

BOWLING ALONE

THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN
COMMUNITY

Robert D. Putnam

SIMON & SCHUSTER

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY SINGAPORE

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 slippage, 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 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 “intra-cohort,” 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 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

• • •

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

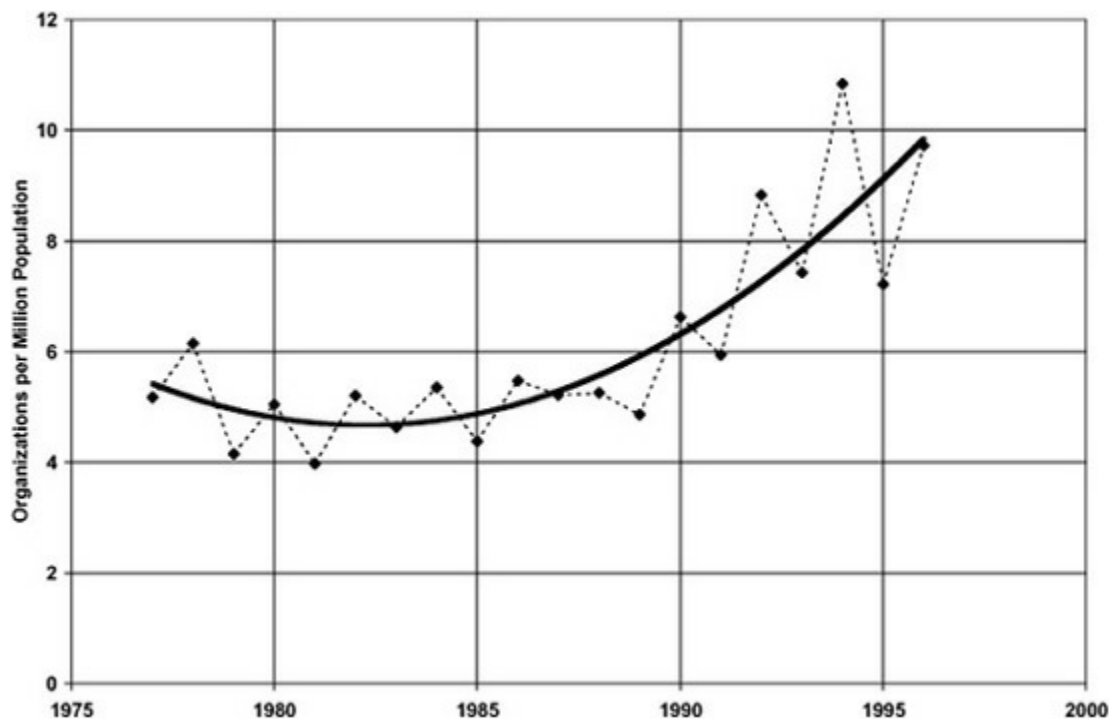


Figure 2: Political Organizations with Regular Paid Staff, 1977–1996

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

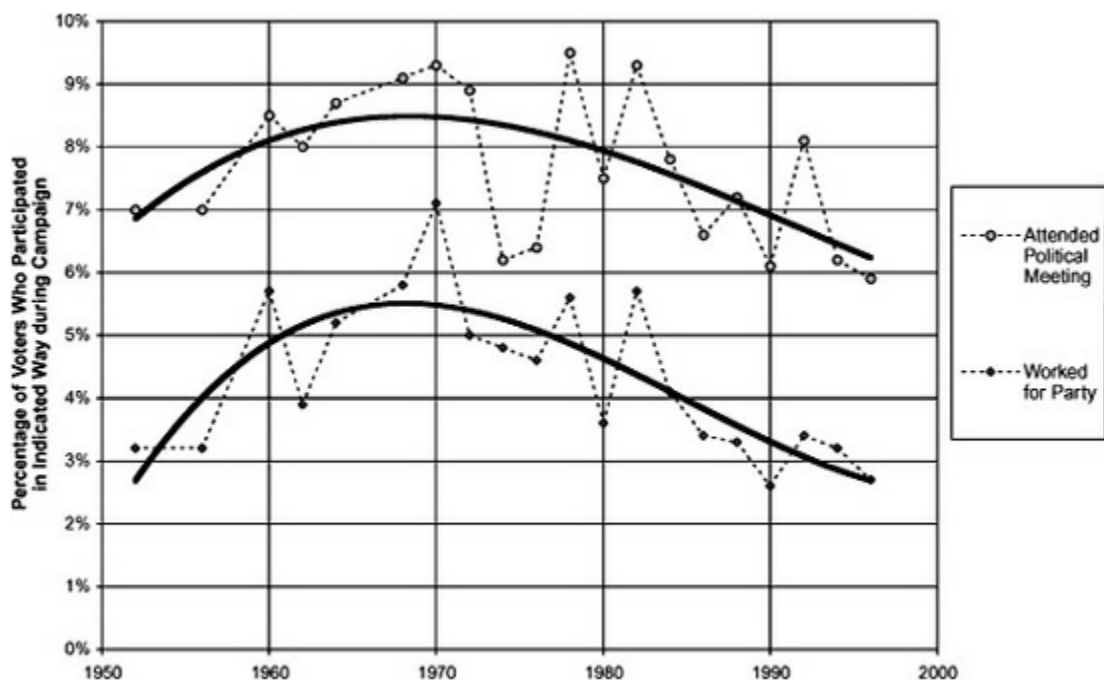


Figure 3: Citizen Participation in Campaign Activities, 1952–1996

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 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).

