

# CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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■ **Abstract** Is it possible for people to join their way to good citizenship? Contemporary thinking, both academic and popular, often leaves the impression that it is, but a careful investigation of the evidence raises serious doubts. In actuality, belonging to voluntary associations is a woefully inadequate foundation for good citizenship for three primary reasons: People join groups that are homogeneous, not heterogeneous; civic participation does not lead to, and may turn people away from, political participation; and not all groups promote democratic values. Good citizens need to learn that democracy is messy, inefficient, and conflict-ridden. Voluntary associations do not teach these lessons.

## INTRODUCTION

The prevailing view of good citizenship holds that people should be actively involved in politics, they should be knowledgeable, and they should hold strong democratic values, such as tolerance (see, e.g., Almond & Verba 1963; Barber 1984; Berelson et al. 1954; Conover et al. 1991; Mill 1910, 1962; Thompson 1970). At the heart of virtually all strategies for achieving these objectives is some form of participation. Active participation in society presumably encourages citizens to participate further, boosts their knowledge of society and its issues, and makes them more tolerant of and attached to their fellow citizens. But a successful approach for securing public participation in the first place has not been conceived.

Not for want of effort. Scholars and observers have devised inventive ways for people to become involved, including citizen juries, policy forums (Dahl 1970), coffee klatches (Mathews 1994), electronic town hall meetings (Etzioni 1972), deliberative opinion polls (Fishkin 1995), people's courts, issue caucuses, grassroots opinion columns in newspapers, "confessional talk shows" (Eliasoph 1998, p. 260), telepolls, national issue referenda (Cronin 1989), full-fledged teledemocracy (Becker & Slaton 2000), neighborhood assemblies of 5000 people meeting weekly, and a civic videotex service (Barber 1998). The most recent proposal, offered by Ackerman & Fishkin (2004), is to have a national holiday every presidential election year on which Americans would gather in public spaces to deliberate on the major issues of the election.

The problem is that all of these perfectly well-intentioned recommendations involve somewhat artificially structured efforts to get people to deliberate. As we have described elsewhere (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002), securing broad-based, meaningful deliberation on contentious issues from ordinary citizens, most of whom have little desire to engage in public policy discussions, is next to impossible no matter how creative the contrived forum may be.

But there is another popular strategy for securing citizen engagement. We speak of efforts to get citizens to join the many civic and voluntary organizations that already exist, to band together with acquaintances and neighbors for whatever purpose they might choose. The issues need not be contentious or national in scope, and the participants need not be randomly selected or primed with customized information. People simply need to meet face to face and the rest will fall into place.

Putnam unleashed a storm of approving excitement when he documented a sharp decline in associational life in the United States and elsewhere and described the improvements that would accompany a reversal of that sorry trend (Putnam 2000, Putnam et al. 2003). Enthusiasm for redressing deficiencies in citizenship through a renewed involvement in voluntary associational life—what came to be termed civic participation<sup>1</sup>—was widespread and intense. Many scholars jumped at the prospect of rejuvenating citizenship through voluntary association membership. The added allure was that citizens would not need to do anything particularly distasteful in the process, such as becoming involved in politics. The idea that civic engagement and therefore good citizenship could be achieved so painlessly seemed too good to be true. Indeed, in this review essay we argue it *is* too good to be true.

Like deliberation theorists, proponents of civic participation make broad, sweeping claims concerning the beneficent effects of community and group involvement on the development of good citizenship. We begin by discussing these claims before turning to the three key limitations on the potential of civic participation to inspire good citizenship:

1. The voluntary associations people are most likely to join are decidedly homogeneous and therefore incapable of generating the benefits claimed.
2. Civic participation in some circumstances actually turns people off of politics, leaving them less, not more, politically engaged.
3. Many groups do not pursue the kinds of goals that would be necessary for promoting democratic citizenship.

For true civic engagement to be achieved, a more realistic view is necessary.

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<sup>1</sup>Civic participation, according to Campbell (2004), consists of “nonremunerative, publicly spirited collective action that is not motivated by the desire to affect public policy” (p. 7). As such, it forms a sharp contrast with political participation, which consists of “those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take.”

## CIVIC PARTICIPATION AS A CURE-ALL

Civic participation is all the rage. If we could just get people engaged in their communities, the argument goes, many of society's ills would vanish. Supporters of civic participation believe it would lead to reduced crime rates (McCarthy et al. 2002, Rosenfeld et al. 2001), more efficient and responsive democratic governments (Putnam et al. 1993, Ch. 4; Ray 2002), and an empowered and vibrant citizenry, including young people (Youniss et al. 2001). On the basis of this positive and appealing message, foundations and institutes have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the study of civic participation. Academic communities have supported it through scholarship, required volunteering, and service-learning programs. In the political arena, the perception of voluntary associations as a cure-all for democratic societies is embraced by both the right and the left.

