American Voluntarism, Social Capital, and Political Culture

By PAUL RICH

ABSTRACT: Robert Putnam has suggested that membership in American voluntary associations has declined in recent decades. The contention now has been challenged by various writers. The historical evidence indicates that associations come and go, reflecting changes in society. Using specific examples to prove there is a malaise that threatens democracy is a risky business. Some associations have simply failed to meet the needs of a better-educated, more discriminating public and have paid the price. A Darwinian process of selection goes on all the time among the many thousands of American groups. Different kinds of voluntarism are constantly being invented. For example, the Internet and World Wide Web have created a whole new voluntary world, which is just beginning to find its voice. This underlines the need for a more detailed examination of the issues and the data than has been the case.

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TO understand America, it is necessary to recognize the significance of civil society (Almond 1996) and of the luxuriant voluntarism that is its lifeblood.[1] During his famous visit to the United States of 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville was especially impressed by the plethora of voluntary associations and decentralized institutions. America's associations—including religious societies, civic organizations, school boards, fraternal orders, and philanthropic groups—are lifelong training grounds for citizenship and leadership, and they create crucial communication networks (Fowler 1991, 36).[2] This pattern of voluntarism, still much more common in America than elsewhere, assumes global significance in the post–Cold War era.[3]

Literature seeking to explain the failure of democratic efforts in the 1920s and 1930s turned Tocqueville's analysis on its head in propagating the theory of mass society. These analyses, ably systematized by William Kornhouser, discussed the absence of voluntary groups in relation to polities in which individuals were relatively isolated—a mass society, one in which there were few institutions mediating between the state and the citizenry (Kornhouser 1959). On the positive side, social scientists like Peter Berger, Richard Neuhaus, Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James S. Coleman sought to extend the Tocquevillian approach with reference to the conditions fostering democracy in private governments like unions and parties in the larger polities (Lipset 1996, 276). They documented the way voluntary associations provided a source of new opinions independent of the state and a means of communicating these new suggestions to a large section of the citizenry, as well as training men and women in the skills of politics and promoting their actual participation in political organization (Lipset 1956, 85).

Nevertheless, until recently there has been far more written about the state than about civil society. "When it comes to civic life," complains Claire Gaudiani (1996), "we are like visitors to a strange city without a map. The phrases 'civil society,' 'social capital' and 'civic virtue' sound as strange to most of us today as price/earnings ratio, ego and biodiversity must have sounded 50 years ago" (38).

Now a change is under way. There has been a markedly increased use of such terms, popularized by Francis Fukuyama and Robert Putnam, among others. The space in a nation-state occupied by civil society,[4] social capital,[5] and their supporting organizations is increasingly spotlighted by political scientists, recalling Geertz's phrase that "the politics of a country reflect the sense of culture" (1992, 262). Partly because of a revival in political culture studies accompanied by an increased empiricalism in defining their influence,[6] voluntarism and associationalism as components of democracy have become popular topics.[7] With the end of the Soviet Union, scholars are interested in seeing how the former totalitarian states can be kept in the democratic camp, realizing that this is not only an economic issue (Rich and De Los Reyes 1998; Alonso 1993). As Ronald Inglehart (1988) warns,

There is no question that economic factors are politically important, but they are only part of the story. I argue that different societies are characterized to very different degrees by specific syndromes of political culture attitudes; that these cultural differences are relatively enduring, but not immutable; and that they have major political consequences, being closely linked to the viability of democratic institutions. (1203; cf. Seligson 1966)

Writing in the 1970s, Alex Inkeles (1979) reported a continuing belief among American historians of a high level of community participation and a corresponding high degree of interpersonal trust, which contrasted favorably to the circumstances in other countries. Continued searching for the conditions nurturing a democratic political culture (for example, Diamond 1997; Hodgson 1993; Packenham 1992; Sowell 1994) has produced a "renaissance" (Inglehart 1988) or, at least, a "return to political culture studies," as Gabriel Almond (1993) puts it.[8]

Recently, though, scholars and political commentators have called attention to evidence from survey research and electoral data of a decline in confidence and interpersonal trust and a decline in electoral participation. The latter has fallen to 50 percent of the eligible electorate in presidential contests and to much lower levels in state and local elections and party primaries. Concern for the implications of such findings for the operation of the democratic process has led many to feel the need for research on the conditions fostering strong civic cultures. Seemingly all is not well in the relationship between civic society and democracy. The Saguaro Seminar and National Workshop on Civic Engagement, both promoted by Robert Putnam, and Theda Skocpol's project on voluntary associations—all Harvard-based—as well as the Aspen Institute's Nonprofit Sector Research Fund, the Center for the Study of Philanthropy and Voluntarism at Duke University, forums sponsored by the Pew Foundation, and a plethora of other projects emphasize the resurgent interest in the nongovernmental sector as part of this problem, focusing on voluntarism (Sorman 1990, 198). This has become an international concern (Metzger 1998; Peschard 1996).

