

Civic Participation...

might (or might not) be, the evaluation of democracy's present condition does not depend on their answers.

In their appreciation of how important a healthy civil realm is for democracy, Putnam, Elshstain, and Sandel effectively reopen the question of citizen competency on different grounds. Competent citizens are not those who merely vote often and wisely, or who know who to call to further their interests. Rather, truly competent citizens appreciate the need for healthy "habits of the heart," and pursue the civility and engaged discourse that democracy makes available to all citizens. Under this definition the criteria of citizen competency are different indeed, but, as these works make clear, are no easier to satisfy.

Competent citizens are scarcer today than previously, Elshstain, Putnam, and Sandel fear, but this is proven not by observing citizens' apparent inability to measure up to rational models of decision making or by totaling the votes on election day. Today, citizens are failing to meet the standards of the democratic civil realm—they are disengaged, homebound, absent on bowling night. They are talking to each other perhaps across the wires, cables, and radio waves, but they are not "acting" in the sense of performing in each others' presence the essential roles of democratic participants. These roles are not necessarily those that political scientists, pollsters and

pundits are likely to observe, honor, or measure. They are roles that require no special expertise, but a willingness to speak and act as joint participants in the play of democracy. This is the work *not* getting done; it is the work of democracy that is being shirked.

Communication and other modern technologies are not really to blame for this as much as are our expectations for them and our growing reliance upon them. In the United States especially, there exists a long, mostly dishonorable history of waiting for the "technological fix" to eradicate whatever problems we encounter. But democracy is not the product of technological inventiveness, nor is it automatically enhanced when innovations make it easier to live one's life more in the presence of glowing screens than of other people.

Democracy need not engender Luddism either; it simply demands, as it always has and will regardless of whatever technological turns we take, that citizens remain engaged in each others' lives. In a very real, though somewhat ironic sense, that is a more difficult task today *because* of our new, "helpful" devices of communication rather than in spite of them. In a democracy, computer literacy is not related to political literacy in any essential way, and competent, engaged, participating citizens need, perhaps more than anything else, simply to get out more, taking an evening to per-

form in democracy's civic theater.

Endnotes:

¹ Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1996); Jean Bethke Elshstain, *Democracy On Trial*, (New York: Basic, 1995); Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

² See in addition to the above, Robert D. Putnam, "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America," *PS: Political Science & Politics* XXVIII:664-83; December 1995.

³ For a broad discussion of the impact of modern risk on the philosophy and practice of liberal politics, see my *Democracy, Risk, and Community: Technology and the Evolution of Liberal Meanings*, forthcoming.

⁴ Quoted in *New York Times*, 5 February 1986, p. A-20.

⁵ Sheldon Wolin, *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 9.

⁶ Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); especially part II.

⁷ For an excellent treatment of both the limitations and possibilities of this new experiment in democratic discourse, see Catherine Flavin and Regina Dougherty (1996), "Science and Citizenship at the NIC," *The Public Perspective* 7:46-49; April/May.



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"Bowling Alone" or "A Nation of Joiners?" Two Views of Civic Life in the Information Age

by Stephen K. Carter

Examining the health of our democracy requires the daunting tasks of theoretically defining "healthy democracy" and determining whether or not we pass the test. Though the definitions are wide-ranging, most would agree that a democracy cannot work unless its citizens are involved to some significant extent. "The despot" wrote Tocqueville, "does not ask them [the people] to assist him in governing the state; it is enough that they do not aspire to govern it themselves."¹ Tocqueville worried that excessive individualism could lead to a general indifference in which citizens, often individually powerless, would fail to solve problems cooperatively. Where people do not voluntarily coalesce to confront difficulties, the government will—and this

is dangerous. Tocqueville saw this tendency combated in mid-19th century America by a vibrant civic life characterized by numerous associations.

In a healthy democracy, people must, in part, govern themselves. Following Tocqueville, many observers have examined our civic life. Some have determined that it is currently deficient, placing group life at the center of the debate over the health of our democracy. Ironically, when we compare Tocqueville's understanding of associa-

tions with some contemporary views, we find the 19th century French visitor to America to be as relevant now as he was over a century ago—even more relevant than some contemporary observers.

