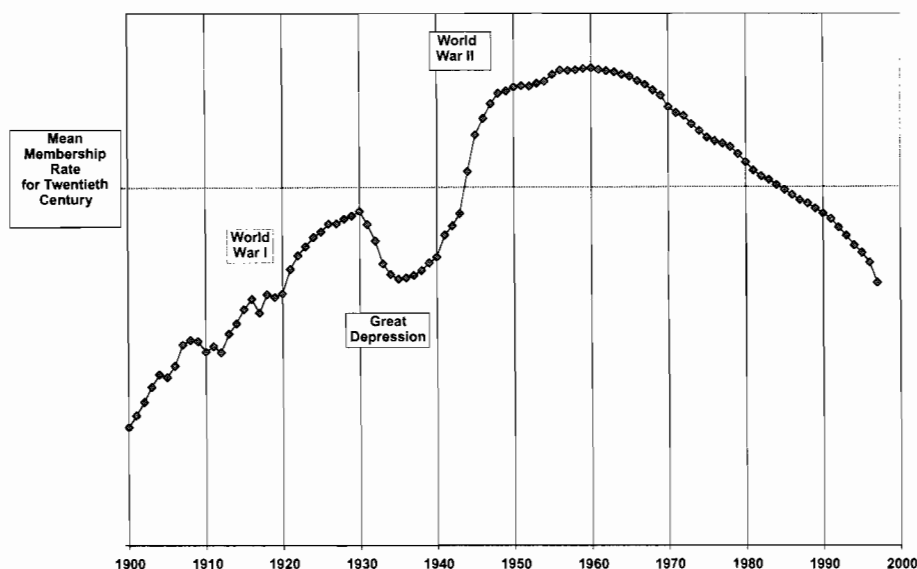


Figure 8: Average Membership Rate in Thirty-two National Chapter-Based Associations, 1900–1997

long upward wave in this figure reflects the fact that more and more women belonged to women's clubs, more rural residents belonged to the Grange, more youths belonged to the Scouts, more Jews belonged to Hadassah and B'nai B'rith, and more men belonged to service clubs. Probably one important factor in this steady growth was the continuing rise in educational levels, but in the aggregate the increase in membership exceeded even that. As the decades passed, America seemed more and more to fit Tocqueville's description.

The sharp dip in this generally rising line of civic involvement in the 1930s is evidence of the traumatic impact of the Great Depression on American communities. The membership records of virtually every adult organization in this sample bear the scars of that period. In some cases the effect was a brief pause in ebullient growth, but in others the reversal was extraordinary. Membership in the League of Women Voters, for example, was cut in half between 1930 and 1935, as was membership in the Elks, the Moose, and the Knights of Columbus. This period of history underlines the effects of acute economic distress on civic engagement, a topic to which we shall return in chapter 11.

Most of these losses had been recouped, however, by the early 1940s. World War II occasioned a massive outpouring of patriotism and collective solidarity. At war's end those energies were redirected into community life. The two decades following 1945 witnessed one of the most vital periods of commu-

nity involvement in American history. As the "market share" for these thirty-two organizations grew with the growing population, the increase was even more dramatic. The civic explosion encompassed virtually every type of organization, from "old-fashioned" ones like the Grange and the Elks to the newer service clubs like the Lions (roughly four decades old in the 1960s).

By the late 1950s, however, this burst of growth began to tail off, even though absolute membership continued to rise through the late 1960s and early 1970s. At first, club secretaries reported new membership records with mounting enthusiasm. But as the decline deepened, however, absolute membership began to plummet. By century's close the massive gains of the 1940s and 1950s in these organizations had been eliminated.

On average, across all these organizations, membership plateaued in 1957, peaked in the early 1960s, and then began a steady decline by 1969. On average, membership in 1997 was only about 10 percent higher than in 1940–45 and the peak and were slightly lower than in 1997. These averages conceal some important differences among the various organizations. For example, membership in the Masons and Hadassah, while membership in the Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts seems to have been less affected by the decline. The postwar boom in membership in the Grange and the General Federation of Women's Clubs ended by the mid-1950s, whereas other organizations, such as the Elks, remained on a higher plateau. Membership in the Elks spiked sharply during World War II, reached its highest levels in the early 1960s, and then began a steady decline in the 1970s onward. These organizational differences in membership declines are a reflection of the success and failure, organizational tenacity and the vicissitudes of social life and politics.