SOMETIMES BOWLING ALONE

Doubts about the health of American civil society were expressed prior to the current controversy. Debates over whether voluntarism in America really is in decline are not new (Lipset 1956, 16, 82-86). For some time it has been apparent that individual associations rise and fall and that no complex society has discovered the secret of organizational equilibrium when it comes to particular ones maintaining their stability and social gains (Lipset 1950, 82, 332).

But a loud alarm has been sounded by Robert Putnam based on the assumption that the republic is in danger as the number of couch potatoes grows, as watching television replaces civil participation (Putnam 1995). Cliché makers have taken up the cry, muttering about a nation of strangers, a land of the

disinvolved, a growth in the politics of mistrust, and the emergence of a society in which indeed people bowl alone (Heller 1996). The suggestion has been made that those bowling alone not only are less likely to be involved in politics but also are more prone to illness than those on teams: "People with few social ties were two to three times more likely to die of all causes than those with more extensive contacts." This has "ominous implications . . . [since] social capital is declining in America" (Kawachi, Kennedy, and Lochner 1997, 56).

An aspect of the initial debate was, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, actually about the decline of bowling leagues, abetted by photographs of Putnam incongruously squatting, alone, in the middle of a darkened bowling lane (Heller 1996). What should have been noted immediately was brought to the fore by Nancy Ammerman: "Knowing that people are not bowling in leagues does not tell us that they are necessarily bowling alone. They may be bowling with informal friendship groups, their families, or their Sunday school classes. The decline in one form of associational participation—while disconcerting to those with an economic investment in that form—does not necessarily signal a decline in association, as such" (Ammerman 1996). In retrospect, the idea was inherently strange that a new generation of silent bowlers, eating their pizzas in gloomy isolation, had replaced gregarious groups.[9]

Moreover, there have been other changes in bowling culture that might be investigated. As reported by the Billiard and Bowling Institute, an expansion of 11.4 percent occurred in the number of participants between 1987 and 1997, particularly among persons with incomes over $50,000. There was an increase in the number of young people bowling and a decrease in the number of elderly bowlers (Billiard and Bowling Institute 1998). Recent findings amend past perceptions of the sport as a blue-collar avocation. This change may be as significant as any possible move from league play to bowling alone.[10]

It would be an interesting twist to the bowling-alone thesis if it turns out that television affects bowling by not giving enough time and publicity to the game. Bowling exposure on television appears to have induced some people to take up the game, just as more extensive treatment of golf on television allegedly increased interest and participation in golfing (Wright 1996, 1997). As for the growth in voluntary spirit among bowlers, the new Bowl for Kids' Sake organization, aiding the Big Brother and Big Sister mentoring programs, involves more than 2 million bowlers a year and has produced more than $125 million.[11] The argument could be made that Bowl for Kids' Sake members do not share beers as readily as do members of company teams, but proving that would be a challenge.

Voluntary organizations are not exempt from social change. There is a Darwinian process of selection going on (Kaufman 1991, 91-96). Research is needed on the effect of extensive social mobility on the stability of

social groups. Taking part in civil society is a continual, dynamic, and sometimes problematic process of interaction between individuals and the associations linked to their interests and values. In America, improvement in the respective positions of individual people strengthens the bonds of civil society more than it weakens them, and fosters the myriad of voluntary associations and their mutations (Lipset 1996, 276-77).

Whether voluntarism has grown or declined depends on one's conception of the subject.[12] It would be most peculiar if the changes in American society over the last 30 years had not affected the character of voluntarism. Changes in the way in which people wish to serve as volunteers seem more likely than a decline in voluntarism (Schudson 1996). For example, the conventional raison d'être of the women's auxiliary was to cook dinner for the men's group, a role now considered ludicrous by many.

Arguments about growth or decline in voluntarism have to come to terms with a variety of contrary or conflicting data. Countering Putnam, Gallup polls have found that the proportion of people reporting that they volunteered for charitable, "social service," or "non-profit" organizations has doubled between 1977 and the 1990s. Ethnic organizations have increased their total membership in percentage terms (Lipset 1996, 280-81). Margaret Conway, Alfonso Damico, and Sandra Damico (1996), using a large data set (22,652 initial interviews in 1972, with follow-up surveys in 1974, 1976, 1979, and 1986), indicate that baby boomers in the high school graduating classes of 1972, who were traced across their early adult years, showed "a pattern of increasing community engagement." They conclude, "Putnam's data overlook a variety of other types of civic activity" (8).

WHITE MALE SHRINERS

The bowling-alone thesis heavily relies on statistics showing declines in membership of several familiar civic organizations. An early-morning shave with Occam's razor is suggested. Some well-known groups may have declined because of changes in constituency and failure to innovate rather than from any general lack of altruism and public spirit (Charles 1993, 11).[13] Everett Ladd (1998) remarks,

> Unless one is prepared to argue that a particular organization is uniquely valuable in civic terms, what is one to make of its losing ground? Why should we care that the Benevolent Protective Order of Elks (BPOE) has fewer members now than in the 1950s? Putnam offered no evidence—nor have other civic-decline-thesis proponents—that the loss of Elks and Jaycees has not been matched, or even surpassed, by increases in other groups equally attractive in their social/civic reach.