The right sees voluntary associations as a means of devolving power to local communities and as an alternative to government-sponsored programs. George H.W. Bush's "thousand points of light" and George W. Bush's "faith based and community initiatives" are clear examples. Don Eberly, who served as the deputy director of the White House Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives, claims:

The voluntary sector. . .often prompts us toward acts of generosity, mutual assistance, self-sacrifice, and compassion—which we would not otherwise undertake in the workplace or during the course of an average day. American greatness hangs not only upon a successful market and a strong government but upon the cultivation of humane and moral habits in the voluntary sector. . . . The voluntary sector, more than any other sector in society, possesses the capability to train our moral sensibilities and develop in us an active respect for the dignity of others. (Eberly & Streeter 2002, pp. ix–x)

The left views voluntary associations as a means of fostering grassroots politics and increasing the voice of ordinary people. Bill Clinton, through his national service program AmeriCorps, was no less eager than the Bushes to promote voluntary activity. Turning to Tocqueville, Galston makes strong social and political claims for voluntary associations:

They can serve as sites of resistance against tyranny and oppression. By strengthening social bonds, they can reduce the dangers of anomie. They can foster the bourgeois virtues that modern democratic societies need, and they can nourish the habits of civic engagement. They can help form opinions that shape deliberation in democratic public institutions. They provide vehicles for the noninstrumental expression of moral convictions as norms for the wider society. And of course, they offer opportunities for groups of citizens to conduct important public work through collective action outside the control of government. (Galston 2000, p. 69)

Of the many claims about the positive effects of civic participation, we focus on three claims about voluntary associations that are prevalent in the recent academic

literature. Volunteering is said to instill civic values, enhance political behavior, and improve democracy and society.

## Impact on Civic Values and Attitudes

According to the proponents of voluntary associations, interacting with others for a broader cause than one's own selfish interests pushes people to shift their attitudes. They learn to appreciate differences and they acquire basic democratic values. One of the most important of these values is tolerance. In a democratic society where freedom of speech and association are so important, the willingness to grant basic civil liberties to people whose views are abhorrent is essential. The argument for the positive effects of associational life on tolerance goes like this. People join groups for a variety of reasons and interact with others in pursuit of the group's goals. Since most people do not automatically talk about politics when in a nonpolitical group, and often actively avoid it (see, e.g., Eliasoph 1998, Ch. 2), they become friends with fellow members before learning that these new friends hold different political views. Since they now like these people, they become more tolerant of these different views. This tolerance then spreads to people who are not members of the group (see Mutz 2002b for an excellent overview of cross-cutting networks and tolerance). And research shows that indeed people involved in civic participation are more tolerant (Hooghe 2003), although there are disagreements over the specific mechanisms that lead to this increased tolerance.

Improved civic values do not stop with tolerance. A primary argument in the social capital literature is that civic participation increases interpersonal trust. "Trustworthiness lubricates social life. Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity" (Putnam 2000, p. 21). People come to believe that if they do a good deed for someone or for their community, that action will be reciprocated. When people distrust others, they will not assume that a good deed will someday be reciprocated, and they will be less likely to do the good deed at all. A great deal has been written on trust (e.g., Braithwaite & Levi 1998, Fukuyama 1995, Jackman & Miller 1998, Levi & Stoker 2000, Uslaner 2002), so we will not review this area in depth. Suffice it to say that research confirms the correlation between civic participation and interpersonal trust: People who are involved in voluntary associations are more likely to trust people than those who are not involved (Brehm & Rahn 1997, Claibourn & Martin 2000, McLaren & Baird 2003). Some scholars also argue that involvement in voluntary associations increases trust in government (Joslyn & Cigler 2001), although others find that it decreases government approval (Brehm & Rahn 1997).

There is evidence that civic participation improves other attitudes. Joslyn & Cigler (2001) find that participation in voluntary associations increases members' sense of political efficacy and decreases the polarization of their evaluations of the candidates running for president. People involved in associations may experience first-hand the effect they can have as a group, and this sense of efficacy may

then be generalized to the political arena. As far as the decreased polarization of opinions is concerned, research has shown that through interaction in voluntary associations, members share information that they can then use when making political judgments (Ray 2002). In addition, members of voluntary associations are more likely to watch television news and to read newspapers, which increases the breadth of information available for discussion (Norris 1996). This sharing of information could contribute to moderating evaluations as people hear from trusted others that the opposing candidate is not as horrible as some might think.

## Impact on Political Behavior

Proponents of civic participation contend that voluntary association involvement not only improves attitudes but also enhances political behavior. People who join voluntary associations are more likely to participate in politics (Teorell 2003, Verba et al. 1995), especially time-based and volunteer-oriented activities (Ayala 2000). One argument put forward to explain this phenomenon is that people learn civic skills in voluntary associations, such as how to lead a meeting or write an effective letter, and they can transfer these skills to the political realm (Verba et al. 1995, 309–17). Once people have these skills in their behavioral repertoire, they feel more comfortable using them in different realms.

A problem with the civic skills argument is that even passive members in groups increase their political participation, though it is hard to imagine that passive members improve their civic skills nearly as much as active members do. An alternative argument is that voluntary group membership, even if passive, increases the opportunity to be recruited to participate more broadly in politics (Teorell 2003; Verba et al. 1995, p. 144). In essence, the more people you know, the more people there are who might get you to sign up for some political activity.

It is likely that both arguments are correct: group members learn civic skills and they are more likely to be recruited. The main point, though, is that civic participation is related to political participation. People who are active in voluntary associations also tend to be active in politics. It is not just group participation that increases, though. An in-depth study of the relationship between voluntary association involvement and turnout found that group involvement increases the likelihood of voting (Cassel 1999). Part of the reason for this link is that group membership increases participatory predispositions, civic skills, and the likelihood of being recruited. Much of the relationship, however, remained unexplained.