One useful illustration is provided by the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). In the middle years of the twentieth century, the PTA was the most common of community organizations. A survey of associational membership in the early 1960s found that the PTA had more members than any other secular organization. In a 1960 survey of six adult Nebraskans reported membership in the PTA. The absolute number of PTA members was relatively small, of course, no surprise at all—more parents than

striking, however, is that the *percentage* of parents nationwide who joined the PTA more than doubled between 1945 and 1960, continuing the vertiginous and almost uninterrupted growth of this organization since its founding in 1910. On average, every year throughout the quarter century up to 1960 another 1.6 percent of all American families with kids—more than 400,000 families a year—was added to the PTA membership rolls. Year after year, more and more parents became involved in this way in their children's education.

The reversal of six decades of organizational growth—captured graphically in figure 9—came with shocking suddenness in 1960. When the subsequent decline finally leveled off two decades later, membership in the PTA had returned to the level of 1943, utterly erasing the postwar gains. A brief rebound in the 1980s had all but vanished by the late 1990s. On average, every year throughout the quarter century after 1960 another 1.2 percent of all American families with kids—more than 250,000 families a year—dropped out of the PTA. The best recent study of the PTA concludes that

membership declined from a high in the early 1960s of almost fifty members per 100 families with children under eighteen to fewer than twenty members per 100 families with children under eighteen in the early 1980s. Although participation rebounded somewhat in the 1980s and the early 1990s, the organization never recaptured its membership heights of the late 1950s and early 1960s. [Recently the organization has experienced renewed decline.] Between 1990 and 1997, the PTA lost half a million members, even though the number of families with children under eighteen grew by over 2 million and public school enrollment grew by over 5 million.¹⁹

The explosive growth of the PTA was one of the most impressive organizational success stories in American history, its unabated, almost exponential growth over the first six decades of the twentieth century interrupted with only the briefest of pauses during the Great Depression and for a single year during World War II. This success—membership encompassing eventually nearly half the families in America—was due no doubt to the fact that this form of connectedness appealed to millions of parents who wanted to be engaged in some way in their children's education. It is easy in our cynical era to sneer at cookies, cider, and small talk, but membership in the PTA betokened a commitment to participate in a practical, child-focused form of community life.

Yet the PTA's collapse in the last third of the century is no less sensational than its earlier growth. What could account for this dramatic turnaround? Some part of the decline in rates of membership in the PTA is an optical illusion. Parental involvement in local school service organizations (not all of which are affiliated with the national Parent-Teacher Association) did not fall as rapidly as membership in PTA-affiliated groups. First, during the 1970s, following disagreements about school politics, as well as about national dues,

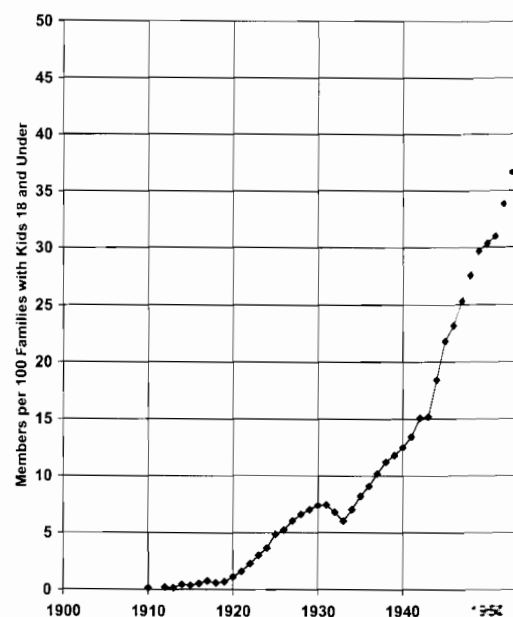


Figure 9: The Rise and Fall of the PTA, 1900-1960

some local parent-teacher organizations dissolved, and others joined competing organizations or simply ceased to exist. As a result, many of the missing local PTAs reappeared as independent local associations themselves, often after bitter battles over school desegregation and other issues. In addition, the loss of affiliation from the national PTA in several southern states, this development may have led to a loss of southern parents from the organization. After accounting for all these specific gains, the overall decline in parental participation in parent-teacher organizations after 1960 is still a partial decline in the decades after 1960. The decline in the 1950s to recognize that many parents were not involved with their kids' education.