“Bowling Alone” and the Decline of Social Capital

Robert Putnam has recently made headlines by arguing that over the past few decades American civic life has been degraded, most likely by television. More specifically, Putnam sees a decline in “social capital” which he defines as “features of social life—networks, norms and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives.”² Defining “social capital” is obviously of critical importance, as is its link to our democracy. For Putnam, social capital is characterized by “classical secondary associations” where members’ ties are to each other (rather than to a symbol or ideology) and where members actually meet face to face. Examples include voluntary associations like the PTA, the Elks Club and, of course, league bowling.³ Putnam does not include what he terms “tertiary associations” including “mailing list organizations” like the American Association of Retired Persons and The Sierra Club, or bureaucracies like universities and The Metropolitan Opera. Putnam’s empirical evidence demonstrates declining participation in secondary associations and increasing participation in tertiary associations. Putnam correctly points out that “American civil society is not moribund” and that “America still outranks many other countries in the degree of our community involvement and social trust,” but he continues, “... if we compare ourselves, not with other countries but with our parents, the best available evidence suggests that we are less connected with one another.”⁴

Need Civic Participation Be Face-To-Face?

Why is social capital important? For Putnam, the link between social capital and a healthy society is trust, “The theory of social capital presumes that, generally speaking, the more we connect with other people the more we trust them, and vice versa.”⁵ The trust people have in one another, we can infer, is a crucial component of any healthy democracy. Is Putnam right? Part of the problem is how we define “associations” and understand their role in civic life.

Tocqueville offers an alternative understanding, one that is primarily concerned with the means citizens have to combine and solve problems. Associations occur when people form an opinion or feeling and look to others for mutual assistance. These associations, as Tocqueville stresses, can be of almost any kind and need not be face-to-face. Whether

people combine for business, pleasure or to solve social problems, the point is that they are combining. Having learned the power of association, they will be less likely to revert to the excessive individualism that corrodes society, leaving a void that only the government can fill. Tocqueville’s broad definition of association, which includes the tertiary groups that Putnam feels are inadequate, has some implications for the latter’s argument. Whether or not these larger, less personal associations are sufficient for a healthy civic life is the heart of the matter.

How healthy does our democracy look if we measure participation in more broadly defined associations? The evidence suggests that American democracy is doing just fine. The time-series data on associations presented in this issue clearly show no significant decline in group membership during the last twenty years. Indeed, some forms of associa-

tion, particularly involvement with charitable and social service activities, have seen dramatic increases. The World Values Survey of 1993 shows that only 18% of Americans reported belonging to no groups. Tocqueville would no doubt be comforted by the data in the same survey showing 47% of respondents belonging to a religious association.

The data on charitable giving and volunteering again show a public more than willing to combine and solve problems. In the Roper Center Survey for *Readers Digest*, 40% of respondents reported averaging ten or more hours of volunteering in an average month. The

time-series data on charitable giving is equally striking. Per capita giving (in constant dollars) has more than *quadrupled* since the 1930s. These data do not support Putnam’s claim that “the best available evidence suggests that we are less connected with one another.”

In this light, Putnam’s condemnation of the mass media may be misguided. The revolution in mass communication, Putnam’s disdain for television aside, has greatly increased the capacity of people to communicate with each other and associate for common purposes. While there is undoubtedly much to dislike about television and other new media, they are effective ways of communicating common interests.⁶ Similarly, the Internet makes identifying a common purpose and suggesting the appropriate means easier than ever. In a world of fiber optic communications, the likelihood of people being truly isolated seems remote. Those who wish to combine for common purposes have more access to one another and more means of pursuing their aims than at any time in human history. As more people gain access to the “information superhighway” the prospects for civic life will expand, albeit in larger, more diffuse organizations than in the past.