## Impact on Democracy and Society

Supporters believe voluntary association membership not only helps the individual members, it also helps society more broadly. Voluntary associations strengthen social bonds and develop a sense of community (Dekker & van den Broek 1998, Galston 2000, Ray 2002); they breed cooperation and ease coordination to help solve collective action problems in communities (Brehm & Rahn 1997); and they increase social capital in communities (Wollebaek & Selle 2002). Democracy

is also strengthened when civil society is strong. The primary argument is that democratic institutions must be more effective, responsive, and accountable when citizens are highly involved in groups (Dekker & van den Broek 1998, Galston 2000, Ray 2002). And because power is more broadly distributed, freedom and liberty are safeguarded (Ray 2002). Indeed, a major contention of Tocqueville was that a strong associational life prevented government from becoming too strong, because although individuals can be ignored, groups cannot be (Tocqueville [1840] 1969, pp. 513–17). There is power in numbers.

## WHY CIVIC PARTICIPATION IS NOT A PANACEA

Who could possibly be opposed to the idea of people working together to better their community? Virtually no one. The concerns expressed about civic participation have not been attached to the typically laudable immediate community outcomes but rather to proponents' optimistic claims for the positive effects of civic participation. Does involvement in community organizations and voluntary associations really make people better citizens and make democracies stronger?

We take aim at the three central claims outlined above: that interaction among diverse people will automatically enhance democratic values, that civic participation fosters political participation, and that democracy is strengthened by widespread involvement in voluntary associations. A significant array of recent research calls into question the beneficial effects of civic participation, and in some cases even raises the specter of decidedly negative effects.

### Diversity and the Enhancement of Citizen Values

Putnam (2000) draws a crucial distinction between “bonding” and “bridging” social capital. Bonding activities are “inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups,” whereas bridging activities are “outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages” (p. 22). Most scholars believe bridging groups are far more likely to have a positive effect on interpersonal trust (McLaren & Baird 2003) and other important personal and societal traits, although not everyone agrees that groups must be heterogeneous. Those in the latter group claim that multiple association memberships even in homogeneous groups can increase political activity (Teorell 2003) and social capital formation (Wollebaek & Selle 2002). Regardless, the general argument is still the same: When people come into contact with those who are different, they become better citizens, as indicated in their values and their behavior.

But involvement in heterogeneous (or multiple homogeneous) groups is not the nostrum some scholars hope it is. Social capital theorists assume that through face-to-face interaction with diverse people, group members develop ingroup trust that is then generalized to the broader community. Membership in a homogeneous group would not improve the extent to which trust is generalized to people outside

the group. The social psychology research on groups, however, shows how difficult it can be to get people involved in heterogeneous groups, and even if they do join a heterogeneous group, they are likely to gravitate toward and interact with fellow group members who are similar to them.

Study after study shows that people are attracted to those who are similar to them (e.g., Berscheid & Reis 1998, Byrne 1997). People choose friends who resemble them in their demographics, attitudes, values (Newcomb 1961), personality (Boyden et al. 1984), interpersonal style, and communication skills (Burlinson & Samter 1996). Although proximity is important initially, it is similarity that really matters over the long haul.

Similarity is not limited to the interpersonal level. Research shows that group members tend to be similar in terms of age, sex, beliefs, and opinions (see, e.g., George 1990, Levine & Moreland 1998, Magaro & Ashbrook 1985). Popielarz (1999), for example, found that women tend to belong to gender-segregated groups and that women's groups tend to be homogeneous in terms of age, education level, marital status, and work status as well. Beyond women's groups, evidence suggests that civic groups are becoming more homogeneous over time. It certainly appears to be the case that group membership is more stratified by class now than in the past (Skocpol 2002, Costa & Kahn 2003). And when income inequality increases, it is the lower classes whose group involvement is most likely to diminish (Brown & Uslaner 2002), meaning not only that the membership within a given group becomes more homogeneous but that on the aggregate level the membership across all groups becomes more homogeneous. Voluntary association members tend to be better educated and wealthier than nonmembers (Hooghe 2001; Oxendine 2004; Verba et al. 1995, pp. 190, 432), and those who are most active in organizations overwhelmingly come from a higher socioeconomic status. In Canada, 6% of adults account for 35%–42% of all civic involvement (Reed & Selbee 2001). The same people tend to be active across a variety of organizations.

Groups tend to be homogeneous for two reasons. First, groups attract people who are similar to the existing group members, both because people like to be around people like themselves and because people who are similar are more likely to be recruited into the group. Second, groups encourage similarity among members (Moreland 1987) by shunning those who break the norms too often and pressuring the repeat offenders to leave the group (Schachter 1951). Campbell (2004) argues convincingly that homogeneous groups can more easily reach a consensus on the norms that guide behavior. They are also better able to enforce the norms and to sanction those who defy them. It is no accident, then, that people tend to be members of homogeneous groups. They are drawn to them, recruited into them, and pressured to conform within them. Breaking out of this pattern is not easy (Eliasoph 1998).

Work on social identity offers a compelling explanation for why adhering to group norms is so important to people. According to social identity theory, people who are members of a group easily come to identify with the group, characterize fellow group members in a positive way, and like fellow group members (Tajfel 1982,

Turner 1999). Because they like and identify with the group, they want to be good group members, which means that they want to behave the way a good member behaves. This entails following the group norms and fitting the stereotype they hold of the group (Hogg & Abrams 1988, Ellemers et al. 1999). People who strongly identify with the group tend to see themselves as prototypical members of the group and to behave as prototypical members. They also see consensus in their group (Turner 1999) and perceive it as homogeneous and cohesive (Branscombe et al. 1999).