No doubt diligent detective work will uncover the nuanced stories behind each of the plunges and recoveries across these very diverse organizations. The decline abruptly halted, followed by rapid decline—evidence on changing civic involvement after we had explored the details of each

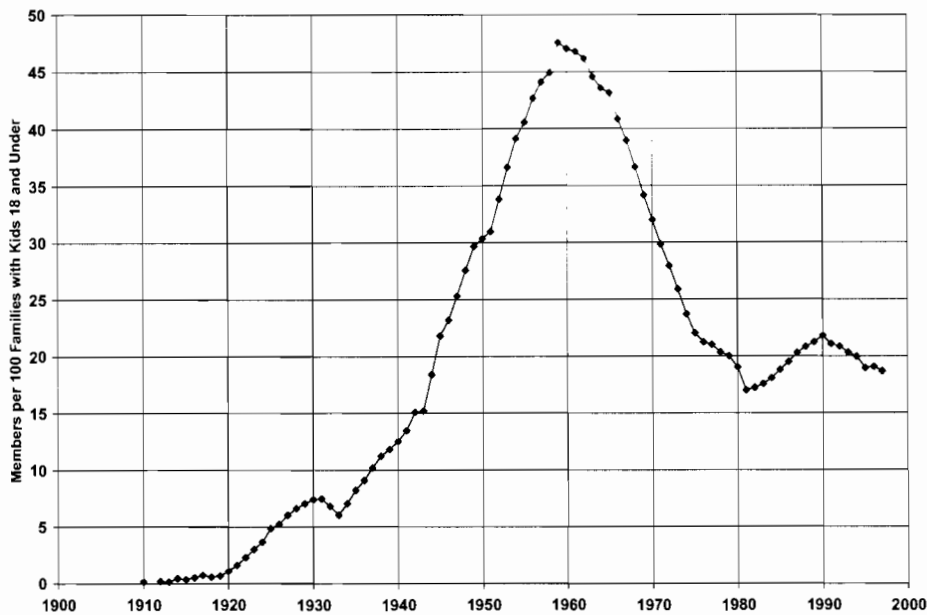


Figure 9: The Rise and Fall of the PTA, 1910–1997

some local parent-teacher organizations disaffiliated from the national PTA either to join competing organizations or to remain wholly independent. As a result, many of the missing local PTAs reappeared as local PTOs (parent-teacher organizations unaffiliated with the national PTA), although many of these now independent local associations themselves subsequently withered. Moreover, bitter battles over school desegregation in the 1960s caused wholesale disaffiliation from the national PTA in several southern states. While a genuine organizational loss, this development may not have marked the withdrawal of southern parents from the organizational life of local schools. Nevertheless, after accounting for all these specific gains and losses, it is reasonably clear that parental participation in parent-teacher groups of all sorts suffered a substantial decline in the decades after 1960.²⁰ One need not romanticize PTA meetings of the 1950s to recognize that many Americans nowadays are less involved with their kids' education.

No doubt diligent detective work would turn up equally interesting and nuanced stories behind each of the plunging memberships, but the common features across these very diverse organizations—rapid growth to the 1960s, abruptly halted, followed by rapid decline—is a significant piece in the mosaic of evidence on changing civic involvement in American communities. Even after we had explored the details of each organization's rise and decline, we

would be left with the remarkable fact that each of these organizations—very different from one another in its constituency, age, and leadership—seems to have entered rough water at about the same time in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

IN TWO IMPORTANT RESPECTS, however, membership figures for individual organizations are an uncertain guide to trends in Americans' involvement in voluntary associations. First, the popularity of specific groups may wax and wane quite independently of the general level of community engagement. Even though our historical analysis so far has cast as wide a net as possible in terms of different types of organizations, it is certainly possible that newer, more dynamic organizations have escaped our scrutiny. If so, the picture of decline that we have traced may apply only to "old-fashioned" organizations, not to all community-based organizations. As sociologist Tom Smith has observed, "Ultimately, if we want to know whether group membership *in general* has been increasing [or decreasing], we have to study group membership *in general*."²¹

Second, formal "card-carrying" membership may not accurately reflect actual involvement in community activities. An individual who "belongs to" half a dozen community groups may actually be active in none. What really matters from the point of view of social capital and civic engagement is not merely nominal membership, but active and involved membership. To address these two issues, we need to turn from formal organizational records to social surveys, which can encompass organizational affiliations of all sorts and can distinguish formal membership from actual involvement.