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Civic Life Adapts to the Information Age

This returns us to the heart of the matter: does democracy require the personal interaction of Putnam's secondary associations or can these larger organizations provide a meaningful civic life? Here we must heed Hiskes's warning that the communications revolution may well undermine our democracy by encouraging *talking* rather than *doing*. Like Putnam, Hiskes is concerned with the face-to-face quality of democracy. Yet, unlike Putnam, he focuses on accountability not trust. Hiskes warns that "excessive secrecy in government or in citizenship is a danger that threatens democracy as a whole." His point is well taken. Yet, our country has changed dramatically and our civic life can never be the same.

As communities and governments expand and problems become increasingly complex, there may well be a tendency toward larger, less personal forms of association. Complex problems, like environmental protection, arguably require considerable expertise and national coordination. Given that the locus of decision making has shifted from localities towards state capitals and Washington, D.C., it might be argued that these more impersonal, tertiary organizations are *essential* to a healthy democracy as we enter the 21st century. If taking care of the elderly, for example, requires navigating a maze of state and federal regulations, acquiring an understanding of a complex health care industry, and

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organizing Americans across the nation, it should not be surprising that a larger, more impersonal organization like the AARP would arise to combine the elderly in pursuit of their interests.

Hiskes's fear of secrecy and declining accountability, while food for thought, is probably overstated. That anonymity is more possible in the modern age is beyond question, yet the flood of information and access we have would seem to provide "the light of open scrutiny and public discussion" that he rightly identifies as the enemy of bigotry, corruption and tyranny. Groups like "Klan Watch" have arisen to monitor the activities of extremist groups on the Internet and elsewhere. In the wake of the tragedies in Oklahoma and Waco, information on extremists has flooded the airwaves. Representatives of the various militias appear on *This Week With David Brinkley* and the Randy Weavers of the world can be seen testifying before Congress on C-Span. This suggests that anonymity may be harder to come by than Hiskes would have us believe. Indeed, many fear that there will be *too little* anonymity in an age where very personal information is collected in large data bases and sold on the open market.

Tocqueville writes, and I think Putnam and Hiskes would agree, "Feelings and opinions are recruited, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal influence of men upon another."⁷ Putnam and Hiskes see only a specific type of association, characterized by face-to-face interaction, as relevant to these goals. According to Tocqueville, a variety of organizations fit the bill. This debate demonstrates the need to look specifically at what functions these associations perform, how they perform them, and what impact the communications revolution will have on the health of our democracy. I am less convinced than others of the centrality of direct, personal contact to our democracy. True, if our civic participation were reduced to simply writing checks to various organizations or "sounding off" on the Rush Limbaugh show, our democracy would suffer. However, mass communication

would seem to make this less likely.

Tocqueville understood that the symbiotic relationship between civil and political associations was necessary to counteract the excesses of individualism. He is correct, and democracy is forever challenged to foster that relationship. Associations have and will undoubtedly continue to evolve over time, adapting with various degrees of success to their environment. In the midst of this change, it is crucial for students of democracy to be clear as to how associations strengthen democracy. Tocqueville suggested that the free flow of ideas and freedom of association would allow people to combine for common purposes. Today we have *more* opportunities to learn about and associate with more people than ever before. These developments, whatever their drawbacks, surely offer opportunities, unthinkable a generation ago, for a meaningful civic and political life.

Endnotes:

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990; first published in America, 1840) Vol. 2, p. 102.

² Robert Putnam, "Tuning in, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America" in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, December, 1995.

³ *ibid.*, p. 666. Interestingly, Putnam also defines social capital as "our relations with one another" and cites "having coffee with a friend" as an example.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 666.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 665.

⁶ For Tocqueville, newspapers were also a mixed blessing: "I shall not deny that in democratic countries newspapers frequently lead the citizens to launch together into very ill-digested schemes; but if there were no newspapers there would be no common activity. The evil which they produce is therefore much less than that which they cure." (*Democracy in America*, Vol 2, p. 111) Would not the same be true of radio, television, et al.?

⁷ *Democracy in America*, Vol 2, p. 108-9.

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