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Unsolved Mysteries: The Tocqueville Files

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Robert Putnam's important and disturbing work on civic participation ("**The Strange Disappearance of Civic America**," *TAP*, Winter 1996) has led him to conclude that television is the culprit behind civic decline. But lest we be *too* disturbed, we ought to consider carefully whether the data adequately measure participation and justify his conclusions and whether his conclusions fit much else that we know about recent history. I suggest that his work has missed some key contrary evidence. If we could measure civic participation better, the decline would be less striking and the puzzle less perplexing. If we looked more carefully at the history of civic participation and the differences among generations, we would have to abandon the rhetoric of decline. And if we examined television and recent history more closely, we could not convict TV of turning off civic involvement.

Consider, first, the problem of measuring whether there has been civic decline. Putnam has been ingenious in finding multiple measures of civic engagement, from voter turnout to opinion poll levels of trust in government to time-budget studies on how people allocate their time to associational membership. But could it be that even all of these measures together mask how civic energy is deployed?

Data collected by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady suggest the answer is yes. In 1987, 34 percent of their national sample reported active membership in a community problem-solving organization compared to 31 percent in 1967; in 1987, 34 percent reported working with others on a local problem compared to 30 percent in 1967. Self-reports should not be taken at face value, but why does this survey indicate a slight increase in local civic engagement? Does it capture something Putnam's data miss?

Putnam's measures may, in fact, overlook several types of civic activity. First, people may have left the middling commitment of the League of Women

Voters or the PTA for organized activity both much less and much more involving. As for much more: Churches seem to be constantly reinventing themselves, adding a variety of groups and activities to engage members, from singles clubs to job training to organized social welfare services to preschools. An individual who reports only one associational membership--say, a church or synagogue--may be more involved in it and more "civic" through it than someone else who reports two or three memberships.

Second, people may have left traditional civic organizations that they used for personal and utilitarian ends for commercial organizations. If people who formerly joined the YMCA to use the gym now go to the local fitness center, Putnam's measures will show a decrease in civic participation when real civic activity is unchanged.

Third, people may be more episodically involved in political and civic activity as issue-oriented politics grows. For instance, in California, motorcycle riders have become influential political activists since the 1992 passage of a law requiring bikers to wear helmets. 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.

Of course, policy is a limited notion of government. Putnam assumes a broader view that makes personal investment part of the payoff of citizenship. Participation is its own reward. But even our greatest leaders--Jefferson, for one--complained about the demands of public life and, like Dorothy in liberating Oz, were forever trying to get back home. Getting government off our backs was a theme Patrick Henry evoked. And who is to say that getting back home is an unworthy desire?

The concept of politics has broadened enormously in 30 years. Not only is the personal political (the politics of male-female relations, the politics of smoking and not smoking), but the professional or occupational is also political. A woman physician or accountant can feel that she is doing politics—providing a role model and fighting for recognition of women's equality with men—every time she goes to work. The same is true for African American bank executives or gay and lesbian military officers.

The decline of the civic in its conventional forms, then, does not demonstrate the decline of civic-mindedness. The "political" does not necessarily depend on social connectedness: Those membership dues to the NRA are political. Nor does it even depend on organized groups at all: Wearing a "Thank you for not smoking" button is political. The political may be intense and transient: Think of the thousands of people who have joined class action suits against producers of silicone breast implants or Dalkon shields or asbestos insulation.

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Let us assume, for argument's sake, that there has been a decrease in civic involvement. Still, the rhetoric of decline in American life should send up a red flag. For the socially concerned intellectual, this is as much off-the-rack rhetoric as its mirror opposite, the rhetoric of progress, is for the ebullient technocrat. Any notion of "decline" has to take for granted some often arbitrary baseline. Putnam's baseline is the 1940s and 1950s when the "long civic generation"—people born between 1910 and 1940—came into their own. But this generation shared the powerful and unusual experience of four years of national military mobilization on behalf of what nearly everyone came to accept as a good cause. If Putnam had selected, say, the 1920s as a baseline, would he have given us a similar picture of decline?

Unlikely. Intellectuals of the 1920s wrung their hands about the fate of

democracy, the decline of voter turnout, the "eclipse of the public," as John Dewey put it or "the phantom public" in Walter Lippmann's terms. They had plenty of evidence, particularly in the record of voter turnout, so low in 1920 and 1924 (49 percent each year) that even our contemporary nadir of 1988 (50.3 percent) does not quite match it. Putnam himself reports that people born from 1910 to 1940 appear more civic than those born before as well as those born after. There is every reason to ask why this group was so civic rather than why later groups are not.

The most obvious answer is that this group fought in or came of age during World War II. This is also a group that voted overwhelmingly for Franklin D. Roosevelt and observed his leadership in office over a long period. Presidents exercise a form of moral leadership that sets a norm or standard about what kind of a life people should lead. A critic has complained that Ronald Reagan made all Americans a little more stupid in the 1980s--and I don't think this is a frivolous jibe. Reagan taught us that even the president can make a philosophy of the principle, "My mind's made up, don't confuse me with the facts." He taught us that millions will pay deference to someone who regularly and earnestly confuses films with lived experience.

