

# CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN AMERICA: VOLUNTEERING AND CONTRIBUTING

By Virginia A. Hodgkinson

Giving and volunteering are a large part of the American culture. Since colonial times, communities have concerned themselves with the care of widows and orphans, the provision of education, mutual aid, and the public or common business of the community. After the Revolution, Americans drafted a constitution that gave limited powers to federal government, and most other power to the states and the people. And the First Amendment to the Constitution—assuring freedom of religion, speech, and the press—further promoted the development of all manner of voluntary religious institutions, private schools and hospitals, and associations of every kind. As Tocqueville noted in the 1830s, individualistic Americans continually form associations to carry out and promote their collective interests. This cultural "habit" has persisted in modern times.

Independent Sector has tracked trends in giving and volunteering in a series of biennial surveys beginning in 1988.<sup>1</sup> This research suggests that Americans remain convinced of the power of the individual to influence societal well-being and of the responsibility of the citizen to his community. In the 1991 survey, three-quarters of the respondents said that they thought it was in their power to do things to improve the welfare of others. Two-thirds rejected the notion that individuals could do little to alleviate suffering in the world.

Americans also think that individual citizens have a duty—with government—to help others in need and to improve the quality of their communities. In the 1988 Independent Sector survey, 75% agreed that it is the responsibility of individuals to give what they can to charity. Eighty-one percent also thought that the government has a basic responsibility to take care of people who cannot take care of

themselves. When the same questions were asked in Great Britain in the 1988 *Charity Household Survey*, sponsored by the Charities Aid Foundation, only 46% considered it the responsibility of people to give what they could to charity; 80% thought that it was the responsibility of the government to take care of people who could not care for themselves. While these questions have not yet been asked in broad international comparative surveys of giving, other available data suggest that many in western Europe and in Canada rely on strong government intervention to assist people in need. In the United States, most believe that helping others is an individual obligation as well as the responsibility of government.

## Giving and Volunteering

In 1991, 72% of American households reported giving an average of \$899, or 2.2% of their average household income, to charitable causes. Among contributing households, 49% reported giving less than 1% of their income to charity; 19% reported contributing between 1 and 2%; 9% reported total contributions between 2 and 3%; 8% reported giving between 3 and 5%; and 15% reported contributing 5% of household income or more. In spite of a volatile economy, the proportion of households that reported contributions has remained fairly steady: 71% in 1987, 75% in 1989; and 72% in 1991. Contributions declined slightly as a percentage of household income, from 2.5% in 1989 to 2.2% in 1991.

Each year, a very large percentage of all contributions go to religious institutions. In 1991, 60% of all funds contributed went to churches and other religious organizations, 14% to human services and youth organizations, 8% to education, and 7% to health organizations and

hospitals. The other 11% of total individual contributions were given to a variety of causes ranging from the arts and culture to community development and civil rights programs. According to estimates provided annually by the American Association of Fund-Raising Council (AAFRC) Trust for Philanthropy, giving from individuals amounted to \$102 billion in 1992—representing 2.01% of personal income.<sup>2</sup> Individual giving and bequests represented 89% of total giving in 1992 (\$124.3 billion). The other 11% came from corporations and foundations.

In 1991, 51% of Americans reported volunteering in the previous twelve months. Thirty-nine percent reported volunteering in the previous month. On average, volunteers gave 4.2 hours per week. While 41% of volunteers gave 2 hours or less per week, 27% volunteered 5 or more hours per week. The total hours Americans volunteered was 20.5 billion in 1991. Of this 20 billion hours, 15 billion were volunteered formally, with commitments on the part of the volunteer to an organization. Another 5 billion hours were informal, meaning that people volunteered on an ad hoc basis either to an organization or to individuals in their community. If only formal volunteering is counted, total volunteer hours equaled the value of 9 million full-time employees at an estimated value of \$176 billion. Generally, the proportion of adults that report volunteering has increased over the past five years (45% in 1987; 54% in 1989; and 51% in 1991).

## Giving by Groups

Americans report giving throughout all income groups. While the proportion of households that report contributions increases with household income, lower income households contribute a higher

percentage of their household income. In 1991, 46% of respondents with household income under \$10,000 reported contributions averaging 3.6% of their household income. Ninety-one percent of those with household income of \$100,000 or more reported contributions, and these averaged 3.2% of total income.