Homogeneous groups can therefore offer their members a relatively conflict-free environment. When someone does raise an issue likely to create conflict, association leaders quickly let him or her know that the group is not interested in discussing it (Eliasoph 1998, p. 33; Mansbridge 1983, Chs. 6, 13). Group members feel uncomfortable when conflict arises and quickly want to return to the warm feelings generated by consensus. Conflict avoidance is not uncommon. As Mutz (2002a) points out, conflict threatens social relationships, and people use a variety of avoidance techniques to remove the conflict situation. People do not want to feel uncomfortable and tense among those in their social network. It is easier simply to disengage.

It is this tendency to disengage that reveals a problem with the heterogeneous versus homogeneous group argument. To get the full benefits of associational involvement, the groups must be diverse so that people interact with others who hold different opinions. But what if heterogeneous groups dampen civic participation?<sup>2</sup> Researchers have found that heterogeneous communities have significantly lower civic participation rates than homogeneous communities (Alesina & La Ferrara 2000, Campbell 2004, Costa & Kahn 2003). Conflicting viewpoints can dampen the desire to become involved in civic participation. People from heterogeneous communities are less likely to want to attend a voluntary association meeting only to have fellow members get upset with each other. When people have to interact face to face, consensus becomes very desirable.

At the group level, researchers tend to focus not on diversity's effects on civic participation but on its effects on particularized and generalized trust (see, e.g., Fukuyama 1995, Putnam 2000, Uslaner 2002). Heterogeneous groups, these researchers argue, are much more likely to generate generalized trust than are homogeneous groups. However, comparative research on the relationship between

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<sup>2</sup>The nature of existing research makes it somewhat difficult to address this possibility definitively. Researchers have used various combinations of civic and political activities in their participation measures, which have led to mixed results. For example, when looking at community-level heterogeneity, Oliver (1999) measures civic engagement by using four variables: voting in local elections, contacting locally elected officials, attending community board meetings, and attending voluntary association meetings. Costa & Kahn (2003) examine volunteering, group membership, trust, and voter turnout. Campbell (2004) carefully distinguishes between the two types of participation and finds that community heterogeneity increases political participation but decreases civic participation. As political scientists have long recognized, conflicting viewpoints can increase excitement about politics, thereby increasing the desire to participate in politics.

group diversity and trust has generated mixed findings at best. McLaren & Baird (2003) find that, among Italians, heterogeneous group members have higher generalized trust than homogeneous group members; however, Stolle (2001) finds that this relationship obtains only in certain countries. In Sweden, group diversity (defined as involvement of foreigners in the groups) was significantly and positively related to generalized trust, but in the United States, group diversity (defined as racial diversity) was significantly and *negatively* related to generalized trust.

Because people are unlikely to be involved in heterogeneous groups, the more important concern is what happens to homogeneous group members. The prospects are not positive. People involved in homogeneous associations do not learn generalized trust, do not learn how to cooperate with people who are different, and do not confront a wide array of information from many different perspectives. Homogeneous group members develop “strong” trust (Granovetter 1973), but this acts to exclude those who are different and to turn group members inward.

Indeed, some evidence indicates that group homogeneity increases participation directed toward helping group members but diminishes participation directed toward bettering the community as a whole. Uslander (2001)<sup>3</sup> studied fundamentalist religious groups in the United States, which are homogeneous. He reports, “Religion leads people to do good deeds, but generally only for their own kind” (p. 28), although mainline churches sometimes promote outgroup helping behaviors (see also Cassel 1999). Wuthnow (1998, p. 148) quotes a woman named Mary who volunteers at a church-based center. When Wuthnow asks about diversity at the center, Mary “says church people are often interested in helping the needy, but hold back because the needy are not like them or because they fear the needy may become involved in their church: ‘It’s very hard for them to embrace someone who maybe doesn’t look like them or doesn’t look like they would like to be a part of their relationships.’”

The evidence that joining voluntary associations, whether homogeneous or heterogeneous, increases civic values is decidedly weak. The claim, made by proponents of civic participation, that participation in bridging groups increases social capital and civic participation is a hard one to sell. People rarely become involved in heterogeneous groups, and even when they do, they tend to interact with those members who are similar to them. And although some scholars argue that involvement in heterogeneous groups increases generalized trust (Brehm & Rahn 1997), others point out that it is those people who are trusting in the first place who tend to join heterogeneous groups (Stolle 1998, 2001; Stolle & Rochon 1998).

## The Civic versus Political Divide

Aside from the problems introduced by people’s attraction to homogeneous groups, some scholars worry that placing a strong emphasis on civic participation could

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<sup>3</sup>See also Uslander’s unpublished manuscript, *Civic engagement in America: why people participate in political and social life* (University of Maryland, College Park, MD).

actually make people *less* likely to become politically involved. Walker (2002) relates her experiences with the Center for American Women and Politics' National Education for Women leadership program: "The participants, students from colleges and universities across the country, were actively engaged in volunteer and service learning activities. But any talk of political engagement—voting, running for office, lobbying—and they recoiled with disgust. Service was a friendly, morally pure alternative to the messy, dirty, compromise-filled world of politics" (p. 183).

