

Galston, W. A. & Levine, P. (2003). America's civic condition: A glance at the evidence. In Miroff et. al., *Debating Democracy*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin).

The publication of Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone" in 1995 sparked a vigorous but often murky debate about America's civic condition. Some of the confusion arose from the inconclusiveness of the available data and some from a failure to draw certain basic distinctions.

It is not always recognized that civic health may be measured along several dimensions: participation in electoral politics, political and social trust, voluntary sector activity, and attitudes and conduct bearing on the moral condition of society, to name but a few. No one doubts that many forms of participation in official political institutions and activities have declined in recent decades or that Americans are less inclined to express trust in political leaders—and in one another. It is equally clear that in overwhelming numbers, Americans believe that their society is morally weaker than it once was. Whether they are right to believe this is a different, and more difficult, question. But the fact that they do has contributed to the surprising public salience of what might have remained an abstruse scholarly debate.

When we turn our attention to the voluntary sector, matters become less clear. Here again, some basic distinctions prove useful. Voluntary sector activities include formal organizational membership, volunteering, charitable giving, and informal socializing. Evidence suggests that trends in these areas may be diverging. Moreover, civic trends have not been linear during the past generation. Some declines that began in the 1970s—in aggregate group membership, volunteering, and philanthropy—appear to have halted and even reversed themselves in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Group Membership

Judged against other industrialized nations, American civil society remains comparatively strong (though its relative standing may have fallen in recent decades). According to the 1990-91 World Values Survey, 82 percent of Americans belong to at least one voluntary association, a rate exceeded only in Iceland, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Furthermore, Americans belong to (and volunteer for) almost all types of groups at above-average rates. Only unions are relatively weak in the United States.

Existing methods for determining and comparing rates of group membership are far from perfect. For example, surveys have not typically asked people how many associations they belong to. Instead, they have asked whether people belong to various types of groups, and answers to these questions have been aggregated to produce a total number of memberships. This aggregate figure is misleading because anyone may belong to several groups of a particular type. Over time, Americans' memberships may have concentrated within certain categories, creating an illusion of decline.

Critics have identified two additional problems with established survey instruments. First, they point out that since strictly comparable poll questions have been asked only since the 1970s, it is hard to know whether aggregate group membership has declined since earlier decades. Second, they argue that existing surveys are unlikely to have captured all recent changes in U.S. associational life—for example, the proliferation of faith-based informal "small groups" that Robert Wuthnow has so painstakingly documented.

Still, there is no evidence that the average rate of membership has increased in the last quarter century. This is a surprise, because in the past rising levels of education have been linked with increased associational activity. It appears that two trends over the past quarter century have roughly counterbalanced each other: the proportion of high school and college graduates in the population has grown larger, but civic participation at every educational level has declined. People with high school diplomas but no college educations have become about 32 percent less likely to join any associations, while there has been an increase in the proportion of people who belong to no organizations at all.

Trends among racial and ethnic groups reflect their distinctive history and condition. To take just one example, African Americans have traditionally combined formal political acts, such as registering people to vote, with group membership and protest tactics. Overall, there has been little decline in these forms of civic engagement since the "activist" 1960s, but African Americans have typically shifted their attention from civil rights struggles to quality-of-life issues in local communities. And as Frederick C. Harris has noted, African Americans without much formal education have, like their white counterparts, largely dropped out of community-oriented activities as well as formal political life.

Another way to break down aggregate measures of civil society is to look at types of organizations. Most categories have seen little change since 1972, when the General Social Survey first asked relevant poll questions. For instance, religious associations, sports leagues, and youth organizations have had stable membership levels. However, millions of people have left labor unions and fraternal societies such as the Elks and Masons, and similar numbers have joined professional associations. Membership in school service groups has substantially increased, perhaps because of recent efforts to link community service and learning. Finally, as Everett C. Ladd has pointed out, there has been a huge shift from mainline Protestant denominations to evangelical churches.

Not All Groups Are Created Equal

These changes may prove significant for the future of democracy in America. Throughout American history, voluntary associations have been valued because they are thought to build civic virtue, foster trust, encourage cooperation, and promote political participation. But on closer inspection, it turns out that not all associations promote democratic health in the same way or to the same extent.

Unions, for instance, are important sources of solidarity among working people. They have core functions that attract members, but they also offer social activities, information, and mutual assistance. They also offer a measure of political power to workers, thereby increasing pluralism and encouraging participation. Members of union households are 8 percent more likely than other people to vote. Though John Brehm and Wendy Rahn have found that union membership is a relatively weak predictor of overall associational membership, Eric Uslaner's research shows that unionized workers join more voluntary organizations and make more charitable contributions than other people do. The dramatic decline in union membership over the past 40 years has been exacerbated by factors—automation, international competition, the relocation of factories to nonunion states, and changes in federal labor law enforcement—that do not directly affect other associations.

Fraternal organizations and women's auxiliaries have suffered deep losses in membership since 1974. As Theda Skocpol has demonstrated, these groups traditionally had deep roots in their communities, and they offered men and women of different classes an opportunity to talk and cooperate more or less as equals—something that professional associations, which have grown in recent decades, do not do. The important question is what (if anything) will replace the cross-class local organizations that flourished through most of American history.