A number of organizations have not been able to meet economic and social challenges, such as failing to adopt to increased levels of education and changing tastes (Inkeles 1998, 86).[14] Skocpol (1997) notes,

Better-educated Americans, in short, have pulled out of broad community groups in record numbers since the mid-1970s, sometimes leaving behind people with a high school education or less. America's largest cross-class associations have withered. The best-educated people are still participating in more groups overall, but not in the same groups as their less well-educated fellow citizens.

Putnam does admit that gender and race have had an influence, suggesting that "the pace of disengagement among whites" reflects the fact that joining traditionally male Anglo-Saxon Protestant movements is no longer attractive in an increasingly pluralistic society (Putnam 1995, 672). Some of the groups he mentions, like the Caucasian or George Washington Masons (as distinct from the Prince Hall or black Masons), although reforming in desperation to avoid collapse, have long been perceived as stuffy white male bastions. A more sophisticated America is less content with listening to endless minutes of past meetings or sitting through lengthy and artery-clogging dinners. The sources of the increasingly ecumenical and educated tastes of Americans when it comes to food may also be reflected in a changing taste in leisure activities (Nessman 1997). Adequate discussion requires attention to the almost endless variety of new voluntary activities arising in the last 20 years.

The initial praise given to Putnam's description of American society, attention that benefited from the interest created by the work done by Francis Fukuyama on trust and social capital, now has given way to a chorus of reservations. Skocpol (1997) writes,

> Perhaps unintentionally, Putnam largely ignores the cross-class and organizational dynamics by which civic associations actually form and persist—or decay and come unraveled. An association may decline not only because people with the wrong sorts of individual traits proliferate in the population, but also because opportunities and cultural models for that association (or type of organization) wither in the larger society and polity. An association may also decline because the defection of crucial types of leaders or members makes the enterprise less resourceful and relevant for others.

The whole subject is indeed more complicated than the initial bowling-alone discussions made out. Skocpol announced at the American Political Science Association meetings in Boston in 1998 that she had just taken the initial ritual degrees in the Grange or Patrons of Husbandry lodge in an effort to extend her understanding of the little researched American fraternal world—which, in fact, is changing rapidly. Claiming that Putnam has missed the growth of small local organizations that are now the significant and preferred venue for voluntary service, Wattenberg and Wattenberg (1998) comment, "In a demassifying America, it is a mistake to derive sweeping conclusions about our civic health from the fate of an unrepresentative sample of mass organizations."

Francis Fukuyama himself has developed reservations about the decline of associations. "It is not clear,"

he writes, "that either the number of groups or group memberships in civil society declined overall in this period, as the political scientist Robert Putnam has suggested." Instead,

> despite the apparent decline in trust, there is evidence that groups and group membership are increasing. . . . Rather than taking pride in being a member of a powerful labor federation or working for a large corporation, or in having served in the military, people identify with a local aerobics class, a New Age sect, a co-dependent support group, or an Internet chat room. (Fukuyama 1999, 60, 71)

Regardless of the qualifications now being added to the argument, Putnam's case for decline in voluntary activity still rests partly on numerical evidence that

> fraternal organizations have . . . witnessed a substantial drop in membership during the 1980s and 1990s. Membership is down significantly in such groups as the Lions (off 12 percent since 1983), the Elks (off 18 percent since 1979), the Shriners (off 27 percent since 1979), the Jaycees (off 44 percent since 1979), and the Masons (down 39 percent since 1959). In sum, after expanding steadily throughout most of this century, many major civic organizations have experienced a sudden, substantial, and nearly simultaneous decline in membership over the last decade or two. (Putnam 1995, 672)

These reports sound very alarming until one realizes that the decline is not limited to the last decade or two. Some of these organizations have been suffering severe membership losses since the 1920s.[15] Research by Brent Morris (1993) shows the last year of growth for several once proud and large organizations: Knights of Pythias (1921), Odd Fellows (1923), Grotto (1925), Knights Templar (1926), Royal Arch Masons (1926), Shrine (1926), Royal and Select Master Masons (1927), Freemasons in general (1928), and Scottish Rite Masons (1929).[16] He observes,

> By the 1920's, fundamental changes in American society were beginning to cause changes in fraternities. . . . It is important to note that nearly all had experienced declining membership before 1929, and in fact had only insignificant increases before their last year of growth. By this time, many of the needs formerly filled by fraternal orders either were not pressing or were met by other groups. (23 passim)

Thus the decline of some of these familiar organizations is not an alarming development of the last decade or two. Many of these societies were dealt a fatal blow by the fact that their insurance benefits were no longer as competitive as those offered by insurance companies as simple business propositions with no secret handshakes required (Lipset 1996, 179).