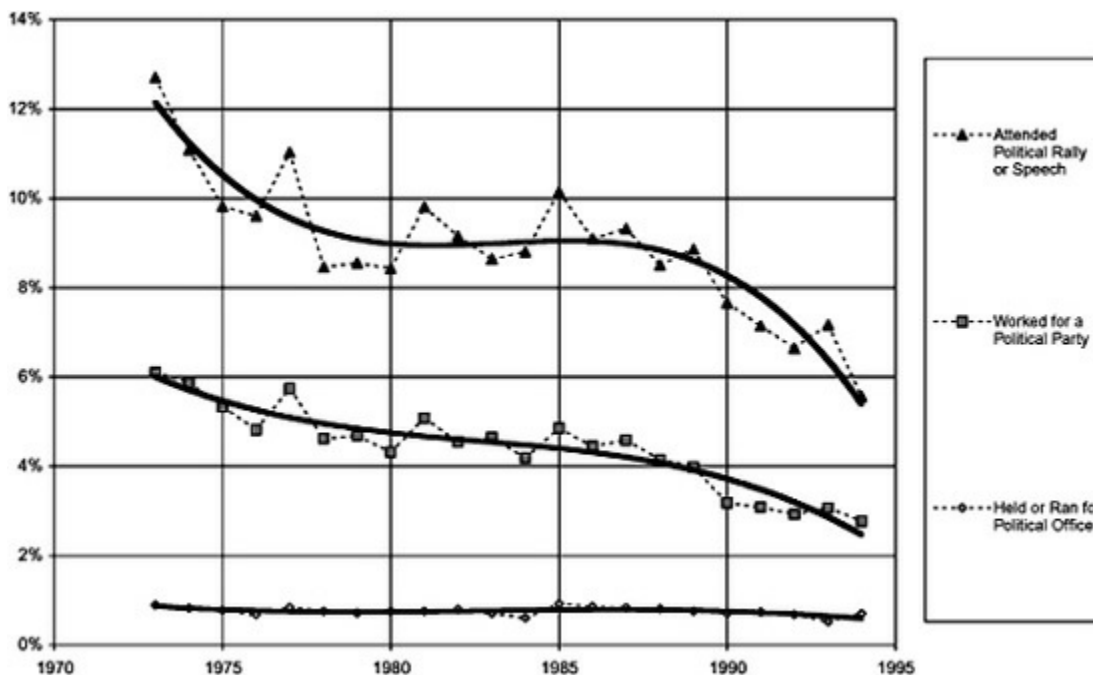


Figure 4: Trends in Civic Engagement I: Partisan Activities

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

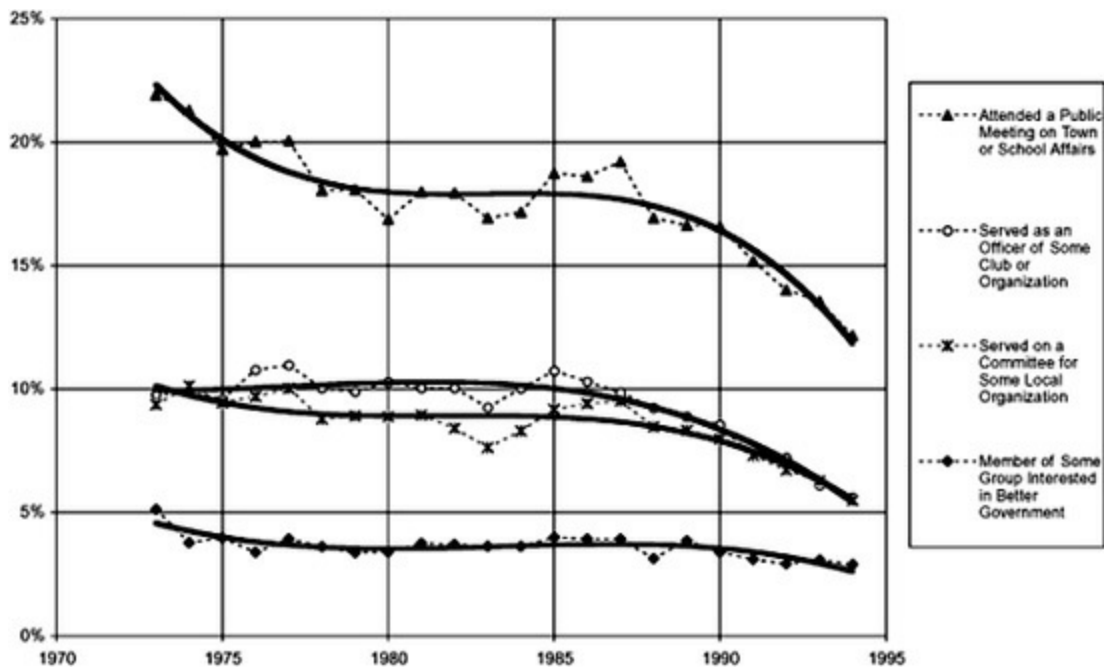


Figure 5: Trends in Civic Engagement II: Communal Participation