The "long civic generation" had the advantages of a "good war" and a good president. Later generations had no wars or ones about which there was less massive mobilization and much less consensus--Korea and, more divisively, Vietnam. They had presidents of dubious moral leadership--notably Nixon, whom people judged even in the glow of his latter-day "rehabilitation" as the worst moral leader of all post-World War II presidents. So if there has been civic disengagement in the past decades, it may be not a decline but a return to normalcy.

If the rhetoric of decline raises one red flag, television as an explanation raises another. Some of the most widely heralded "media effects" have by now been thoroughly discredited. The yellow press had little or nothing to do with getting us into the Spanish-American War. Television news had little or nothing to do with turning Americans against the Vietnam War. Ronald Reagan's mastery of the media did not make him an unusually popular president in his first term (in fact, for his first 30 months in office he was unusually unpopular).

Indeed, the TV explanation doesn't fit Putnam's data very well. Putnam defines the long civic generation as the cohort born from 1910 to 1940, but then he also shows that the downturn in civic involvement began "rather abruptly" among people "born in the early 1930s." In other words, civic decline began with people too young to have served in World War II but too old to have seen TV growing up. If we take 1954 as a turning-point year--the first year when

more than half of American households had TV sets--Americans born from 1930 to 1936 were in most cases already out of the home and the people born the next four years were already in high school by the time TV is likely to have become a significant part of their lives. Of course, TV may have influenced this group later, in the 1950s and early 1960s when they were in their twenties and thirties. But this was a time when Americans watched many fewer hours of television, averaging five hours a day rather than the current seven, and the relatively benign TV fare of that era was not likely to induce fearfulness of the outside world.

All of my speculations here and most of Putnam's assume that one person has about the same capacity for civic engagement as the next. But what if some people have decidedly more civic energy than others as a function of, say, personality? And what if these civic spark plugs have been increasingly recruited into situations where they are less civically engaged?

Putnam accords this kind of explanation some attention in asking whether women who had been most involved in civic activities were those most likely to take paying jobs, "thus lowering the average level of civic engagement among the remaining homemakers and raising the average among women in the workplace." Putnam says he "can find little evidence" to support this hypothesis, but it sounds plausible.

A similar hypothesis makes sense in other domains. Since World War II, higher education has mushroomed. Of people born from 1911 to 1920, 13.5 percent earned college or graduate degrees; of those born during the next decade, 18.8 percent; but of people born from 1931 to 1950, the figure grew to between 26 and 27 percent. A small but increasing number of these college students have been recruited away from their home communities to elite private colleges; some public universities also began after World War II to draw from a national pool of talent. Even colleges with local constituencies increasingly have recruited faculty nationally, and the faculty have shaped student ambitions toward national law, medical, and business schools and corporate traineeships. If students drawn to these programs are among the people likeliest in the past to have been civic spark plugs, we have an alternative explanation for civic decline.

Could there be a decline? Better to conceive the changes we find as a new environment of civic and political activity with altered institutional openings for engagement. Television is a part of the ecology, but in complex ways. It is a significant part of people's use of their waking hours, but it may be less a

substitute for civic engagement than a new and perhaps insidious form of it. TV has been more politicized since the late 1960s than ever before. In 1968, *60 Minutes* began as the first money-making entertainment news program, spawning a dozen imitators. *All in the Family* in 1971 became the first prime-time sitcom to routinely take on controversial topics, from homosexuality to race to women's rights. *Donahue* was first syndicated in 1979, *Oprah* followed in 1984, and after them, the deluge.

If TV does nonetheless discourage civic engagement, what aspect of TV is at work? Is it the most "serious," civic-minded, and responsible part--the news? The latest blast at the news media, James Fallows's *Breaking the News*, picks up a familiar theme that the efforts of both print and broadcast journalists since the 1960s to get beneath the surface of events has led to a journalistic presumption that no politician can be trusted and that the story behind the story will be invariably sordid.

All of this talk needs to be tempered with the reminder that, amidst the many disappointments of politics between 1965 and 1995, this has been an era of unprecedented advances in women's rights, gay and lesbian liberation, African American opportunity, and financial security for the elderly. It has witnessed the first consumers' movement since the 1930s, the first environmental movement since the turn of the century, and public health movements of great range and achievement, especially in antismoking. It has also been a moment of grassroots activism on the right as well as on the left, with the pro-life movement and the broad-gauge political involvement both locally and nationally of the Christian right. Most of this activity was generated outside of political parties and state institutions. Most of this activity was built on substantial "grassroots" organizing. It is not easy to square all of this with an account of declining civic virtue.

Robert Putnam has offered us a lot to think about, with clarity and insight. Still, he has not yet established the decline in civic participation, let alone provided a satisfying explanation for it. What he has done is to reinvigorate inquiry on a topic that could scarcely be more important.

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