In any case, the decline of an organization may not be regarded as bad for American democracy. It might even be positive.[17] Blacks or women or Jews or Catholics, who were formerly excluded from some of those organizations that are now fighting for existence, will not think that the overall quality of American voluntarism or civic culture has also fallen as a consequence.[18] The still-overwhelmingly white male Shriners is not essential to democracy, nor is

the resolutely white Order of the Eastern Star of irreplaceable value to maintaining American democracy in the coming millennium.[19] The decision of the Elks in 1995 to admit women might seem a little late. So does the decision of the white Masons and the white Shriners to accept blacks, a policy change that is far from unanimous. The onus is on such organizations to change or decline, and sympathy for a plight largely of their own making is misplaced. Many of the organizations now in trouble misread the changes in American society.

Commenting on the supposed bowling-alone malaise, Claire Gaudiani (1996) notes,

> American democracy did not really establish the possibility of democratic civil society until relatively recently when equal opportunity became explicit law. We are not the same people we have been. The United States has never been as culturally, ethnically, racially and religiously diverse as it is today. Never before has so large a percentage of our population experienced as much higher education. Never before has such a large percentage of African Americans participated in or been above the middle income group. Never before have so many women entered the professions, just to name a few of the successes of the last 30 years. There were no "good old days"—no golden age for democratic civil society during which we were all at the same table.

VOLUNTARISM IS ALIVE AND WELL

In a leaky, drafty former VFW hall on Milwaukee's northwest side, Pastor Gerald Saffold is busy rebuilding civil society. Of course, that's not how he would describe what he's doing. He would say that he's bringing souls to Christ—using his immense gift for music to draw inner-city teens into his "Unity in the Community" Choir, where former gang leaders and drug dealers help him write the songs and choreograph the dances that they then perform all over the city. Nonetheless, this is an unmistakable act of civic renewal, and under the least hospitable circumstances imaginable. Where before there were inner-city gangs of angry teens, there is emerging today a cohesive community, united in common endeavor, mutually developing skills of cooperation, leadership, and citizenship. Yet sadly, we as a society do not seem inclined to celebrate this simple gospel choir as a significant civic event. (And this, ironically, in the very face of Putnam's now famous discovery of the link between active choral societies and civic health.) Instead, we seem to be scanning the horizon for larger, more sweeping countrywide movements. Those who accept Putnam's argument and seek to revitalize civil institutions tend to focus their concerns on a limited range of major national non-profits like the PTA or the Red Cross. (Schambra 1998)

It is not only the growth of such alternative religious groups that suggests that American voluntarism is alive. Even such time-honored pursuits as stamp collecting have developed new groups. Since 1980, among the new philatelic societies that have been founded are those for studying stamp and postal history related to aviation, birds, malaria, Christopher Columbus, cats, moths, golf, rainbows, lighthouses, and petroleum. There is no evidence that the Lighthouse Stamp Society will be less of a contributor to American associational life in the future than the Or-

der of Buffaloes was in the past. The fact is that new clubs see the light of day all the time, and others disappear. In fact, the Moth Stamp Society already has evidently come too close to the candle and perished (Chronology 1999).

The PTA is one of Putnam's concerns. Everett Ladd (1998) has effectively put the issue of its decline to rest. He notes that while the national PTA membership is considerably below its high point, reached in 1962, the loss does not reflect a decline in enrollment at the local level. The drop-off resulted from the secession of many local chapters from the national organization. The latter now includes only one-quarter of all schools. The overwhelming majority of parent-teacher groups are no longer affiliated with the national body. But the proportion of parents of public school children who report having attended a "PTA meeting," as a generic term, actually rose from 36 percent in 1983 to 49 percent in 1992. Ladd also reports that in "1965, just 16 percent of all parents told Gallup that they had attended a school board meeting, [whereas,] in 1995, 39 percent said they had."

As Ladd documents in detail, the story of increased parental participation in educational affairs is characteristic of a host of voluntary activities. The evidence also indicates that the plethora of voluntary associations in America, which so impressed Tocqueville, Weber, and other foreign observers as one of the distinctive American traits, is still linked to the uniquely American system of "voluntary religion" (Lipset 1996, 61). As a result, Tocqueville contended that Americans are among the most religious peoples in Christendom. They still are, but the functions of many churches have changed and broadened. Churches and synagogues have been "reinventing" themselves in order to attract members and may offer more civic involvement to their members than two or three memberships in single-purpose organizations (Schudson 1996).

In sum, many of the pessimistic generalizations inspired by the bowling-alone discussion fail to consider the constant change and enormous variety of American organizations. As another example, while fewer Americans are joining the Odd Fellows and their ilk, every day more are involved in college alumni groups if only because more are going to college. The voluntary-organization scene has become more varied and complicated than has been appreciated by bowling-alone enthusiasts, and it is understudied. Thus Masons and Elks are not confined to the category of white men's groups whose declining members are cited by Putnam. There are black and female Elk organizations, female and black Masons and co-Masonic organizations, black Shriners, and other black and female organizations that have grown precisely because white male organizations excluded blacks and women (Rich 1997). Like associations that attract minorities and women, the Catholic Knights of Columbus has shown a constant growth. Whatever a thorough examination of the fortunes of all of these groups will uncover, the time has passed when the health of American

voluntarism could be judged by examining the success or failure of white male Protestant organizations.