Arguments abound for why voluntary association activity might not increase political activity. We focus on four of these arguments: (a) Associations increasingly limit members' participation; (b) the federal government's role is less likely to stimulate political participation; (c) civic participation leads to negative views of democratic governance; and (d) increased generalized trust enables more free riders.

First, Putnam (2000, p. 51) and Skocpol (2003) suggest that as associations moved from membership-directed organizations with face-to-face interactions to Washington-based organizations with elites making all of the decisions, association members lost the opportunity to learn the civic skills necessary for participating in politics and the connections with the political sphere that more grassroots associations offered them. Writing a check to an organization, whether it be the National Rifle Association, the Environmental Defense Fund, or the American Association of Retired Persons, does not have the same political engagement benefits for members as does regular interaction with fellow members of community-based groups.

Others go further and argue that membership in associations harms political activity, perhaps because of shifts in the government's role in society. Berry and his fellow working group members state that, "as the nonprofit sector has grown and increasingly taken over a wide range of social service delivery, the concomitant increase in civic indicators such as volunteering and charitable fundraising may have come at the expense of political voice" (Berry et al. 2003, p. 6). If federal, state, and local governments were providing the services that are now offered by many nonprofit organizations, people would be motivated to become politically involved in these various levels of government to have a say in how the money was spent and to try to influence policies related to these programs. When many of the services are handled by private, nonprofit organizations, whose boards are not elected by the general populace, there is little incentive for people to become involved in politics, since governments seemingly have little to do with them.

Tocqueville, the presumed intellectual forebear of the associational life advocates, takes a less than benign view of government's role in fostering associational membership (see McLean et al. 2002). According to Tocqueville ([1840] 1969, p. 523),

the governments of today look upon [political] associations much as medieval kings regarded the great vassals of the Crown; they feel a sort of instinctive

abhorrence toward them and combat them whenever they meet. But they bear a natural goodwill toward civil associations because they easily see that they, far from directing public attention to public affairs, serve to turn men's minds away therefrom, and getting them more and more occupied with projects for which public tranquillity is essential, discourage thoughts of revolution.

Politicians are free to do what they want to do while the public, disengaged from politics, tranquilly pursues its interests in civic organizations.

The third argument points out that people are disgusted with politics in the United States. People view democratic processes as messy, inefficient, unprincipled, and filled with conflict (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002). Voluntary associations offer an alternative that provides a conflict-free environment. "For young people eager to make a difference, but living in a culture that regards politics with distrust and disgust, service may present a welcome way of 'doing something' without the mess and conflict of politics" (Walker 2002, p. 187). People can feel good about doing something to help their community even as they disengage from the political system itself.

The problem is that reinforcing the message that consensus and harmony are good whereas conflict and disagreements are bad undermines what democracy is all about.

The focus on consensus and helping implies that citizens should get along because of a shared base of interests and needs. But, in a diverse, pluralistic society, citizens often do not share similar interests or needs. Democratic institutions exist not to level out differences between citizens, but to find ways to bring competing needs to the table and make difficult decisions about the allocation of resources and the production of values. Democracy does not demand that citizens like each other. The process is supposed to be messy, conflictual, and difficult. . . . This is a very different message than the one that is conveyed by most of the service rhetoric and research, and by a culture that seeks to avoid or denigrate politics. (Walker 2002, p. 187)

Because younger people are the ones who are especially pressed into volunteering and service—what with service learning programs, "volunteering" required by their schools, and national programs such as AmeriCorps—they are the ones who are learning that politics is bad, and this bodes ill for their participation rates in the future. Keeter et al. (2002) note a disturbing finding: "While the country has succeeded in transmitting the value of civic engagement to successive generations, there is strong evidence that it has failed in keeping the chain of political engagement unbroken" (p. 2). Youth who are engaged in political groups at school tend to be politically active, but most student groups are nonpolitical in nature. Indeed, volunteers in general consider their volunteer work to be nonpolitical (Keeter et al. 2002, p. 19). But it is in the political realm where important policy decisions are made that will have a fundamental effect on people, young and old. Volunteering in a soup kitchen will help hungry individuals in a town but will do

nothing to address broader problems of homelessness and poverty. These issues need government.

Adherents of the final argument start with the premise proposed by social capital theorists that voluntary association membership increases generalized trust. People learn to trust the members of their associations, and this trust then gets generalized to the population as a whole. It is this generalized trust, according to social capital theorists, that ultimately makes the economy and the democratic system run smoothly. Some scholars argue, though, that this generalized trust might actually diminish political participation because those who trust political and community leaders may not see a need to participate (Claibourn & Martin 2000, Muhlberger 2003). Participating in politics incurs costs, including the costs of gaining political knowledge and spending time on politics, so it makes sense to become a free rider if others can be trusted to make the right decisions. When people's varying general tendencies to join groups are controlled for, it is the distrustful who are more likely to feel compelled to participate (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2001).

No matter who is right (and the four arguments are not mutually exclusive, so they may all be right), it is important to reiterate that there is a positive, though not robust, relationship between voluntary association membership and political participation (Campbell et al. 2003, Jenkins et al. 2003, Keeter et al. 2002). Generally, people who participate in voluntary associations are also likely to participate in politics. The relationship holds true for heterogeneous (Oliver 1999) and homogeneous (Hero & Tolbert 2004, Hill & Leighley 1999, Mutz 2002a, Rubenson 2003) communities. Among Chinese-Americans with high levels of generalized trust, Uslaner & Conley (2003) found that large social networks, membership in ethnically homogeneous groups, and participation in politics went hand in hand. The political participation of blacks and Hispanics also appears to be unharmed by their involvement in homogeneous groups. Ayala & Benavides (2003) found that the homogeneity of an association's membership did not negatively affect political participation, and, even among whites, group homogeneity actually increased political participation rates.

