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Unsolved Mysteries: The Tocqueville Files

ROBERT PUTNAM DECEMBER 19, 2001

Robert Putnam Responds

Any social change as broad gauged as that sketched in "**The Strange Disappearance of Civic America**" is surely complex--with multiple causes, conflicting countertrends, and uncertain consequences--so I welcome a lively discussion of these issues, especially with interlocutors as sophisticated as those in this symposium. In my view, four central questions must be considered:

1. Is it true that civic engagement has declined in the last few decades--that is, have Americans' connections with their communities become attenuated? My 1995 article on "Bowling Alone" surveyed this issue, and "Strange Disappearance" briefly reviewed the evidence. This is the central question addressed by Schudson.

2. If so, why has it happened? "Strange Disappearance" was a first attempt to sort through some possible answers to this question. Schudson, Skocpol, and Valelly all respond in part to this question.

3. Does it matter? That is, does civic engagement (or its absence) actually have

significant consequences for the health of our communities? This question has not been debated thus far, and I shall here assume--like my critics here--that, for the most part, the answer is "yes." However, "civic engagement" comes in many forms, some healthful and others not, so exploring the diverse consequences of those different forms will be a central concern of my larger project.

4. What can we do about it? This is, in many respects, the question that most concerns me. It is the focus of a gathering debate in conservative circles, but until now it has been ignored by progressives. I am thus delighted that it is at the core of Skocpol's contribution.

First, has anything changed? Americans engage with our communities and with one another in many different forms--in families, around the water cooler, at church, on the street corner, over the barbecue, in voluntary associations, in political gatherings, and myriad other settings. No single archive records all these encounters, but I have tried to pull together as diverse an array of evidence as possible--multiple surveys, membership records, time budgets and so on--in order to detect and decipher underlying trends, without limiting my attention to a single sphere, such as politics. The title "Bowling Alone" was chosen precisely to suggest that civic disengagement in contemporary America is not primarily a political phenomenon, although of course it has powerful political consequences. (By way of analogy, neither universal education nor television is primarily a political phenomenon, although both have had powerful political consequences.)

Politics, however, is the focus of the critiques by Schudson and Valelly, and I am happy to address it. I am not the first scholar to notice a decades-long slump in many forms of political engagement. Valelly correctly cites, for example, Rosenstone and Hansen, whose pathbreaking work (as

modestly

extended in my own) shows substantial declines in such activities as attending meetings on community affairs or working for political parties. Equally ominously, interest in political and social issues among students entering college reached a 30-year low last fall.

The forms of engagement that have resisted this trend--political contributions, civil litigation, talk radio, membership in "mailing-list" and "single-issue" lobbies, such as the AARP or the NRA, and so on--are without doubt politically significant, and they betoken a widespread recognition of the power of politics, for good or ill. Americans have not stopped trying to influence government, even though most of us are increasingly skeptical about our chances of success.

For the most part, however, these rising forms of political engagement rest on a constricted notion of citizenship--citizen as disgruntled claimant, not citizen as participant in collective endeavor to define the public interest. Just as much of our community service today is "drop-by," much of our politics is "surf-by" and "call-in." We are no less free with our opinions, but we are listening to each other less. We are shouting and pressuring and suing, but we are not reasoning together, not even in the attenuated sense that we once did, with people we know well and will meet again tomorrow. Financial capital grows in political importance, while social capital declines. To those Americans who have more money than time, this may seem a mere change in coinage, but the transformation is fundamentally debasing our democracy.

Schudson is surely right that there was something special about "the long civic generation"--that is, after all, why I labeled it such--and he and Skocpol are both right that levels of civic engagement have risen and fallen in the tides of American history. In fact, the unusual civic engagement among Americans raised in the first half of this century was probably the fruit of a

period of civic revitalization around the turn of the century. (I am currently engaged in research on precisely this question, in the hopes of uncovering lessons relevant to our current predicament.) If Schudson believes, however, that contemporary progressives should rest content with today's post-civic, Reaganite "normalcy," then I dissent.