Church-affiliated groups are the backbone of civil society in America, involving almost half the population (compared with just 13 percent in the average industrialized democracy). Religious associations offer ways for people to give money, receive aid, hold meetings, recruit members for other associations, and learn about public issues. As Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady have found, they are especially valuable for people with little income or education, who tend not to join other groups. Polls show that membership in such groups correlates with voting, volunteering, charity, and political activity.

Evangelical denominations are no exception. The experience, values, and personal networks that they develop transfer easily to politics. They have little hierarchy, and they demand intense participation from their members. For example, as part of their church activities, Baptists are much

more likely to plan meetings and make presentations than are Catholics. The growth of evangelical denominations has introduced many people, especially lower-income people, to the political process and given them powerful tools for mutual aid.

Even as fundamentalist denominations encourage the faithful to rely on one another, however, there is evidence that they promote distrust of outsiders. This practice, ironically, helps voter turnout, because a fervent dislike for others motivates people to vote. The broader point, however, is that increased mutual reliance and trust within groups is not necessarily correlated with increased trust among groups.

Mailing-list associations, from the National Rifle Association to the Children's Defense Fund, have grown since 1970. Members of these groups contribute dues to support professional staff; but they do not donate much time or effort. Presumably, writing a check improves one's skills, knowledge, and interpersonal trust much less than attending a meeting or organizing a grass-roots movement.

But mailing-list organizations must not be stereotyped. The Sierra Club, for instance, has been described as a group whose members merely write checks and read newsletters. But as George Pettinico has noted, in one May weekend, the Los Angeles chapter alone organized 39 events, from classes to camping excursions, that were cooperative and participatory.

The controversy over contemporary national check-writing organizations raises broader historical and political issues about the relationship between top-down and bottom-up activities. Theda Skocpol argues that classic voluntary associations such as the PTA and the American Legion succeeded in creating both effective national lobbying arms and vital chapters or affiliates at the state and local levels, with close communication between the various tiers. It should also be said that even pure mailing-list organizations can be effective political actors, thereby freeing members to perform other civic tasks.

Still, a large shift from grass-roots groups to national membership organizations would be grounds for concern. In general, today's associations offer relatively few opportunities for local leadership and deliberation. The past 25 years have seen a marked decline in the share of people who belong to committees and serve as officers of local groups, a trend that parallels declines in such forms of local political activity as attending school board meetings and participating in political parties.

Associational Life and Healthy Democracy

Recent scholarship suggests complex links between associational activities and key political variables such as political participation, social trust, and confidence in government. Controlling for education and income, members of church groups, neighborhood associations, and sports leagues are especially likely to follow politics and vote—a correlation that supports the hypothesis that political participation is significantly more attractive for individuals who belong to social networks. It's not hard to see why. Making a meaningful decision at the polls requires a big investment of time and attention. Because members of voluntary groups have many opportunities to discuss politics, they can easily acquire information, and they are sometimes persuaded to vote by each other or by local politicians and activists who gravitate to organizations. By urging fellow members to support particular candidates or causes, citizens can multiply their political power.

Most studies find that associational membership is also linked to trust in other people. But researchers differ on the strength of the relationship and on the direction of the causal arrow between the two. A recent poll of Philadelphians by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press showed no strong direct link between trust and participation in voluntary activities. However, Philadelphians who believed that they could "make a difference" tended to be trusting; they were also especially likely to volunteer.

Interpersonal trust and confidence in government tend to go together. Some research suggests that disenchantment with official institutions is an important cause of wariness toward other people. When political leaders let us down, we draw negative conclusions about human nature in general.

The reverse is presumably true as well: wariness toward other people (stemming from crime, family dysfunction, and other sources) may affect our confidence in politicians.

Yet trust in government has fallen more precipitously than interpersonal trust. Much of the decline took place in 1963-75, an era defined largely by Vietnam and Watergate. And perhaps, to a significant extent, the decline was justified. But there now exists, at least at the extremes, evidence of paranoia rather than healthy distrust. According to a recent study by the University of Virginia's Post-Modernity Project, a fifth of Americans believe that the governing elite are "involved in a conspiracy." Widespread fear of major public institutions not only creates generalized distrust thereby discouraging group membership—but may also cause people to favor exclusive and inward-looking organizations. As noted by Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, excessive cynicism about politics and government may well discourage voting and other forms of political participation. A presumption that politicians are unworthy keeps many honorable people out of the field. And a belief in conspiracies prevents citizens from making critical distinctions among leaders, organizations, and ideologies.

A Refuge from Politics?

The evidence now available does not permit firm conclusions about the overall condition of associational life in America. But it does seem that voluntary activities are on balance healthier than are formal political institutions and processes. Indeed, citizens, particularly the youngest, seem to be shifting their preferred civic involvement from official politics to the voluntary sector. If so, the classic Tocquevillian thesis would have to be modified; local civic life, far from acting as a school for wider political involvement, may increasingly serve as a refuge from (and alternative to) it. The consequences for the future of our democracy could be significant.