Several reviews of national surveys conducted between the early 1950s and the early 1970s found evidence of steady and sustained growth in organizational memberships of all sorts, but other scholars have questioned whether changes in survey wording might undermine this conclusion.²² In other words, subtle shifts in the lens of our social time-lapse camera may have sufficiently blurred the successive images that we cannot be sure about the trends during the 1950s and 1960s. However, in 1957 a team of University of Michigan researchers conducted a careful nationwide survey on behalf of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), and in 1976 a group led by one of the earlier researchers replicated the 1957 study, taking great care to make the studies as nearly identical as possible.²³ The first wave of surveys was carried out roughly a decade before what organizational records suggest was the postwar peak of civic engagement, whereas the second was conducted roughly a decade after the peak.

In many respects, the Michigan-NIMH study found considerable stability in the life experiences of Americans across these two turbulent decades. Nevertheless, one of their central findings was a "reduced integration of American adults into the social structure."²⁴ Over these two decades informal socializing

with friends and relatives declined; church memberships fell by 16 percent, and church attendance more directly in a moment. In addition, these surveys found significant declines in church groups; fraternal and service organizations; PTAs; youth groups; charities; and labor unions. The available survey evidence is consistent with a decline in membership in voluntary associations, though the decline is modestly between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s.

For the years after the mid-1970s, the evidence is initially richer, and our judgments are more informed, fuller and more confident. Three major sources of information: the General Social Surveys, the General Trends archive, and the DDE National Survey.

How has group membership in general changed in the last century? The GSS provides the most comprehensive picture of Americans' formal membership in many organizations. The data is that formal membership rates have declined since the mid-1950s, rising educational levels. The decline in membership in at least one organization has been glacial so far, from a little less than 70 percent in the early 1950s to less than 70 percent in the early 1990s. In church groups, labor unions, fraternal organizations, and service organizations, the decline has been more rapid, but this decline has been more rapid in the 1970s and 1980s. The only substantial increase is in the 1990s, and we shall see later, that growth has been in the professions themselves. If we take the data in this period—on the assumption that people have the skills and interests that made them members—the overall declines are more marked. In the 1990s, organizational membership has declined in all groups except high school dropouts the decline has been more rapid in formal organizational membership.

This ambiguous conclusion is based on the available evidence on more active forms of membership. Service as an organization member is common among active members of organizations. 51 percent of all organization members had served as an officer, and 46 percent had served as a committee member, and 46 percent had served as a committee member—roughly half of the active members—some time as a committee member, 51 percent as an officer, and only 21 percent had never

with friends and relatives declined by about 10 percent, organizational memberships fell by 16 percent, and church attendance (a topic that we shall address more directly in a moment) declined by 20 percent. Examined more closely, these surveys found significant declines in membership in unions; church groups; fraternal and veterans organizations; civic groups, such as PTAs; youth groups; charities; and a catch-all "other" category.²⁵ Thus the best available survey evidence is consistent with the organizational record that membership in voluntary associations among ordinary Americans declined modestly between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s.

For the years after the mid-1970s, the survey evidence becomes substantially richer, and our judgments about trends in this quarter century can be fuller and more confident. Three major survey archives contain relevant information: the General Social Survey (GSS), the Roper Social and Political Trends archive, and the DDB Needham Life Style archive.²⁶

How has group membership in general changed over the last quarter century? The GSS provides the most comprehensive measure of trends in Americans' formal membership in many different types of groups. The short answer is that formal membership rates have not changed much, at least if we ignore rising educational levels. The percentage of the public who claim formal membership in at least one organization has fallen a bit, but that trend has been glacial so far, from a little less than 75 percent in the mid-1970s to a little less than 70 percent in the early 1990s.²⁷ Membership in church-related groups, labor unions, fraternal organizations, and veterans groups has declined, but this decline has been mostly offset by increases in professional, ethnic, service, hobby, sports, school fraternity, and other groups. To be sure, the only substantial increase is in the domain of professional organizations, and as we shall see later, that growth has barely kept pace with occupational growth in the professions themselves. If we take into account the rise in educational levels in this period—on the assumption that many more Americans nowadays have the skills and interests that traditionally brought people into civic life—the overall declines are more marked. Among college graduates, for example, organizational membership has declined by roughly 30 percent, while among high school dropouts the decline has been roughly the same. Nevertheless, the net decline in formal organizational membership is modest at best.