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 curb-side 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

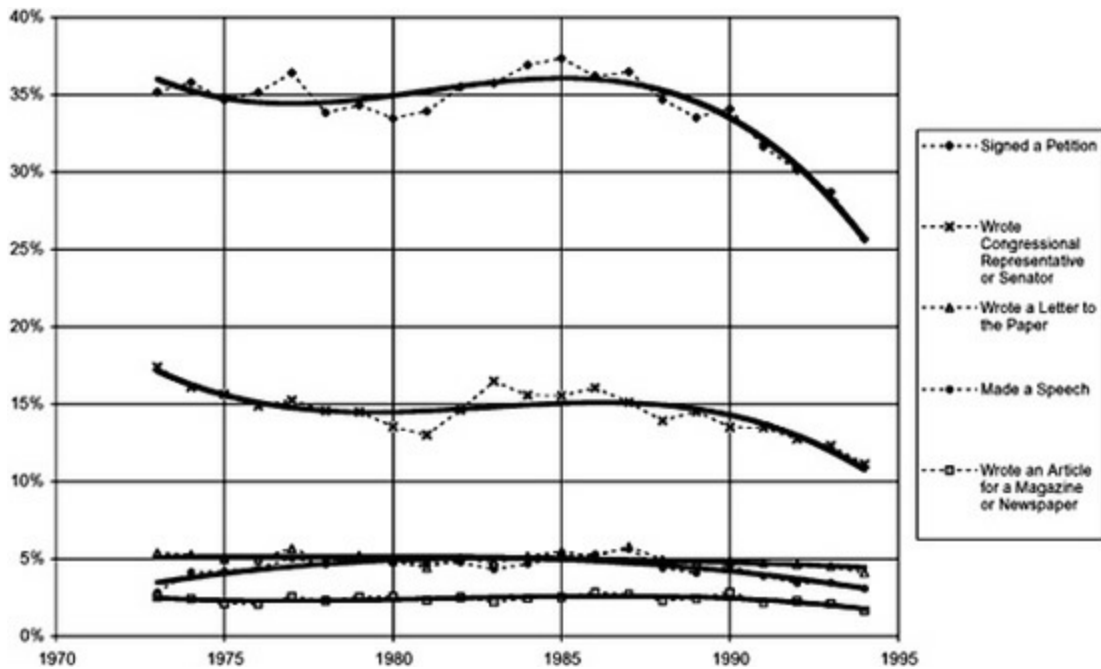


Figure 6: Trends in Civic Engagement III: Public Expression

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 activities (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

