

Civic Engagement and Civic Attitudes in Cross-National Perspective: Introduction to the Symposium

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Although civic engagement as a field of study has a long tradition in political science, it re-emerged in the 1990s as a result of real world events and academic scholarship. Popular revolutions in Eastern Europe and elsewhere led to a renewed interest in ‘people power’ across the world, including in the United States. And political scientist Robert Putnam’s study of civic community in Italy, followed by his analysis of changing patterns of social capital in the United States, helped to launch a new research agenda in the fields of comparative and American politics. Indeed, over the last fifteen years since the publication of *Making Democracy Work*, and over a decade since the article versions of what eventually became *Bowling Alone*, numerous works have addressed the themes of civil society and social capital, in a wide variety of theoretical and empirical contexts (see, for example, Adler and Kwon, 2002; van Deth, 1997; Foley and Edwards, 1999; Glaeser *et al.*, 2002; Hooghe and Stolle, 2003; Howard, 2003; Lidström, 2006; Lin, 2001; Newton, 2006; Paxton, 2002; Portes, 1998; Woolcock, 1998).

Underpinning Putnam’s work is the concept of social capital, a notion that has attracted widespread interest among all sorts of social scientists in the past decade, as it claims to explain, or be associated with, a varied set of social, political and economic phenomena. Social capital includes a variety of ingredients, including civic attitudes such as trust, reciprocity and helpfulness, as well as civic engagement and social interaction between citizens. Scholarly evidence suggests that societies high on social capital and civic engagement have lower crime rates, more democratic government, more efficient economies, more successful schools and better public services (Coleman, 1988; Kawachi *et al.*, 1997; Knack and Keefer, 1997; Putnam, 1993; however, see McLaren and Baird, 2006; Tarrow, 1996). The problem is that societies rich on social capital and civic engagement are also wealthier and often more democratic. Thus it is extremely difficult to know what is cause and what is effect in this tightly interwoven set of variables. Are societies wealthy and democratic because their citizens are trusting, cooperative and engaged? Or do wealth and democracy explain why citizens are able to trust and engage in civic life (Inglehart, 1997)?

This special symposium highlights three of the most recent and important themes in the debate about civic engagement and social capital, much of which has been

inspired by Putnam's work. Each of the four articles contributes to new insights about the sources, patterns and effects of civic engagement and attitudes, such as: (1) the internal effects of associational involvement; (2) immigration, diversity and social capital; and (3) generational change in democratic citizenship and political action repertoires. What unites the four articles in this symposium is not only a similar thematic approach, but also the use of a ground-breaking new survey, the US 'Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy' (CID) survey.

The US CID survey is a rich, multidimensional survey instrument.¹ It contains some very innovative items on the themes of informal social networks and the composition and diversity of ties and associations, and it also includes new batteries on democratic values and attitudes, political participation and tolerance. In addition to being a strong stand-alone survey, the CID also represents a collaboration with the European Social Survey (ESS), a major cross-national survey that has been conducted biannually since 2002 in over twenty countries. The US CID survey integrates several elements from the 2002 version of the ESS, which included a module on 'citizenship, involvement, democracy' and another on immigration. As a result, the US can now be included in these broad cross-national comparisons. Indeed, two of the four articles in this symposium analyze the CID data alongside the ESS. Furthermore, one of the articles shows how the CID data can be merged with census tract information and compared to another survey on similar themes that was conducted in Canada – thus demonstrating the versatility of the CID survey. In the remainder of this introduction, we will briefly outline the themes in this symposium.

The Internal Effects of Voluntary Associations

In the research on social capital and civic engagement, associations or social groups take a special role because of their socialization effects on democratic and cooperative values and norms. It is assumed that voluntary associations and social interactions function as 'schools for democracy'. Most empirical studies on the effect of voluntary associations showed that members of organizations and associations exhibit more democratic and civic attitudes as well as more active forms of political participation than non-members. For example, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963) found that members of associations are more politically active, more informed about politics, more sanguine about their ability to affect political life and more supportive of democratic norms (see also Billiet and Cambré, 1996; Hanks and Eckland, 1978; Olsen, 1972; Verba and Nie, 1972). Others have noticed that the number and type of associations to which people belong, and the extent of their activity within the organization, are related to political activity and involvement (Rogers *et al.*, 1975). In later research, Verba and his colleagues found that members of voluntary associations learn self-respect, group identity and public skills (Dekker *et al.*, 1997; Moyser and Parry, 1997; Verba *et al.*, 1995).