Putnam has responded to some of the positive findings by asserting that many, if not most, of those groups that have shown recent growth are "passive," that is, they do not require or even allow opportunities to meet. But passive membership is not a new phenomenon. There were many passive member organizations, such as the National Geographic Society, in the past. Strangely, it is only the new large groups such as the Sierra Club and the American Association of Retired Persons that are cited as "mailing list" and "checkbook" associations, and therefore not relevant to the civic culture. Moreover, while making a financial contribution is not the same as serving in an office, it can be an efficient exercise of citizenship, possibly more so than attending a meeting (Schudson 1996).

Furthermore, the argument that belonging to the organizations mentioned by Putnam has come to mean little more to members than a magazine subscription is contradicted by the people-centered activities of the groups he singles out. The American Association of Retired Persons has more than 4000 local chapters, most of which are involved in community service such as blood drives, hospital visitation, and other civic activities. One affiliate, the National Retired Teachers' Association, is meeting a pledge to provide 45 million volunteer service hours for 1.5 million young people by the end of the year 2000.

The causal connections between American voluntarism and political behavior are more complicated than the bowling-alone arguments make out. Judith Cohen (1998) points to the artificiality of

> the distinction made between local, "secondary" associations like the Elks Club which are said to be in decline—and the new "tertiary," mass-membership organizations, from the National Organization for Women to the American Association of Retired Persons. Putnam and others have argued that whereas the traditional groups offered opportunities for face-to-face interactions, these new associations rely on abstract impersonal ties of people to common symbols, texts, leaders, and ideals. . . . Other evidence, however, does not support this conclusion. For example, a recent study by Sidney Verba and his colleagues indicates that the falloff in voter turnout is not part of a general erosion in voluntary activity or political participation. They report *increases* in certain forms of civic activism, such as membership in community problem-solving organizations.

Another troubling matter is that the expansion of university-connected organizations has been discounted by Putnam on the grounds that universities, including their alumni activities, are run by bureaucrats. But consider the case of Putnam's university, Harvard. It has generated almost endless examples of voluntarism such as the Harvard Mountaineering Club, the Harvard Music Association, the Harvard Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association, the Friends of the Arnold Arboretum, the Harvard Business

School Club of Hong Kong, and so on. Universities breed such voluntary organizations with the fecundity of a rabbit. Hundreds of Harvard clubs raise millions for scholarships. There are a vast and increasing number of special Harvard alumni groups, ranging from those for computer zealots to those for cookbook enthusiasts. These societies have their own elections, their own policy disputes, and their own experiences in democracy. The increase of alumni-based groups is but one of the ways that the enormous growth in higher education has contributed to civil society.

MISTAKING CHANGE FOR DECLINE

People still bowl together, but they also do other things together. Optimism about American voluntarism is clearly warranted (Smith 1997, 472). The number of groups listed in Gale Research's *Encyclopedia of Associations* has grown from 5000 in 1956 to more than 20,000 in the 1990s, and it is not in any way a complete list. (Nor indeed has this encyclopedia ever been a complete list.) Reporting on a survey taken in Philadelphia, Andrew Kohut (n.d.) of the Pew Research Center reports trying to

> explore further and in considerable depth the principal concepts in this social trust/civic engagement debate . . . we found that overwhelmingly people said whether they were playing in softball leagues or doing e-mail or in self-help groups that they were meeting people who became important to them. In another follow-up question, we asked, Do you meet people in these activities that you could turn to in time of help. And the answer was 70 percent yes in most cases. So we were trying to push this Putnam thesis that people are not engaged in activities and have become social isolates, and that's not the case.

In rejecting "bowling alone," Robert J. Samuelson (1996) points out that softball leagues now claim 40 million participants, in contrast with only 27 million in 1972. Another critic, Diana Eck (1997), discusses how the American penchant for volunteerism has influenced the behavior of religious groups comprising new immigrants who lacked such experience back home. There are Hindu groups that adopt a highway and an organization called Sikhs Serving America, which tries to help street people. There has been a proliferation of "voluntary associations based on democratic, and not necessarily Christian, principles" (3). The academic debate has had little to say about such new religious movements as the Iron Man bands and the Promise Keepers, which are not groups that faculty join (cf. Dunn 1996, 47; Berger 1971). It seems that only organizations that were part of Main Street are to be considered in determining the alleged decline.