	<i>Relative change 1973–74 to 1993–94</i>
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-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 involved 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

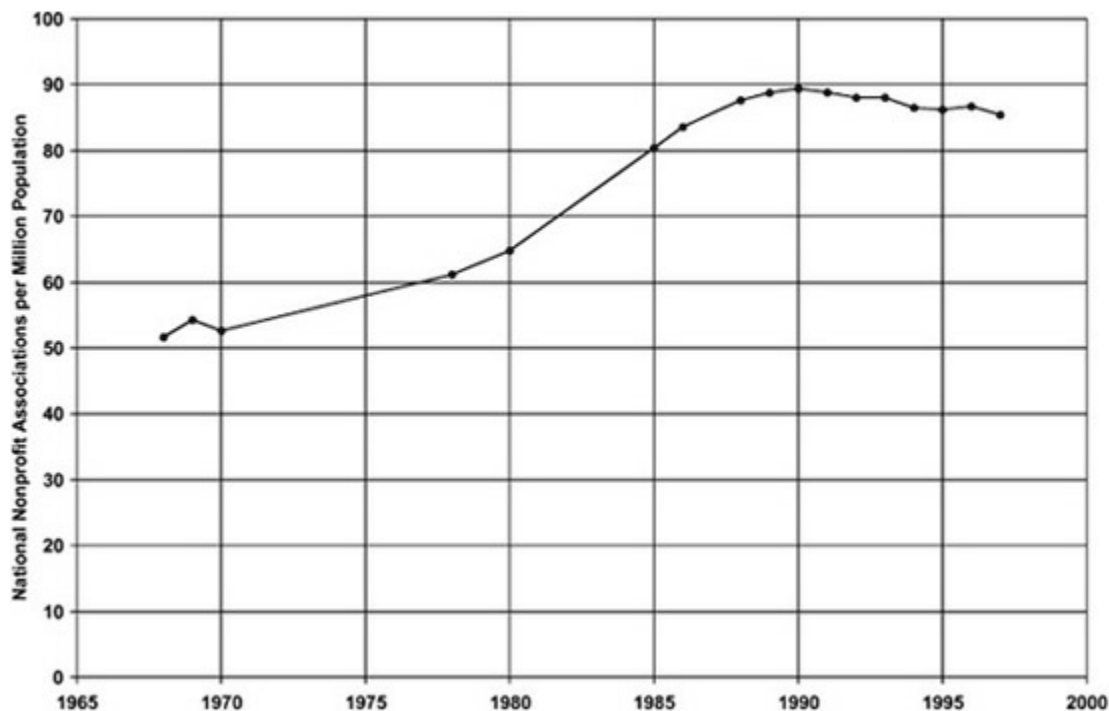


Figure 7: The Growth of National Nonprofit Associations, 1968–1997

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 associationism” 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.⁷ 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 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