To these findings, the social capital school adds the insight that membership in associations should also facilitate the learning of cooperative attitudes and

behavior, including reciprocity. In particular, membership in voluntary associations should increase face-to-face interactions between people and create a setting for the development of trust that is generalizable to the outside world (see Almond and Verba, 1963; Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Putnam, 1993).

However, some scholars have expressed doubts about the role of voluntary associations (Uslaner, 2002). Most of all, it is not entirely clear whether those who score high on civic values and attitudes are the ones who might join voluntary associations disproportionately. Because of this possibility of self-selection effects, scholars have sought out methods that would allow them to disentangle better the causal flow of the relationship. Three dynamic approaches have been used in this kind of research using the length and intensity of group membership as dynamic variables. First, if the internal socialization function of voluntary groups is true, it should be the case that those people who have joined groups for longer periods in time should exhibit more civicness than those who have just recently joined a group (Stolle, 2001). Second, longitudinal designs are better able to scrutinize whether prior joining might actually lead to civic pay-offs as a consequence (Claiborn and Martin, 2000). Finally, there is a need to compare not only non-members with members, but to go beyond this crude dichotomy and compare those who are extremely active in voluntary associations with those who are less active. On all three fronts so far, the research could not confirm that the causal relationship flows from joining to civic attitudinal or behavioral outcomes. For example, members who participated in an organization for longer periods of time were not necessarily more trusting (Stolle, 2001); respondents who joined a group at time 1 were not necessarily more civic at time 2 (Claiborn and Martin, 2000); and passive organization members were not much distinguishable from active ones (Wollebæk and Selle, 2003). But these results were often limited to one-country or smaller comparative settings. What we need in this line of research is a more thorough and cross-national analysis of this relationship.

The first article in this symposium, by Marc Morjé Howard and Leah Gilbert, takes this issue to heart and establishes a unique typology of civic engagement in voluntary associations that distinguishes between less active and more active members of associations. If the socialization function of voluntary associations is correct, we should see that those who engage themselves more intensively should also be more trusting and more civically active. The article delivers an innovative test of this hypothesis in the cross-national study of the combined CID and ESS data sets. Generally, Howard and Gilbert find evidence for the internal socialization function. People who are more intensely involved in voluntary associations also engage in more political acts, have higher life satisfaction and are (for the most part) more trusting than those who do not, even when controlling for important demographic factors. Although the issue of the direction of the causal flow is still not completely solved, the broad scope of these cross-national findings highlights the general relevance of active and intense involvement as opposed to nominal membership in the study of social capital and civic engagement, thus

underscoring the widespread relationship between active participation in voluntary organizations and attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

Immigration, Diversity and Social Capital

One of the most challenging and vexing issues in debates about social capital and civic engagement involves the composition of people's social networks and society overall. It need hardly be said that in a world of large and increasing waves of population migration and ethnic mixing, such research strikes a sensitive nerve. Every year, about 2.75 million foreigners migrate to European countries alone (Salt, 2005, p. 26), and almost 1 million enter the US each year as well (*Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service* 2001). Considering the demographic trends and changes on the labor market, Western societies will clearly become more and more ethnically and culturally diverse in the near future. While most scholars and policy makers emphasize the importance of diversity, and they argue in favor of its beneficial effects on individuals and societies, the empirical connections with regard to the consequences for social cohesion remain unclear. Two of the articles in this symposium tackle this question, albeit in quite different ways: one addresses national attitudes toward immigration and immigrants, while the other focuses on local diversity within people's own social networks and communities.

In contrast to the US, which has a long tradition as a 'nation of immigrants', large-scale immigration has only existed for several decades in most West European countries, less than a decade in many South European countries and hardly at all in Eastern Europe.² Yet despite these different histories, immigration has become a heated political issue in both Europe and the United States, as countries seek solutions to manage the growing diversity of their populations. The article by Jack Citrin and John Sides explores these transatlantic comparisons by analyzing how American and European societies differ in their views of immigrants, using the CID and ESS data sets.

Citrin and Sides present a nuanced picture that leads to some clear conclusions. In terms of tolerance for diversity, they show that Americans are far more likely to respect and value cultural and religious pluralism in their society than Europeans, thus apparently confirming the 'exceptionalism' of the impact of the American historical experience with immigration and diversity. Yet Americans are actually very similar to Europeans in terms of the individual-level determinants of their attitudes, their likelihood to overestimate the number of immigrants living in their countries and their concerns about the impact of current and future immigration on public finances and safety. Moreover, Americans and Europeans share very similar views about the desirability of certain types of immigrants – especially those who are more highly qualified and who speak the national language. As a result, despite different immigration histories and overall tolerance of cultural diversity, Citrin and Sides conclude that the US and most European

countries have a disconnect between elite opinion and public attitudes. And while many countries have an economic 'need' for increased immigration, the political bargains will likely emphasize both increased selectivity and cultural assimilation of recent and future immigrants.