This ambiguous conclusion, however, is drastically altered when we examine evidence on more active forms of participation than mere card-carrying membership. Service as an organizational officer or committee member is very common among active members of American organizations. In 1987, 61 percent of all organization members had served on a committee at some time or other, and 46 percent had served as an officer.²⁸ Among self-described "active" members—roughly half of the adult population—73 percent had served at some time as a committee member, 58 percent had served at some time as an officer, and only 21 percent had never served as either an officer or a commit-

tee member. Sooner or later, in short, the overwhelming majority of active members in most voluntary associations in America are cajoled into playing some leadership role in the organization.

How has the number of Americans who fit this bill changed over the last few decades? Between 1973 and 1994 the number of men and women who took *any* leadership role in *any* local organization—from “old-fashioned” fraternal organizations to new age encounter groups—was sliced by more than 50 percent.²⁹ (Figure 10 summarizes this evidence by showing the changing fraction of the population who have been actively involved in organizational life as either a local officer or a local committee member.) This dismaying trend began to accelerate after 1985: in the ten short years between 1985 and 1994, active involvement in community organizations in this country fell by 45 percent. By this measure, at least, nearly half of America’s civic infrastructure was obliterated in barely a decade.

Eighty percent of life, Woody Allen once quipped,³⁰ is simply showing up. The same might be said of civic engagement, and “showing up” provides a useful standard for evaluating trends in associational life in our communities. In twenty-five annual surveys between 1975 and 1999 the DDB Needham Life Style surveys asked more than eighty-seven thousand Americans, “How many times in the last year did you attend a club meeting?” Figure 11 shows how this form of civic engagement has dwindled over the last quarter of the twentieth

century. In 1975–76 American men attended club meetings on average each year—essentially twice as often as in 1994. The number of Americans who attended at least one meeting a year shrunk by fully 58 percent to five meetings a year. In 1999 that figure had fallen to 35 percent. In 1975 two-thirds of all Americans attended at least one meeting a year; two-thirds of all Americans *never* attended a meeting a year. We may still seem a nation of joiners, but we are not—at least if “joining” means attending.

Thus two different survey approaches have shown that local clubs and organizations of all sorts have shrunk over the last several decades of the twentieth century. The decline is consistent with evidence of an entirely unexpected trend in the 1990s, national samples of Americans’ daily lives. By recording how they spent every minute of their day, and by analyzing these sets of diaries we can reconstruct the patterns of time that gradually evolved over the three decades.

Broadly speaking, as John Robinson has shown, our time allocations have not changed much over the last few decades, for example—but there are significant shifts in the way we spend our time.