Age groups, however, may be a different matter. Scholars have been particularly concerned about the effects of civic participation on political participation among the young. Older people are more likely to be active both politically and civically. Younger people, however, often find civic participation more appealing than political participation, and the percentage of young people who are involved in both is significantly lower (11%) than the percentage of people aged 38 and older (~18%) (Jenkins et al. 2003). What remains unclear is whether young people's appreciation for civic participation will continue as they age. For many young people, volunteering in the community is not a choice but a school requirement. Campbell et al. (2003) note that making political participation mandatory decreases people's internal motivation to participate in other ways. Students who are forced to be involved in civic activities might well lose their intrinsic motivation to be involved in the future and may find themselves even less likely to participate in civic or political activities.

Nonetheless, the relationship between civic and political participation leads some to believe that getting people involved in voluntary associations will lead to their increased political involvement. But clearly there is a self-selection bias that makes it difficult to determine the effect of voluntary association membership on political participation rates (Stolle 2003). People who join voluntary associations are by nature active people. Research has shown convincingly that active people tend to join groups of whatever stripe and they also tend to participate in politics (Keeter et al. 2002, Jenkins et al. 2003). Joiners participate in politics because it is another form of joining; therefore, it is a mistake to assume a causal relationship between voluntary association membership and political participation. Further, the more active people are, the more likely they are to have large social networks, which McClurg (2003) has shown is more strongly related to political participation than group membership per se.

## The Importance of Group Goals

Scholars have increasingly recognized that not all groups are created equal. There is a “dark side” to civic participation (Fiorina 1999) that can create “unsocial” capital (Levi 1996). The effects of group membership, according to these scholars, depend on the group’s goals and values. If the group’s goals are democratic, politically oriented, and tolerant of others, then its members will learn democratic values and become politically active as a benefit of being involved in the group. If, however, the group is antidemocratic, disdainful of politics, and intolerant of outsiders, then its members will learn undemocratic values and probably become disengaged from the political system. “We might be right to be wary about too much bonding among people who disdain others” (Uslaner & Dekker 2001, p. 181).

Armony (2004, p. 20), drawing on an article by Michael Berryhill in *The New Republic*, dramatically illustrates the problem.

Members of the Aryan Brotherhood, the Aryan Circle, the Texas Syndicate, the Crips, the Bloods, and the Confederate Knights of America—all prison gangs in Texas—attend meetings, elect officers, have a system of rules and sanctions, exercise internal accountability, make the bulk of their decisions democratically, distribute benefits according to merit, and write their own constitutions. Members learn to trust each other and thus discover the benefits of cooperation and reciprocity. They develop organizational skills by handling paperwork and taking responsibility for specific tasks. They also learn to exercise their rights. . . .

Indeed, upon leaving prison, one member of the Knights, John King, decided to start a chapter of the Knights in his home town and brutally murdered an African-American, James Byrd, presumably to gain credibility for his new group among the Knights (Armony 2004). These groups are voluntary associations that develop many of the citizenship virtues extolled by those who promote civic participation,

yet no one argues that this type of voluntary association is positive for democracy or for good citizenship.

Part of the problem is that not all groups are formed for positive reasons, and some groups are formed for decidedly negative ones. Rosenblum (1998) argues, “Insulated from government, people form associations to meet all sorts of emotional and ideological needs, amplify selfish interests, and give vent to exclusionary impulses” (p. 14). Kohn (2002) contends that “the protection of status is among the core purposes of association” (p. 296). There is no guarantee that groups will be tolerant or actively democratic, so voluntary association membership will not necessarily enhance democracy. A common example offered by critics of civic participation is Nazi Germany. Associational life was rich and vibrant, yet clearly many of the German people were not tolerant toward those who were different, nor did they exhibit key democratic attitudes and behaviors: “active associational life worked to reinforce rather than overcome narrow particularistic interests” (Knack 2002, p. 773; see also Armony 2004).

Activists tend to be drawn from a higher socioeconomic status, and higher-status individuals tend to hold most strongly the dominant cultural values of their time and place. Therefore, associational values may simply reflect the dominant cultural values (Rossteutscher 2002). If these are democratic and civil, then group members will exhibit higher levels of democratic and civil values than nonmembers, not because of their associational experiences but because they are more likely to have held the dominant values in the first place.

Undemocratic and intolerant groups have constituted an undeniable component of associational life in the United States. Kaufman (2002) argues persuasively, drawing on historical evidence, that when association life is particularly vibrant and growing, “competitive voluntarism” takes hold. The growth of associations sets off competition among the numerous groups for “members, money, institutional legitimacy, and political power” (p. 7). Group members more actively than ever try to recruit new members into the association. These associations become more homogeneous and segregated by demographic characteristics because of recruitment practices and pressures to adhere to group norms. People who do not fit the group often quit, “further reinforcing the selection pressures incumbent on the membership-attainment process” (p. 7).