As for international voluntarism, Ann Boyles (1997) is impressed not by decline but by increase: "the sudden efflorescence of countless . . . organizations . . . at local, regional, and international levels." She adds, "This blossoming of civil society, as represented by non-governmental organizations, community-based groups, academic institutions, and

others, is significantly reshaping the international agenda" (34). The rapidly growing international side of voluntarism is encouraged by the Internet. If one area is to be singled out for discussion, it should be the ultimate effect on political and social life of this worldwide explosion in communication (Rich and De Los Reyes 1997). I am impressed by the animated discussion, lobby, and support groups that have sprung up via the Net. A new cyber generation is connecting people in ways only partly understood. Attention needs to be paid to the ways that these e-mail–stimulated chat groups, which now involve millions of people, contribute to sustaining democratic political systems, as well as to creating international pressure groups.[20] People with common interests may come together from all over the world.[21] A striking example may be found in the fact that indigenous peoples from Australia to Siberia to Canada have been able to develop a consciousness of kind and the ability to communicate and work together. Democracy everywhere is taking new and different forms (Nye and Owens 1996, 19).

OLIGARCHIC CONTRIBUTORS TO DEMOCRACY

Of course, the debate that Putnam has helped promote is of immense value, and there are many questions that have long gone unanswered that may now get attention. The thesis that voluntary organizations contribute to the health of democracy has been criticized on the grounds that few large associations are themselves internally democratic (Smith 1997, 478-80). There is considerable documentation that Robert Michels's neglected theory of organizational oligarchy (1949) is valid for groups as diverse as trade unions, professional associations, Internet groups, fraternal orders, veterans' bodies, and so on. The oligarchy theory asserts that most large associations are inherently dominated by their leadership and bureaucracy. The leaders and bureaucrats control communication with the membership, have a monopoly on political skills, and can therefore generally determine policy and remain in office with little or no opposition. As Michels asserted, how can groups, which themselves are not democratic, enhance democracy? The answer to the conundrum is simple. A voluntary organization must represent its members to some degree if the association is to retain their support. Members have the option to leave or to stop contributions. Thus voluntary organizations must fulfill representative functions. They also, of course, may carry out the role, which Tocqueville assigned to them, of linking the citizenry to the polity.

Discussion and argument about the rule of voluntary organizations in democracies will continue. The effort started by Tocqueville to understand them still requires much more information. But, at the moment, all we safely say is that they are not declining. We do note with satisfaction that the bowling-alone debate shows that political culture and civil society are getting the attention they have always deserved and, for a time, were irrationally denied (Verba 1965;

Almond and Verba 1963; Kavanah 1972; Rosenbaum 1975; Brint 1994).[22] The heightened interest in how a healthy political culture might be sustained has become almost synonymous with an increased interest in the conditions fostering democracy (Diamond 1992, 116-20).

The considerable research over the past three decades documenting the importance of economic development to democracy stands. However, if economic growth helps nation-states trying to democratize, it is not as certain that it alone is going to solve political problems. Much is needed from the nongovernmental sector.[23] Without organized parties and organized groups independent of the state, there can be no democracy. For example, the promising changes as far as democracy is concerned in Mexico primarily result from developments outside the formal government structure (Alonso 1993, 7-10). Indeed, understanding of the new Mexican politics requires insight into the decision making now taking place in the informal spheres (Alonso 1993; Berger 1971). The Mexican political commentator Juan Ruiz Healy (1998) claims, "The NGOs are already as powerful as the Church and the Army."

CONCLUSION

In *The Politics of Unreason* (1970), Lipset and Raab analyzed how the fortunes of political organizations varied over time. They suggested as a useful concept "selective support." The ability to attract members is a function of the ability of an organization to keep up with change in the needs and wants of its constituency and to maintain effective leadership. In this respect, the bowling-alone excitement, as Alex Inkeles has suggested to me in a letter (26 July 1996), does not involve discovery of an alarming fatal illness but simply a rediscovery of the basic fact that the health of voluntary organizations waxes and wanes: support is selective.

I agree with Robert Putnam about the need to focus on the health of intermediate organizations. I would never suggest complacency. Yet some of the remarks made in the current debate about voluntarism have been wide of the mark. There are other reasons for current problems in American political life.[24] I am optimistic about American civil society (Smith 1997, 472). The essayist Samuel McChord Crothers, after a long-winded Harvard commencement, was asked by his wife how the speeches had gone. He dryly remarked that evidently the world had been in great danger, but now all would be well! Possibly there is wisdom here for the bowling-alone alarmists. America leads the world when it comes to richness of organizational life and inventing new forms of voluntarism. So it did, to Tocqueville's bemusement, in the early nineteenth century—and, fortunately for democracy, it still does.

Notes

1. I wish to thank my colleagues at the Hoover Institution, including Alex Inkeles, Larry Diamond, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Henry Rowen, for discussions about the role of civil society in democratization. Needless to say, my views are not necessarily theirs.

2. "One of the frustrations of studying the policy literature on civil society is the large scale unwillingness to look at the dynamics within. This was certainly the whole point of Gramsci's contributions: understanding the forces within civil society was the key to emancipation. Without differentiation, analysis, picking good-and-bad guys, the idea of civil society loses any explanatory value—either as theory, or as a tool for policy decisions" (Van Roony 1997, 6).