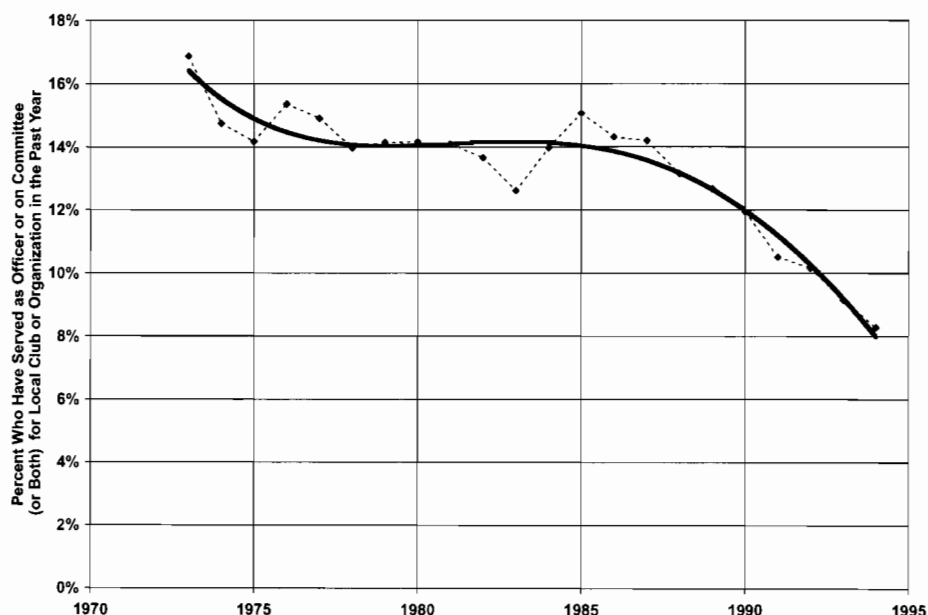


Figure 10: Active Organizational Involvement, 1973–1994

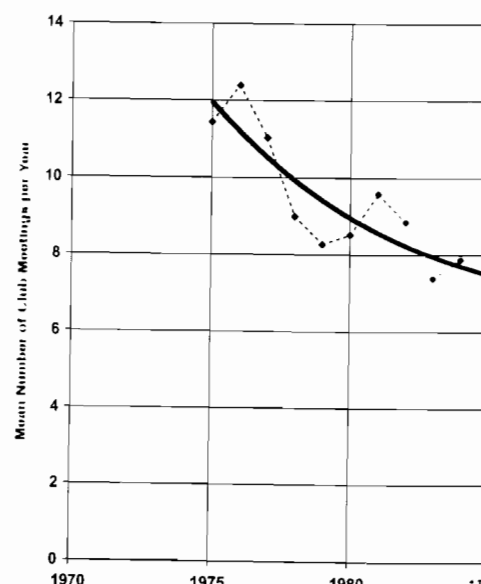


Figure 11: Club Meeting Attendance Data, 1975–1999

century. In 1975–76 American men and women attended twelve club meetings on average each year—essentially once a month.³¹ By 1999 that figure had shrunk by fully 58 percent to five meetings per year. In 1975–76, 64 percent of all Americans still attended at least *one* club meeting in the previous year. By 1999 that figure had fallen to 38 percent. In short, in the mid-1970s nearly two-thirds of all Americans attended club meetings, but by the late 1990s nearly two-thirds of all Americans *never* do. By comparison with other countries, we may still seem a nation of joiners, but by comparison with our own recent past, we are not—at least if “joining” means more than nominal affiliation.

Thus two different survey archives suggest that active involvement in local clubs and organizations of all sorts fell by more than half in the last several decades of the twentieth century. This estimate is remarkably consistent with evidence of an entirely unexpected sort. Each decade between 1965 and 1995, national samples of Americans were asked to complete “time diaries,” recording how they spent every minute of a randomly chosen “diary day.” From these sets of diaries we can reconstruct how the average American’s use of time gradually evolved over the three decades between 1965 and 1995.³²

Broadly speaking, as John Robinson, director of the time diary project, has shown, our time allocations have not changed dramatically over this period—we have averaged just about exactly eight hours of sleep a night throughout the decades, for example—but there are some important exceptions. Watching