In the heyday of voluntary associations in the United States (between the Civil War and World War I), competitive voluntarism increasingly differentiated society along gender, ethnic, and racial lines. The outcome of this segregation was not benign. Kaufman (2002, p. 9) contends that

by encouraging Americans to bond together along gender, ethnonational, and ethnoreligious lines, associationalism further disposed them to fear one another and thus to fear government itself—particularly any government program that might require the redistribution of income or collectivization of risk. The result was a nation with a rather bizarre sense of self, one rooted not in the benefits of citizenry or in the value of inclusion but in libertarian paranoia and mutual distrust.

He further argues that many of the problems deplored by many Americans today are the result of this group segregation: racial prejudice, special-interest politics, a love of guns, a fear of government, a weak labor movement, and limited government-based social services and welfare provisions.

Armony (2004) similarly argues that associations can serve undemocratic ends, especially when people in dominant positions in society feel threatened. Armony's in-depth case study of the Citizens' Councils, a pro-segregationist group, shows how associations can actively pursue undemocratic ends in an attempt to shore up the status quo against the threat of change. To help with recruitment, the segregationist Citizens' Councils often worked with associations that Putnam (2000) and others have held up as exemplars of civic participation, such as the Rotary Club, Kiwanis, Lions, and American Legion. Clearly, "the 'dark side' of civil society may not be easily set apart from the 'bright side'" (Armony 2004, p. 80). The Citizens' Councils, with the aid of allied organizations, could effectively impose economic sanctions against people who favored integration. Because of the social networks created by these associations, word spread quickly and efficiently that anyone who supported integration should be denied jobs, service, and credit. The social networks were highly effective, especially in smaller towns. In America's cities, middle- and upper-class homeowners formed associations to defend their property and to lobby local governments to influence zoning and incorporation. As Berman (1997) notes, one "factor to examine in determining when civil society activity will bolster or weaken a democratic regime. . . is the political context within which that activity unfolds" (p. 567). When the political context is uncivil, including when political elites join with associations to maintain the status quo against democratic change, the outcome of civic participation will be negative.

A separate, although clearly related, issue is the extent to which the processes used by the associations are democratic. The common argument is that organizations run democratically will help create better democratic citizens than will organizations run in an authoritarian fashion. Putnam's (1993) work on Italy showed that vertical and hierarchical organizations, such as the Catholic Church, are less likely to foster social capital and civic engagement than horizontal and voluntary organizations. In vertical organizations, subordinates can shirk, bosses can exploit, and norms of reciprocity and trust never develop. Additionally, social networks are denser in horizontal organizations as people interact as equals.

A related argument is that members of democratic organizations are more likely than members of undemocratic organizations to learn civic skills that can then be transferred to the political realm (Verba et al. 1995). Horizontal organizations, such as many Protestant churches, allow many members to obtain important civic skills (e.g., letter writing and meeting organization) because a wide range of members are involved in decision making. Vertical organizations, such as the Catholic Church, limit this skill development to a select few. Workplace democracy similarly gives workers an opportunity to learn how to make decisions in a democratic fashion (see, e.g., Witte 1980, Greenberg 1986). Organizational democracy empowers members.

These arguments presume that people generalize to other settings what they have learned in civic associations or democratic workplaces. Rosenblum (1998), however, is highly critical of what she calls the “transmission belt” model of civil society, the idea that “the beneficial formative effects of association spill over from one sphere to another” (p. 48). She adds, “As if we can infer enduring traits from behavior in a particular setting. As if moral dispositions shaped in one context, public or private, are transferable to dissimilar ones. The ‘transmission belt’ model is simplistic as a general dynamic.” Rosenblum doubts that “the habits of trust cultivated in one social sphere are exhibited in incongruent groups in separate spheres” (p. 48), as the model’s proponents contend. Empirical support for her skepticism comes from Carlson (2003), who finds that organizational democracy is unrelated to members’ democratic attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, he concurs with Rosenblum that “citizens are quite capable of distinguishing the grounds for associational autocracies from the philosophy that undergirds democratic government” (p. 47).

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE GOOD CITIZEN

Disputes over the view that civic participation invariably makes people better citizens ultimately rest on our understanding of human behavior. We conclude this review with a plea that researchers make explicit their assumptions regarding human nature in order to strengthen theories and research. Proponents of civic participation, and social capital in particular, tell a comforting tale, one that promises better citizens, a healthier community, and a stronger democracy with little hard work involved. But this is not a realistic tale.

Social capital is an undemanding master. . . social capital is fundamentally about how we conduct our everyday life. . . . It does not take years of pushing hard for structural reforms. It does not involve upsetting the political coalitions that have strong stakes in existing institutions. It does not require the painful choices that economists. . . say that poor countries must make in the transition to free markets. Instead, we can mobilize people to do what they would do naturally—join with others in pleasurable activities. (Uslaner & Dekker 2001, p. 178)

The problem, as we have seen, is that the evidence does not clearly support the contention that associational activity leads to more democratic citizens and polities. Some research even suggests such activity leads to less democratic citizens and polities.