3. "Some of the recent literature seems to place the leadership responsibility for civil society functions in Africa on voluntary associations in Tocquevillean terms. By virtue of their existence, their performance of civil society's norm-setting functions is tacitly assumed" (Harbeson 1994, 17). See also Stiles 1997.

4. "As a first approximation, civil society may be defined as all social interests not encompassed by the state or the economy. In its political aspects it also excludes private life, although recent attacks by feminists and others on the public/private distinction make this boundary less clear.... Prominent examples of civil society in action would include the early bourgeois public sphere discussed by Habermas, the insurgent 'free spaces' in U.S. political history constituted by women, blacks, workers, farmers, and others, the democratic opposition in Eastern Europe prior to 1989, and, in the West, feminist, antinuclear, peace, environmental, and urban new social movements. . . . Civil society is a heterogeneous place, home to the Michigan Militia as well as the movements I have mentioned" (Dryze 1996, 481). "Almond and Verba argue that the distinctive property of a 'civic culture' is not its participant orientation but its mixed quality" (Diamond 1993, 14). See also Diamond 1996.

5. "Professor Rahn noted that contemporary social scientists are actually trying to refine an insight from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville had wanted to know why some communities prosper, possess effective political institutions, have law-abiding and satisfied citizens, while others do not. The success of the American experiment, he concluded, could not be explained by geography, or circumstance, or even good laws. Rather, it derived from what he called the mores of the American people—by which he meant the habits of thought, the patterns of behavior, that came as second nature to most American citizens. It is these attitudes and behaviors that are described, in modern parlance, as social capital" (*Newsletter of the National Commission* 1998).

6. "But the development of a stable and effective democratic government depends upon more than the structures of government and politics: it depends upon the orientations that people have to the political process—upon the political culture. Unless the political culture is able to support a democratic system, the chances for the success of that system are slim" (Almond and Verba 1963, 498). "Until recently rather little attention has been directed to how political culture affects the possibilities for democracy in the less developed world and the newly transforming polities of the former communist bloc" (Diamond 1993, 15). "To say that political culture involves the important ways in which people are subjectively oriented toward the basic elements of their political system is an accurate but not yet satisfactory definition . . . so many different formulations have been offered (twenty-five by one count) that one might think he was grappling with the riddle of the Sphinx" (Rosenbaum 1975, 5).

7. "In an article of 1956, Gabriel Almond, building upon conceptions of culture created by such sociologists and anthropologists as Clyde Kluckholm, Ralph Linton, and Talcott Parsons, defined a specifically political area of culture that, in collaboration with Sidney Verba, he proceeded to study empirically in five democracies. The findings were published in 1963 in *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963). A few years earlier, working independently of Almond, Samuel Beer and Adam Ulam presented a somewhat different definition of the concept in a comparative government text of 1958 (*Patterns of Government*, New York: Random House, 1958)" (Bluhm 1974, xii).

8. Certainly to describe as Inglehart does a renaissance in political culture implies that there was a previous hiatus, and that seems to have been the case for political culture as rational choice theory became intensely popular. "To speak of a return to political culture implies that there was an earlier time when political culture studies were here at hand and prospering, that this was followed by a time in which the approach declined, and these studies are once again prospering" (Almond 1993, ix).

9. "Questions can be asked about the General Social Survey (GSS) on which he chiefly relies. The GSS asks respondents about 'types' of organizations to which they belong, not concrete group memberships; as groups have proliferated within certain categories, the extent of individuals' involvement may well be undercounted. What is more, newer types of involvement—such as parents congregating on Saturdays at children's sports events, or several families going together to the bowling alley (just visit one and look!)—may not be captured by the GSS questions. As many fathers and mothers have pulled back from Elks Clubs and women's clubs, they may have turned not toward 'bowling alone' but toward child-centered involvement with other parents" (Skocpol 1996).

10. "And yet, there are some who still look down on bowling, as if it were somehow beneath them. These are the people of which we must be aware! In a world of fascist, bourgeoisie [*sic*] golfers, bowling is the game of the proletariat—THE PEOPLE'S GAME! So embrace it! Cast off the shackles of class struggle, and unite in the spirit of fun and fair play! From ancient Egypt to the German monks to 'Another Fine Brunswick Family Recreation Center,' the legacy of the world's oldest sport lives on in all of us! Grab your ball! Put on those funky shoes! and BOWL! BOWL LIKE THE WIND!" (Berk 1998).

11. "The Bowl for Kids' Sake provides funding to support continued operation of the Jewish Other Big Sister Association. Last year's sponsors helped us raise over $60,000 from our one day event. Please think about what you are able to do to help many local kids" (Bedford Bowl 1998).