The social capital literature has also recently addressed this debate. In fact, a fierce public and academic controversy has broken out about the effect of diversity on social cohesion. At the heart of the argument is another article by Putnam, discussing the impact of greater religious, linguistic, national and ethnic diversity in American society (Putnam, 2007). Despite his expectation and hope that diversity would lead to positive outcomes, Putnam finds, on the basis of his research on US communities, that – at least in the short run – diversity is likely to reduce social solidarity and social capital, to lower social trust between citizens, to make them less likely to participate in the community and its politics and to make society less cooperative. Surprisingly, not only is interracial trust lower in ethnically diverse communities but in-group trust is also lower, which is not only true for white majorities but visible minorities as well (Putnam, 2007; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2000). Moreover, people in mixed communities are more likely to withdraw from social participation and spend more time watching television. In short, diversity seems to produce social isolation.

However, two important caveats need to be discussed about the issue of social diversity and trust. First, although Putnam's findings are thorough, systematic and well documented, it is by no means self-evident that they will be repeated in other societies outside the US. After all, the US is distinct from other countries in several important respects. For example, socio-economic disparities tend to overlap with ethnic and racial differences as well. In other words, mixed neighborhoods are often the poorest, and the poor are usually less trusting than the rich irrespective of diversity. Although Putnam controls for neighborhood poverty, what is not clear is whether the relationship also holds in societies where those cleavages are not as strongly intertwined. Furthermore, slavery has left a particularly strong historical legacy in the US, contributing to the minority-majority trust gap between blacks and whites (Patterson, 1999), which surely influences social relations in mixed localities. In other words, different combinations of economic and ethnic diversity might have different implications for trust and social capital. It would be important to know how the diversity finding holds up when applied to other societies.

The second caveat has to do with the difference between living in a diverse society, or facing diversity on the street or at work, and actually *interacting* regularly and closely with a diverse array of people. A great deal of research on racial attitudes and inter-group relations shows that direct contact with diverse others can be important for building a common identity and thus a sense of trust that transcends group boundaries, particularly when it involves cooperation between equals (Allport, 1954; Gaertner *et al.*, 1996; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2000). This was also underlined by the social capital school: at the time, Putnam highlighted that

perhaps not all forms and types of association exert beneficial effects, and he suggested that we therefore might want to distinguish conceptually between bridging and bonding social interactions. In a bridging–interaction context, people of various socio–demographic and economic backgrounds come together in order to connect based on their common hobbies and interests, whereas bonding interactions take place in a more homogeneous context with people from similar socio–demographic backgrounds. Putnam originally attributed a more beneficial role to the former, stating that bridging networks are more open, enable the flow of important information and socialize citizens to take different perspectives (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000). In short, perhaps using simple diversity measures of localities is not good enough – what really should make a difference is not whether people see diversity around them, but whether they actually experience it actively in their own social networks.

Following up on these two caveats, Dietlind Stolle, Stuart Soroka and Richard Johnston compare in their article the relationship between neighborhood diversity and generalized trust in the US to that in Canada, using the CID survey as well as a comparable Canadian data set. Although Canada’s experience with ethnic diversity is certainly very different from that of the US – based on much more heterogeneity within groups of visible minorities – the study finds similar results: diversity in one’s neighborhood is negatively related to generalized trust. Those who live in more diverse localities are also more distrusting. In this respect the Canadian and American results are very similar.

Yet when the authors examine whether direct contacts with diverse others have different consequences on trust compared to an experience of diversity without such social interactions, their results give a more optimistic picture. Although perceived diversity in one’s neighborly social networks still relates negatively to generalized trust, the article shows that people who regularly talk to their neighbors are not adversely affected by the racial and ethnic diversity of their surroundings. Social ties, it appears, can overcome considerably the feeling of being threatened by diversity. These findings, although still far from the assumption that bridging ties are beneficial for trust, open up a wide array of research questions, including the potential contexts where diverse direct contact might make a difference for generalized trust.