While level of education is an important factor for the level of volunteering, it is not as important for giving. In the 1991 survey, 83% of respondents who were college graduates said they made charitable contributions while 64% of respondents with a high school education reported doing the same. However, only 38% of the population with a high school degree reported volunteering compared with 77% among college graduates.

Giving and volunteering are also pervasive across gender, race, and ethnic background. In 1991, 70% of males and 74% of females reported household contributions. The proportion of African-Americans reporting household contributions increased from 51% in 1987 to 64% in 1991. Among Hispanics, the proportions declined slightly from 56 to 53%. Among whites, the proportion reporting household contributions remained steady at 73%. African-Americans showed the most steady growth in volunteering, increasing from 28% in 1988 to 43% in 1991. Hispanics also increased volunteer participation from 27 to 38%. Among whites, volunteering increased from 48 to 53%. From 1988 to 1991, volunteering increased among males from 44 to 49% and 47 to 53% among females.

Membership in religious organizations and other voluntary and service groups has a powerful influence on levels of giving and volunteering. Among members of religious organizations, 78% reported household contributions and 58% volunteered. The results were even more dramatic among those who were also members of other organizations: 90% reported household contributions and 76% reported volunteering. Among non-members of religious organizations, 58% reported household contributions and 35% volunteered.

## American Uniqueness

There has been scant comparative research on levels of giving and volunteering around the world. Recently, however, some survey work on the topic has been undertaken in western Europe, Canada and Australia. The Charities Aid Foundation has conducted a series of surveys in Great Britain since 1987.<sup>3</sup> Another major study of the nonprofit sectors in 14 nations has been conducted by the Institute for Policy Studies at The Johns Hopkins University (see *Public Perspective* p. 16). Data such as these allow for cross-national examination of traditions and patterns of giving and volunteering around the world.

For example, a 1989 study conducted by Laboratoire D'Économie Sociale and the Fondation de France found that 43% of French respondents reported contributing an average of \$213.<sup>4</sup> This compared to 75% of Americans in 1989 who reported average household contributions of \$978. In that same study, 19% reported volunteering an average of 4 hours per week compared with 54% of Americans who gave an equal amount of time. Overall, about twice as many American households contributed and three times as many volunteered. In that same year, an Australian study sponsored by the Australian Association of Philanthropy found that 77% of respondents reported contributing, compared with 74% in the US.<sup>5</sup> The survey found that Australian household giving represented 58% of total giving in Australia compared with 89% in the United States, 82% in Great Britain, and 88% in Canada. In the most recent survey of individual giving sponsored by the Charities Aid Foundation, 76% of the British reported contributing an average of about eleven dollars per month and 34% reported volunteering an average of nearly 5 hours per month.

Comparisons have been made of giving as a percentage of personal income. In 1985, the average percentage of personal income given to charities in Canada was 0.76%; in Great Britain, 0.52%; and in the US, 1.98%. As a proportion of personal

income, Americans give about four times more than the British and about two and a half times more than the Canadians.<sup>6</sup>

What seems to distinguish Americans most from citizens of other countries is a strong tradition of individual effort and responsibility to community, and less reliance on government to provide necessary resources and services.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Virginia A. Hodgkinson, Murray S. Weitzman, et al., and the Gallup Organization, *Giving and Volunteering in the United States* (Washington, DC: Independent Sector) 1992.

<sup>2</sup> American Association of Fund-Raising Council Trust for Philanthropy, *GIVING USA*, 1991 and 1993 (New York: AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy, 1991 and 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Charities Aid Foundation, *Individual Giving and Volunteering in Britain* (Tonbridge, Kent, Great Britain: Charities Aid Foundation, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Laboratoire D'Économie Sociale and Fondation de France, *First Results, Giving and Volunteering Survey* (Paris, France: Laboratoire D'Économie Sociale and the Fondation de France, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> The Australian Association of Philanthropy and the Australian Centre, *A Quantitative Exploration of the Philanthropy Sector of the Australian Economy for the 1988-89 Financial Year* (Melbourne: Australian Association of Philanthropy and the Australian Centre, University of Melbourne, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Allan Arlett, Phelps Bell, and Robert W. Thompson, *Canada Gives: Trends and Attitudes Toward Charitable Giving and Voluntarism, 1988* (Toronto, Canada: The Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 1988).

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