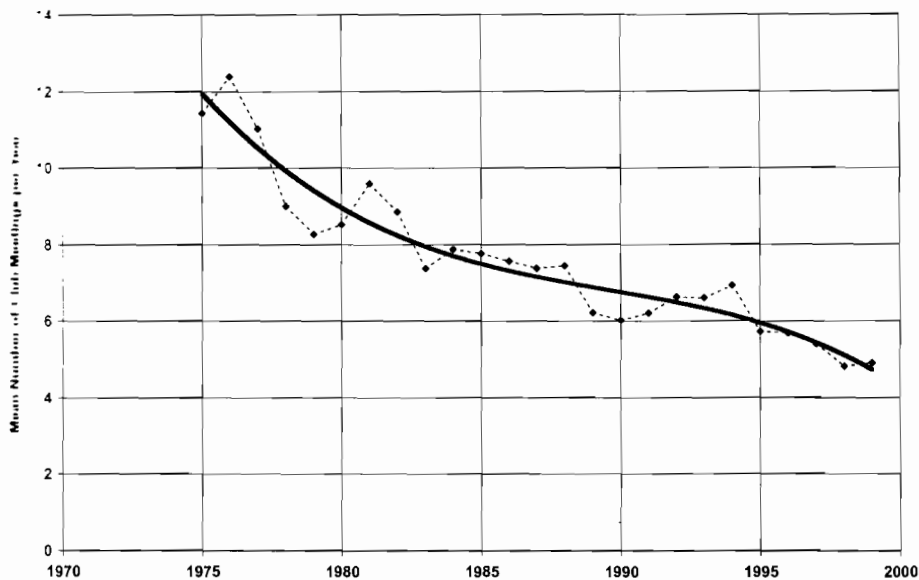


Figure 11: Club Meeting Attendance Dwindles, 1975–1999

TV consumes more time now than it used to, while we spend less time now on housework and child care. The slice of time devoted to organizational activity has always been relatively modest on any given day, since even faithful reading groups or service clubs usually meet only once a week or once a month, not once a day. Nevertheless, the diaries show clearly that the time we devote to community organizations has fallen steadily over this period.³³

Measured in terms of hours per month, the average American's investment in organizational life (apart from religious groups, which we shall examine separately) fell from 3.7 hours per month in 1965 to 2.9 in 1975 to 2.3 in 1985 and 1995. On an average day in 1965, 7 percent of Americans spent some time in a community organization. By 1995 that figure had fallen to 3 percent of all Americans. Those numbers suggest that nearly half of all Americans in the 1960s invested some time each week in clubs and local associations, as compared to less than one-quarter in the 1990s.³⁴ Further analysis of the time diary evidence suggests that virtually all of this decline is attributable to generational replacement: members of any given generation are investing as much time in organizational activity as they ever were, but each successive generation is investing less.

If we take into account the rapid growth in educational levels over this period, all these slumps in associational involvement (leadership involvement, meeting attendance, time spent, and so on) are even more dramatic. Among the burgeoning numbers of college graduates, the average number of club meetings per year fell by 55 percent (from thirteen meetings per year to six), while among high school graduates, the drop in annual meeting attendance was 60 percent (from ten meetings per year to four), and among the dwindling number of Americans who had not completed high school, the drop in annual meeting attendance was 73 percent (from nine meetings per year to two per year).

In absolute terms the declines in organizational activity and club meeting attendance were roughly parallel at all educational and social levels. However, because the less well educated were less involved in community organizations to begin with, the relative decline was even greater at the bottom of the hierarchy. A similar pattern appears in the time diary data—declines at all levels in the educational hierarchy, though slightly greater in this case among the more educated. In other words, the gross decline in community involvement has been masked to some degree by the fact that more and more Americans have the skills and social resources that traditionally encouraged participation in community affairs.

In community life, as in the stock market, past performance is no guarantee of future performance, so it is hazardous to assume that trends over the next several decades will mirror those over the last several. Nevertheless, the downturn shown in figure 11 has been more or less uninterrupted for more than a quarter century, and if the current rate of decline were to continue, clubs

would become extinct in America within a few years. That such local associations have been a feature of the landscape for several hundred years, it is remarkable that they have not been included on the endangered species list.

The organizational slumps reported in recent streams of evidence—different sampling organizations, different questions—but each with interviews in scores of independent surveys, suggest that active involvement of all sorts is needed. That there is that active involvement in local organizations over several decades of the twentieth century is as clear as western tree rings and Arctic ice cores and has confirmed the same rate of global warming.

Another “hard” indicator of the priority of fraternal involvement is the fraction of our total income measure that the Commerce Department has used to estimate. In 1929, 6 cents of every dollar of consumer expenditure was for club and fraternal dues. With the onset (and the nationwide explosion in sales of 1929) of the Great Depression (and the nationwide explosion in sales of 1929) by the end of that decade it had risen to 10 cents. In the 1950s–1960s civic boom that appears repeated in the last three decades of the century, however, it had fallen. In 1997 this measure of the relative priority of fraternal commitments was down 40 percent from its 1929 level.