Where did proponents go wrong? The error was probably in their implicit theory of human behavior. Participatory democrats and advocates of civic participation often assume that people want to be involved in politics. They believe that many more people would participate if only the right conditions were created. For example, Ackerman & Fishkin (2002; see also 2004) recognize that not all of the American voting population would participate in the first Deliberation Day, a day

set aside as a national holiday to bring people together to deliberate about the major issues of the election, but they still expect that fully half of the electorate would participate. Since approximately 100 million Americans typically vote in presidential elections, this means that about 50 million would be involved in Deliberation Day (Ackerman & Fishkin 2002, p. 139). But people's willingness to participate in exchange for a substantial monetary payment (\$150 has been mentioned) should not be confused with good citizenship. We think it highly unlikely that there would be a great outpouring of interest in spending a national holiday deliberating about politics with a bunch of strangers for purposes other than acquiring \$150. Aside from those who need the money, the people most likely to show up are those who would have voted anyway. And participants who attend Deliberation Day for the money are unlikely to deliberate much, feeling cowed by those more loquacious and better informed.

Our own experience with running numerous focus groups around the country is telling. These sessions lasted less than two hours. Participants volunteered and were paid for their time. We served refreshments and tried to make everyone feel comfortable and welcome. Yet almost invariably, one or two of the focus group participants refused to say a word throughout the whole discussion. When asked by other participants to say something, the nontalkers would either shrug and not respond or they would say they did not know anything about politics. Throughout the discussion, they frequently doodled on a piece of paper or looked dreadfully bored. The nontalkers were there because another participant had dragged them along or because they wanted the money. They were clearly uncomfortable and wanted to leave.

As we have argued elsewhere (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002), many people are not interested in politics. Americans are busy. "The demands of job and family, not to mention the appeal of sports, movies, TV, and a host of other things that compete with politics for the public's attention, all tend to make politics a fairly low priority for the average voter" (Donovan & Bowler 2004, p. 35). It is not helpful to imagine people to be something they currently are not and have no desire to become. To assume that people would ever flock voluntarily (i.e., without monetary incentive) to Deliberation Day, or any other political event, is simply wrong. If they are interested, they will come. If not, they won't. In 2004, the war in Iraq and the polarizing candidacy of George W. Bush overcame many citizens' preference to stay away from politics. When these or comparable factors are absent, that motivation will be gone.

Those committed to promoting civic engagement typically believe that current governmental institutions and societal arrangements conspire to dull people's innate desire to engage. They note problems such as prejudicial barriers to engagement, unstimulating political choices, biased media, and elites who prefer to be undisturbed by the *hoi polloi*. As real as these problems may be, acknowledging them does nothing to support the claim that if they were removed people would be civically engaged. Instead, the belief that civic engagement is the default behavior is simply an article of faith, and advocates apparently see little need for empirical

tests of it. They so enjoy politics and civic life themselves that they are unable to fathom the possibility that others do not share their “curious passion” (Mueller 1999, p. 185).

But a careful review of the empirical evidence suggests that many people lack the motivation to engage in civic life generally and politics specifically. In those political contexts where institutions are absent, such as town hall meetings, participants’ reactions are cynical and negative (see Mansbridge 1983, Ch. 6). Less articulate people feel belittled, the decision-making process is roundly ridiculed by participants, and many people quit going or advocate that decisions be made in other forums (see Hampson 1996). Institutions cannot really be the problem in town hall meetings; there are no parties, media, interest groups, or elaborate rules, only dozens of neighbors meeting to discuss shared problems. And still the people are disgusted. In fact, comments subsequent to participation in a town hall meeting are interchangeable with the comments people make about Congress, indicating that the problem runs much deeper than institutions. Making collective decisions in the context of heterogeneous opinions is a challenging and frustrating experience, one that many people could do without.

Faced with the realization that politics is inherently distasteful to many ordinary people, civic engagement advocates have been eager to believe that belonging to self-selected, homogeneous, service-oriented organizations could substitute. As we have documented in this review, despite the prevalence of this belief in recent decades, it is open to empirical challenge. Voluntary groups perform wonderful services and have undeniable value to society, but their effect on democratic politics is tenuous and possibly negative. If these groups teach something other than democratic values or if they serve to weaken ties among diverse people by strengthening ties among those who are similar, then the effects of voluntary associations are not just irrelevant to democracy, they are deleterious. The real nature of voluntary groups is rarely investigated. The most detailed effort is that of sociologist Nina Eliasoph, who, after describing the recruitment, socialization, norms, procedures, and discussions of numerous voluntary groups, concludes that “in an effort to appeal to regular, unpretentious fellow citizens without discouraging them, [groups] silence public-spirited deliberation” (Eliasoph 1998, p. 63). Instead of discussing “potentially upsetting issues,” groups confine their concerns to “practical fundraising projects” that support noncontroversial goals (p. 31). To be sure, more needs to be learned about the nature and specific political consequences of voluntary associations, but the empirical literature currently available is not a source of consolation for believers. Even group sympathizers such as Eliasoph, when they analyze the subject, realize that joining groups is not a way of embracing politics but rather a way of avoiding politics.

The message for students of empirical democratic theory is that there is no shortcut to true civic engagement. Neither tweaking institutions nor promoting volunteerism is likely to help. Ordinary people understandably do not want to get involved in politics, and most voluntary group activity is essentially apolitical. Although this conclusion may seem depressing, it does not have to be. We firmly

believe that by starting from the empirical realities, social scientists can reach a new, more appropriate, and therefore more useful set of recommendations for improving civic engagement. The key is letting people know that becoming active in their favorite clubs does not fulfill their citizenship obligations. The route to enhancing meaningful civic life is not badgering people to become engaged because politics is fun and easy; it is asking people to become engaged because politics is dreary and difficult.

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