Assuming for the moment that social connectedness has in fact atrophied in recent years, what could explain that trend? My greatest regret about "Strange Disappearance," I confess, is that its formulation seems to have invited hasty readers to conclude that I propose a simple-minded, mono-causal explanation--the boob tube as the root of all evil. I do believe that television has had a profoundly negative affect on community bonds in America, but I do not believe (and I did not write) that it is the sole culprit. (In the longer published version of my essay from which *TAP* excerpted "Strange Disappearance," I wrote that "like Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, this crime may have had more than one perpetrator, so that we shall need to sort out ringleaders from accomplices.") My references in "Strange Disappearance" to the Zeitgeist of World War II, to the changing role of women in America, to altered family structures, and so on, should perhaps have been less fleeting. More important, I agree with all three critics that those of us investigating this puzzle should look more systematically for evidence of what Skocpol calls "structural" effects, what Valelly terms "organizational context," and what Schudson felicitously calls "spark plugs"--in short, the supply side of civic life, as well as the demand side.

On the other hand, I would not automatically upgrade this hypothesis from "plausible" to "proven," for I have met too many conscientious leaders of community organizations around the country who are despondent about their inability, despite heroic efforts, to reverse the slow ebbing of their members' involvement--spark plugs in an engine running out of fuel. Moreover, the organizational supply or "spark plug" theory is more plausible for

some forms of disengagement (political parties and women's clubs, for example) and much less so for others (fraternal groups and bowling leagues, for example). Finally, even if civic disengagement did begin among erstwhile "spark plugs," rather than among organizational backbenchers, the leaders' withdrawal still needs explanation and (if disengagement matters) remediation. "Shifting elite allegiances" is a label (or an epithet), not an explanation or prescription.

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So what is to be done? So far the recent debate on how to restore social connectedness has been, as Skocpol says, largely a monopoly of the right. One important merit of Skocpol's important essay is precisely that it opens up this issue on the left. Another is that she brings historical evidence to bear on contemporary debates. For good historical reasons, progressives should resist the view, now being articulated by some simple-minded reactionaries, that government can be replaced by "civil society." As I wrote in this journal three years ago (rather plainly, I thought, and in italics, no less): "Social capital is not a substitute for effective public policy but rather a prerequisite for it and, in part, a consequence of it."

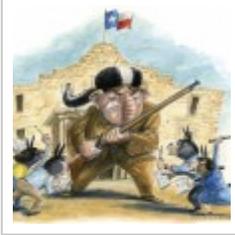
That said, progressives cannot allow ourselves to be pushed into the position that government energy can replace civic vitality or that grassroots connectedness does not matter. Surely we do not need to rehearse sterile academic debates about "the state" versus "civil society," for both are plainly important. What we need instead is a thorough, empirically grounded debate about how to revitalize civic engagement.

Public policy will be part of the answer, as I wrote three years ago. Take a single contemporary example: Neighborhood crime watch groups seem to be a notable exception to the general decline in social connectedness over the last quarter century, and most such groups emerged from community crime prevention programs sponsored by various federal, state, and local agencies, beginning in the 1970s, working often in partnership with community groups. So Skocpol is right to criticize "Tocqueville romanticists" who would claim that politics and government are irrelevant (or worse yet, intrinsically inimical) to civic vitality and who idealize "bottom-up" solutions. (Whether she is right to put me into that category is a less important question that I shall leave to others.)

On the other hand, "top-down" or government-driven solutions are hardly a panacea, and I cannot believe that Skocpol holds that extreme view, either, despite language in her commentary here that occasionally suggests that an active civic life can exist only as the product of an active government. The Washington elites whose creativity she celebrates may have played an important role in creating the American Legion, the Farm Bureau Federation, and the PTA, but so also did millions of ordinary Americans in thousands of local communities. Finding practical ways to encourage and enable their descendants (us) to reconnect with our communities, especially across lines of race and class, is a matter of high urgency, and we should not be distracted by false "either/or" debates.



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