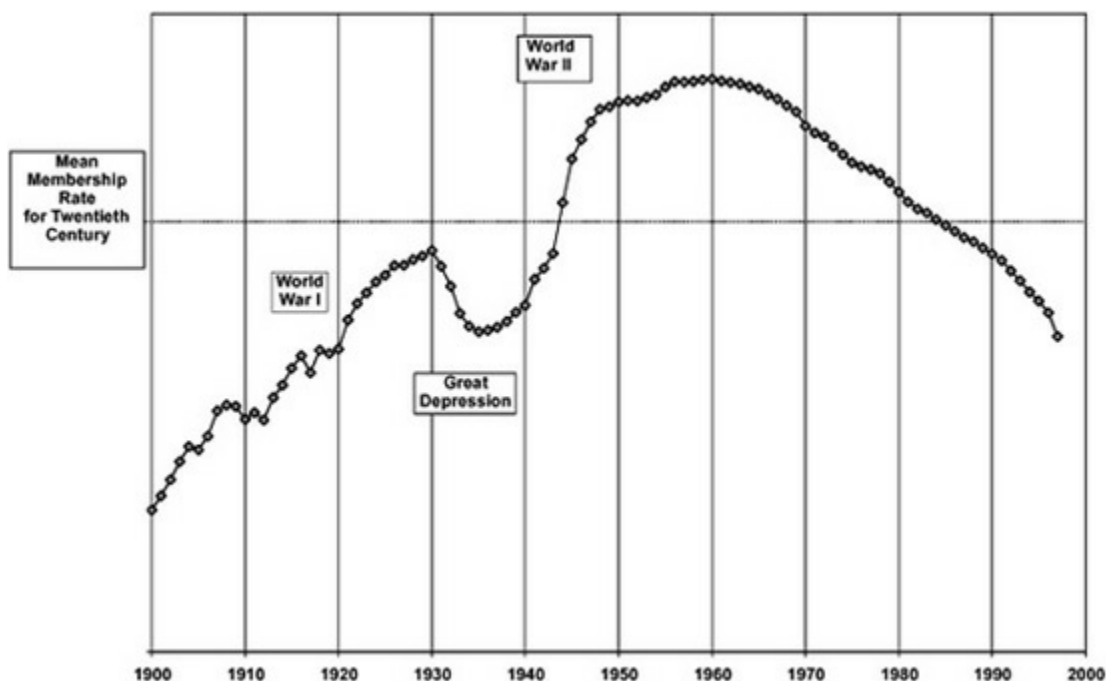


Figure 8: Average Membership Rate in Thirty-two National Chapter-Based Associations, 1900–1997

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 community involvement in American history. As a fraction of potential membership, the "market share" for these thirty-two organizations skyrocketed. Because of growing population, the increase was even more dramatic. The breadth of this civic explosion encompassed virtually every organization on the list, from "old-fashioned" ones like the Grange and the Elks (roughly a century old in the 1960s) to the newer service clubs like the Lions and the League of Women Voters (roughly four decades old in the 1960s).

By the late 1950s, however, this burst of community involvement began to tail off, even though absolute membership continued to rise for a while. By the late 1960s and early 1970s membership growth began to fall further behind population growth. At first, club secretaries long accustomed to announcing new membership records with monotonous annual regularity did not notice that their organizations were failing to keep pace with population growth. As the decline deepened, however, absolute membership began to slip and then to plummet. By century's close the massive postwar boom in membership rates in these organizations had been eliminated.¹⁷

On average, across all these organizations, membership rates began to plateau in 1957, peaked in the early 1960s, and began the period of sustained decline by 1969. On average, membership rates more than

doubled between 1940–45 and the peak and were slightly less than halved between the peak and 1997. These averages conceal some important differences among the experience of the various organizations. For example, the effects of the Great Depression varied from organization to organization, with massive declines in the Masons and Hadassah, while membership in youth organizations like the 4-H, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts seems to have been immune to the economic distress affecting adults. The postwar boom appears in virtually every case, but for the Grange and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs the good times had ended by the mid-1950s, whereas other organizations, like Rotary and Optimists, remained on a higher plateau until the 1980s. NAACP membership spiked sharply during World War II, collapsed in the early 1950s, regained its highest levels in the early 1960s, and then stagnated and slumped again from the 1970s onward. These organizational peculiarities remind us that behind each of these membership declines are scores of individual tales of leadership success and failure, organizational tenacity and strategic blunders, 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 local PTA was among the most common of community organizations. For example, one grassroots survey of associational membership in the early 1960s found that the PTA had more members than any other secular organization. More than one in every six adult Nebraskans reported membership in their local PTA.¹⁸ That the absolute number of PTA members was relatively high during the baby boom is, of course, no surprise at all—more parents, more PTA members. What is more 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,