To summarize: Organizational records of the twentieth century Americans' interests rose steadily, except for the parentheses of the last third of the century, by contrast, only continued to expand, with the creation of an association whose members never actually involved in face-to-face organizations. Consider organizational records, survey reports, and letters. We could surely find individual examples who successfully sailed against the prevailing current. The picture is one of declining membership in organizations. In the last third of the twentieth century formal membership in general has edged downward by perhaps 1-2 percent. Involvement in clubs and other voluntary organizations, at a astonishing rate, more than halving most in the last few decades.

Many Americans continue to claim that unions are the backbone of the economy, but most Americans no longer believe that unions are the backbone of the economy—we've stopped doing common sense.

would become extinct in America within less than twenty years. Considering that such local associations have been a feature of American community life for several hundred years, it is remarkable to see them so high on the endangered species list.

The organizational slumps reported here come from four entirely different streams of evidence—different sampling techniques, different survey organizations, different questions—but each is based on tens of thousands of interviews in scores of independent surveys, and together they cover associational involvement of all sorts. That they converge so closely in their estimate that active involvement in local organizations fell by more than half in the last several decades of the twentieth century is as striking and persuasive as if southwestern tree rings and Arctic ice cores and British Admiralty records all confirmed the same rate of global warming.

Another “hard” indicator of the priority Americans attribute to organizational involvement is the fraction of our leisure dollar that we spend on dues, a measure that the Commerce Department has tracked for the last seventy years. In 1929, 6 cents of every dollar of consumer spending for leisure and recreation was for club and fraternal dues. With the arrival of television in the 1950s (and the nationwide explosion in sales of TV sets), this figure fell to 4 cents, but by the end of that decade it had risen back to 5 cents, in accord with the 1950s–1960s civic boom that appears repeatedly in our evidence. During the last three decades of the century, however, this figure fell to 3 cents, so that by 1997 this measure of the relative priority that Americans give to our organizational commitments was down 40 percent from its postwar peak in 1958.³⁵

To summarize: Organizational records suggest that for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century Americans’ involvement in civic associations of all sorts rose steadily, except for the parenthesis of the Great Depression. In the last third of the century, by contrast, only mailing list membership has continued to expand, with the creation of an entirely new species of “tertiary” association whose members never actually meet. At the same time, active involvement in face-to-face organizations has plummeted, whether we consider organizational records, survey reports, time diaries, or consumer expenditures. We could surely find individual exceptions—specific organizations that successfully sailed against the prevailing winds and tides—but the broad picture is one of declining membership in community organizations. During the last third of the twentieth century formal membership in organizations in general has edged downward by perhaps 10–20 percent. More important, active involvement in clubs and other voluntary associations has collapsed at an astonishing rate, more than halving most indexes of participation within barely a few decades.

Many Americans continue to claim that we are “members” of various organizations, but most Americans no longer spend much time in community organizations—we’ve stopped doing committee work, stopped serving as offi-

cers, and stopped going to meetings. And all this despite rapid increases in education that have given more of us than ever before the skills, the resources, and the interests that once fostered civic engagement. In short, Americans have been dropping out in droves, not merely from political life, but from organized community life more generally.

Before reaching any firm conclusion about trends in Americans' involvement in formal social organizations, however, we need to consider changes in the worlds of religion and work. Religion remains today, as in the past, an extremely important sector of American civil society, and work has come to occupy an ever more important place in the lives of many Americans, so trends in those two domains will have an important effect on our collective stock of social capital.

CHAPTER 4

Religious Participation

CHURCHES AND OTHER religious organizations are a central part of American civil society. America is one of the most religious countries in the contemporary world. With the exception of countries such as Ireland and Poland," observes one scholar, "America is the most God-believing and religion-adhering country in the world, the most traditional country in Christendom," as well as the "most religious country" where "more new religions have been founded than in any other society."¹

American churches* over the centuries have been important social institutions. Tocqueville himself commented on the centrality of religion and religiosity. Religious historian Phillip Hambrick-Monroe notes that at the nation's founding, a higher and higher proportion of Americans lived with a church or synagogue—right through the nineteenth century. If we think of the colonists as a deeply religious people, then the history of religious observance in America is one in which religious adherence *grew* steadily from 1700 to 1980.³ Other observers, such as E. Brooks Holm, note that church "membership" has become less stringent in recent years, "from the seventeenth century through the twentieth century" has probably remained relatively constant.

* For simplicity's sake I use the term church here to refer to all religious organizations, including mosques, temples, and synagogues.