12. "Putnam's measures may, in fact, overlook several types of civic activity. . . . According to the *San Diego Union*, of 800,000 licensed motorcyclists, 10,000 are now members of the American Brotherhood Aimed Toward Education (ABATE), which has been credited as decisive in several races for the state legislature. Members do not meet on a regular basis, but they do periodically mobilize in local political contests to advance their one legislative purpose. Would Putnam's data pick up on this group? What about the intense but brief house-building activity for Habitat for Humanity? Fourth, Putnam notes but leaves to the side the vast increase in Washington-based mailing list organizations over the past 30 years. He ignores them because they do not require members to do more than send in a check. This is not Tocquevillian democracy, but these organizations may be a highly efficient use of civic energy. The citizen who joins them may get the same civic payoff for less personal hassle. This is especially so if we conceive of politics as a set of public policies. The citizen may be able to influence government more satisfactorily with the annual membership in Sierra Club or the National Rifle Association than by attending the local club luncheons" (Schudson 1996).

13. I recall an elderly lady of my acquaintance who was a stalwart member of the Widows of World War I and constantly bemoaning an inability to find new recruits.

14. The Grange could not sustain growth as the farming population decreased, but, in reduced size, it is still a lively organization. While the United Commercial Travelers still maintains a lodge system for lonely salesmen, air transportation makes it possible to be home for the weekend, and the organization has had to meet falling membership by reinventing itself and finding new purposes. United Commercial Travelers lodges have become a sponsor of the Special Olympics for the retarded, of a Junior Golf Tournament, cancer education, an International Safety Poster Contest, and a Hugs Drugs program for families dealing with drug problems (United Commercial Travelers 1996).

15. After a long period of decline, there was an increase in fraternal membership immediately after World War II, partly attributed to the fact that those who served in the war had not been able to join and now were making up for lost time. Other reasons included a desire to fulfill a promise made to join if one survived and to reaffirm a family tradition as a legacy member. The death of many who joined then but were never active members is another reason for the present sharp membership decline. See Morris 1993 for an exhaustive treatment of this subject.

16. The Odd Fellows started to disappear in the 1920s, and the decline from 1920 to 1935 exceeded all its growth from 1900 to 1920. In 1920, the Odd Fellows had 1.7 million members. In 1940, they had 666,000 members. Morris documents in detail how other, now nearly vanished organizations such as the Pa-

triarchs Militant, Rebekah, and Knights of Pythias also peaked around 1920 and then began to disappear (Morris 1993 passim).

17. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder: "We like intermediate institutions when they have good effects and dislike them when they have bad ones. What we want, it would seem, is not civil society, but civic—what the Romans called civitas; that is, public-spiritedness, sacrifice for the community, citizenship, even nobility. But not all of civil society is civic minded" (Zakaria 1995, 15). See also de Guerra 1995.

18. For example, the contribution to democracy of the many parent-teacher associations (PTAs) at all-white schools during the 1950s and 1960s is debatable. The PTA has had a mixed record in facing many of the changes that the country at large has faced. Nationally, the largely white PTA merged with the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers only in 1970. In 1977, after years of procrastination, the word "church" finally was stricken from its list of objectives and "house of worship" substituted in deference to non-Christians. As for membership figures, they began to rise after 20 years of decline in 1983 and as some of the autonomous regional and local groups affiliated or reaffiliated. See PTA History 1999.

19. When I interviewed the executive secretary of the Grand Eastern Star Chapter of New York in 1996, she expressed the view that the absence of black members was not a problem, although perhaps the time would come for having a single black chapter for "exceptional cases"!

20. The most important issue is not total activity but the quality of participation, especially with regard to issues that affect the whole community. "In July 1994 the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits Board began developing a long term project focusing on new ways nonprofit organizations could increase citizen participation, including voter turnout. In early 1995 MCN sponsored a series of discussions included in the Civic Engagement Project, to assess what nonprofits are currently doing to enhance civic participation, and to explore how an association of nonprofits such as MCN could support and promote the role of nonprofits in this area" (Gillespie 1999).

21. "The infection cyberspace spreads today is far more virulent than the bubonic plague. Anathema to government, the 'net carries the virus of freedom" (McCullagh 1996, 33).

22. "There is something spectacular and perhaps ironic about the way in which civil society has burst into social sciences literature in recent years after lying dormant for so long. An important component of Western political thought, the concept was neglected in the West for most of the twentieth century, while it gained more common use in Marxist terminology and some of its derivatives (Gramsci used the term in opposition to the oppressive fascist state). Its new surge, however, occurred just as socialism declined and a capitalist market-oriented socioeconomic order began to spread throughout the world" (Azarya 1994, 85).

23. "The development of a stable and effective democratic government depends upon more than the structures of government and politics: it depends upon the orientations that people have to the political process—upon the political culture. Unless the political culture is able to support a democratic system, the chances for the success of that system are slim" (Almond and Verba 1963, 498).

24. "While the evidence now available does not permit firm conclusions about the overall condition of associational life in America, it appears that voluntary activities are on balance healthier than are formal political institutions and processes. Indeed, many citizens—particularly the youngest—seem to be shifting their preferred civic involvement from official politics to the voluntary sector" (National Commission on Civic Renewal 1998).

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