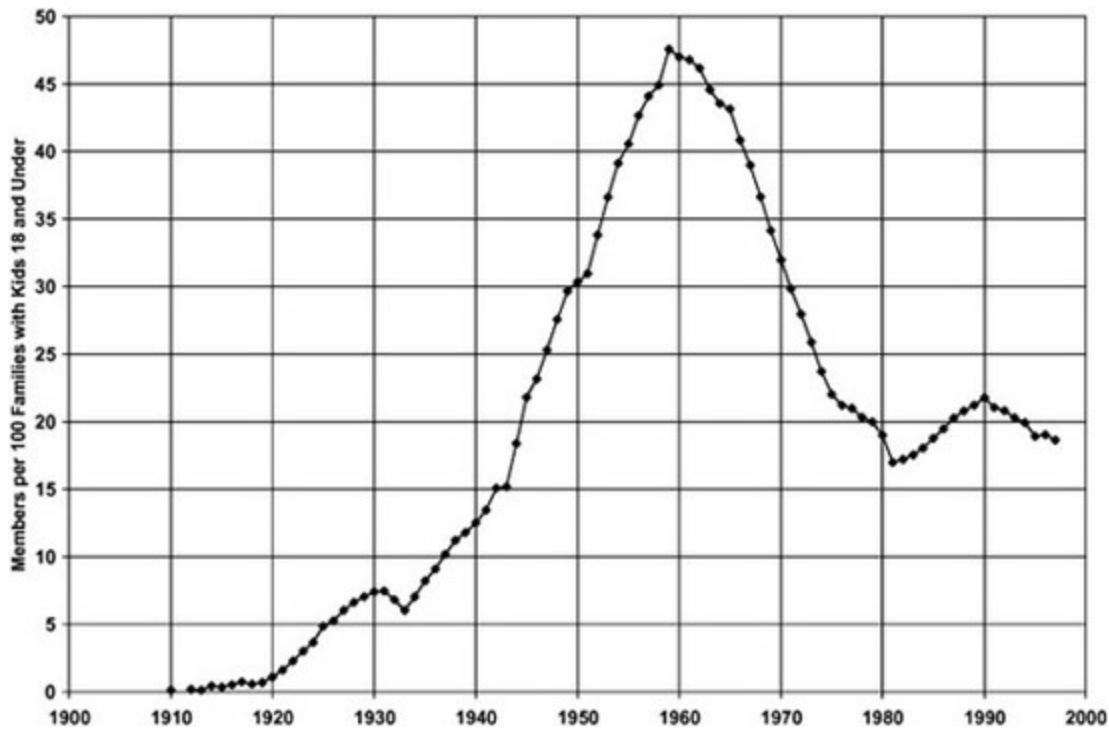


Figure 9: The Rise and Fall of the PTA, 1910–1997

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 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 committee 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