Generational Change and American Decline

Another important debate within the discussion about social capital and civic engagement is the one about its decline in America (Putnam, 1995; 2000). If these social resources are so valuable to societies, then such a stark decline over the last decades, as Putnam describes it, could indeed be threatening to American democracy. His description of falling membership in voluntary associations, declining volunteerism, political apathy and rising political and social distrust seemed to confirm the civic disarray that America had experienced in recent decades. Many

scholars have debated and re-examined Putnam's alarming interpretations and their applicability to other Western democracies (Stolle and Hooghe, 2005). Recently, a new team of authors around Stephen Macedo expressed again their concern with regard to the status of political and social engagement in American society (Macedo *et al.*, 2005).

What is the decline argument all about? According to Putnam, the loss of confidence and degradation of social ties pervades all aspects of American society. Drawing on commercial lifestyle surveys, Putnam found a negative trend for various forms of social interaction involving face-to-face contact beyond formally organized engagements. Not only do Americans socialize less with each other, join fewer associations and not come together around the dinner table as much as some decades ago; beyond these social dimensions, they also refrain from conventional political involvement. For example, he shows that since the 1960s Americans have been losing trust in their government and in government institutions (see also Nye *et al.*, 1997; Pharr and Putnam, 2000). In addition, voter turnout and membership in traditional political groups such as parties has also followed a downward spiral (Putnam, 2000; 2002; Teixeira, 1992; for the entire decline argument see also Macedo *et al.*, 2005).

The underlying message of this detailed account is quite clear: although this work goes much beyond the original narrower formulations of social capital theory to encompass a wide variety of social interactions and political engagements, the trend warns that the loss of community in American society will eventually destabilize democratic civic culture, which in turn will have negative consequences for the performance of political institutions and the viability of democracy itself.

These arguments have encountered fierce academic opposition. The *Bowling Alone* thesis has been variously characterized as overly pessimistic, too traditional or plainly wrong. A number of authors claim that the decline thesis idolizes the vanished world of the 1950s (Lowndes, 2000; Talbot, 2000); others depict it as pure nostalgia, a manifestation of the longing for a civic and engaged era that has clearly ended (Lappé and Du Bois, 1997; Pollitt, 1996). Another group of scholars emphasizes that citizens are developing a multitude of different and perhaps more suitable ways to engage in social and civic arenas, which they find more meaningful, more efficient and more direct. For them, the decline in conventional social interaction and political action is not worrisome. Rather, we should expect citizens to turn away from mass political organizations, associations and traditional social engagements (Inglehart, 1997).

Empirical research about the transformations in civic engagement and social interactions is still scarce. First analyses find a steady increase in the number of people involved in what seem to be newly emerging ways of civic engagement such as internet campaigns, anti-globalization protest movements, political consumerism and alternative lifestyle communities (Bennett, 1998; Dalton, 2004;

Stolle *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, citizens in Western democracies do not just engage in the political process differently, but the changing patterns also affect the style of socializing: citizens use fewer face-to-face and traditional organizational structures in favor of horizontal and more flexible ones (Castells, 1997; Wuthnow, 1998). This transformation can be seen in the way that citizens engage more in virtual communication with each other, the effects of which are currently being examined (Shklovski *et al.*, 2006). Also, citizens rely more on informal ways of volunteering or they support organizations financially to sponsor a cause, a phenomenon known as checkbook memberships (Skocpol, 1996).

The last article of this symposium, by Russell Dalton, joins this critical camp and examines the transformations in citizenship norms and how these changing norms influence political action. Dalton bases his analysis on the US CID survey. The article maintains that so-called *duty-based citizenship* norms have in fact weakened and belong to the politics of the past. In contrast, developing alternative norms of *engaged citizenship*, which have strengthened, are apparent – particularly among young people. These norms inspire different forms of political engagement, many of which may represent positive developments for American democracy as they give more direct opportunities for influence and say. Without denying the importance of political party democracy and voting, ultimately the implication of Dalton's findings suggests that we should recognize the potential of these attitudes and forms of citizen engagement, which open up new avenues for the renewal of American democracy.

Social capital and civic engagement are important societal resources. Given the considerable role they play in political and social life, these concepts have been receiving a great deal of attention from social scientists and policy makers alike. They have vast implications not only for democracy, but for economic performance and societal conflict as well. Thanks to several cross-national data sets it has become possible not only to understand better the consequences of social capital and civic engagement, but also the factors that shape them, and to document longitudinal change or transformations of these resources. The US CID survey contributes to these efforts, and the four articles that follow give insights into the most prevalent academic debates on these topics.

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Notes

1 See <http://www.uscidsurvey.org> for more information, including the questionnaire and data.

2 Of course there have been considerable population movements throughout all parts of Europe over the course of the twentieth century and earlier, but this is quite distinct from the relatively recent phenomenon of immigrants arriving from regions outside Europe.

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