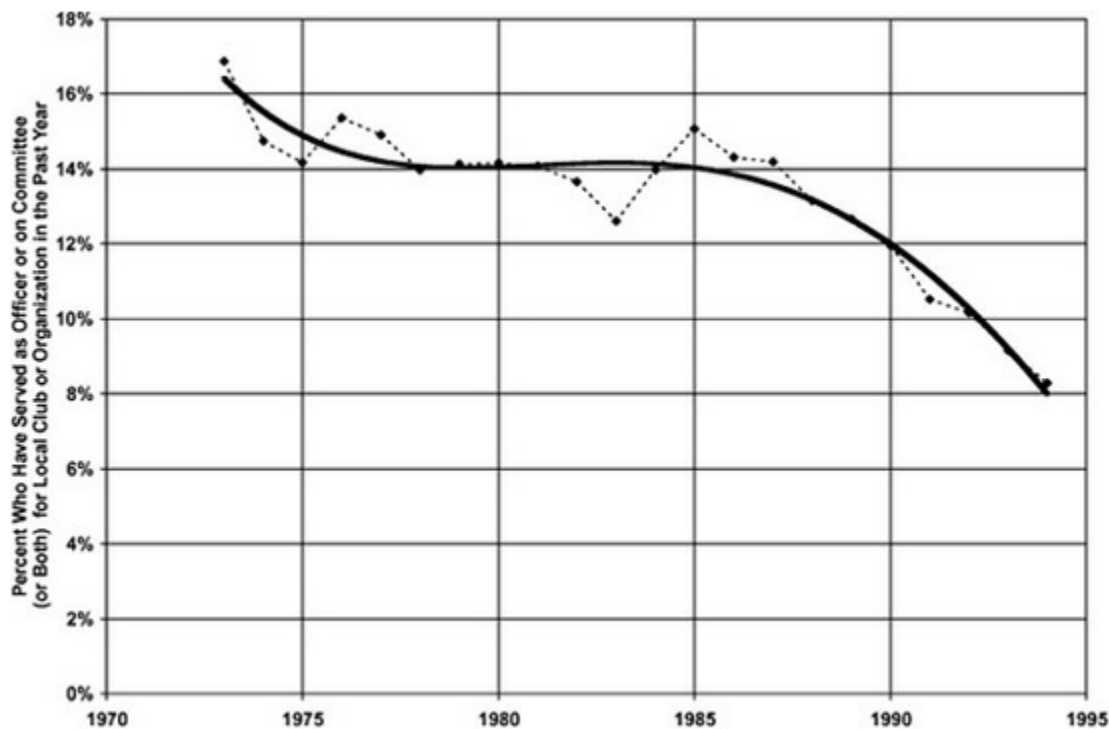


Figure 10: Active Organizational Involvement, 1973–1994 century. In 1975–76 American men and women attended twelve club meetings on average each year—essentially once a month.³¹ By 1999 that figure had shrunk by fully 58 percent to five meetings per year. In 1975–76, 64 percent of all Americans still 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

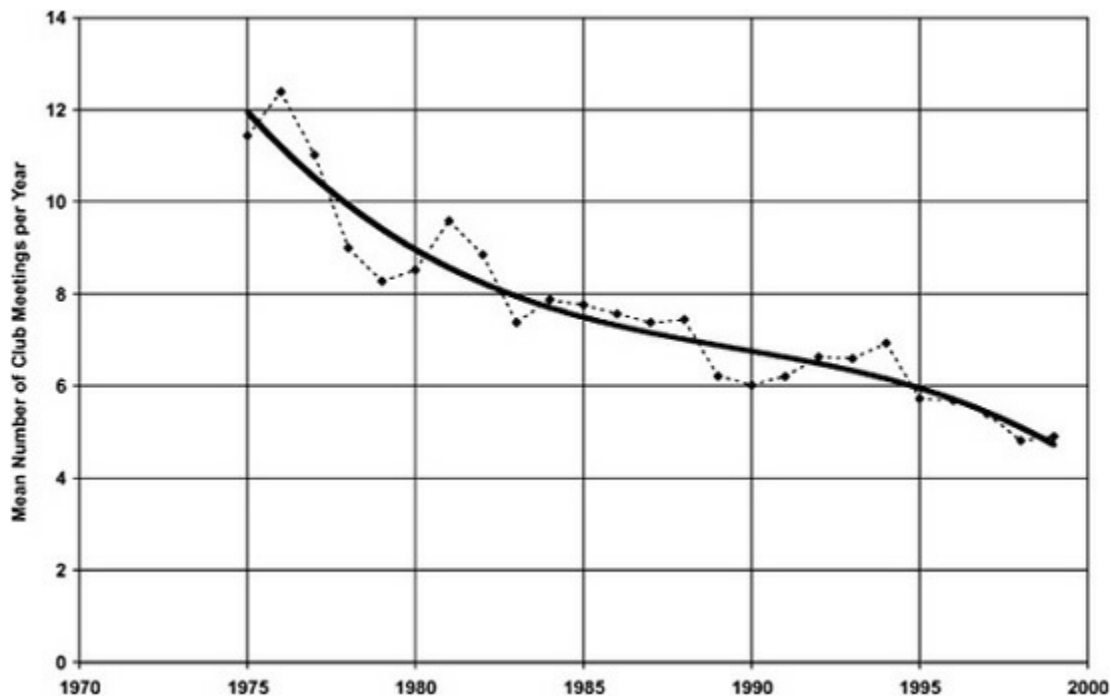


Figure 11: Club Meeting Attendance Dwindles, 1975–1999

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 down-trend 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 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 officers, 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.