

Civic Engagement in America:  
Why People Participate in Political and Social Life

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Why do people take part in social and civic life? There is clearly no simple answer for two reasons. First, people get involved in their communities for a variety of reasons. No form of political or social participation is well predicted by even a handful of variables. Second, and even more critically, there are many different forms of participation and what works to get people involved in one arena often has little effect in another. Getting involved in politics, for example, has very different roots from volunteering for “good” causes.

Civic engagement is important for a variety of reasons. At least from John Stuart Mill onward--to Alexis de Tocqueville (1840) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Robert Putnam (2000) today, there is a presumption that participation in civic life makes one a better person, more self-confident and caring about others. Civic engagement is the keystone of democratic values. This is the thesis behind much of the recent concern with *social capital*. This claim is widely disputed (Rosenblum, 1998; Stolle, 1998; Uslaner, 2002). Less contentious is the argument that civic engagement can reach out to help others (volunteering, giving to charity, working with others on community problems). Civic engagement can accomplish good works and to (in the words of former Virginia Lieutenant Governor Henry Howell) “keep the big boys honest,” to distinguish democratic government from autocracy. Participation can make elites more responsive to citizens (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Sullivan and Uslaner, 1978; Wright and Berkman, 1986). The voices of those who participate most are most likely to be heard, and heeded, by decision-makers (Bartels, 2002; Verba et al., 1995, 506).

I shall provide an overview of what shapes participation in different realms in this paper. Rather than focusing on these distinct arenas, I shall put primary emphasis on what works to get people involved in civic life--and how it works in different contexts.

## Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (2)

I shall consider factors that we can control (mobilization, social contacts, group membership, socialization) as well as demographics that we can't change (age, race, community size) and those we can (education, income). Other factors that may affect involvement are religion, individual resources, interest and attention to politics, attention to the media, personal efficacy and the perceived responsiveness of government officials, and the values that people hold (religious beliefs and trust in others).

Some of these factors work better than others. I provide a brief outline in Table 1 of what is to come. This list of “what works” is highly general. It should not be taken as a prescription for action in any specific arena, because it is meant as a summary statement across many realms. The determinants of civic engagement in the table are *not* listed in any order of effectiveness.

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Table 1 about here

What works should not be surprising. People with more resources (income, education, skills) are more likely to get involved. So are people with more connections, both through social networks and religious involvement. People who follow politics and who believe that the system will respond to them are also more likely to get involved. So are people who believe that they can make a difference. Most critically, people who are mobilized by elites and activists are much more likely to get involved in civic life. However, mobilizing people is much more than either simply asking them to get involved or simply getting them to join civic groups. Asking *does* work, but we recruit people *who are likely to participate anyway*. You can't get apathetic people to change their ways simply by telling them about opportunities to participate. And you won't get misanthropes to do good deeds by talking nice to them (or even threatening them). There is

### Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (3)

strong evidence that participation in civic life during youth will lead to active adults. However, there is real debate over whether forcing young people to volunteer ("service learning") has longer term payoffs. Nor does it seem that getting people to join voluntary organizations will promote other forms of civic participation.

Putnam (2000) acknowledges that some forms of participation may be more important than others, but argues that: (1) *any form of social connections, from organizing a community group to voting to going out to a bar or on a picnic, has positive social consequences*; and (2) *there has been a decline in virtually all forms of political and social engagement from the 1940s to the present and this decline stems from a common source*. If, however, different forms of participation have different roots, then it should not be surprising to find that: (1) they also have different consequences; and (2) some forms of participation have fallen, others have risen, and some have remained flat.

Verba and Nie (1972, 52-53) showed three decades ago that there are four distinct modes of participation: (1) citizen initiated contacts; (2) voting, (3) campaign activity, and (4) cooperative activity. Voting is the least demanding, campaigning and cooperative activity the most. People contact public officials and work with others for personal benefit. Campaigning is a confrontational activity (you are working to defeat your opponent). Contacting officials and especially working on community projects (cooperative activity) depend more upon a sense that someone out there is listening and that fellow citizens can work together in a positive spirit.

There are only modest correlations among the different dimensions of participation (campaigning and communal participation show the highest correlation, Verba and Nie, 1972, 62). Using the 1996 American National Election Study, I examined a more expansive list of

#### Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (4)

social and political activities. I found three dimensions—one for community engagement, another for religious participation, and a third for political involvement (see Table 2). These three dimensions are largely independent of one another: Involvement in community activities does not make one any more or less likely to take part in political activities. Some of the categories seem to make more sense than others. The political dimension is straightforward, as is the community cluster. The religious dimension includes charitable giving, volunteering, and working on community problems. This is not surprising, since much charitable giving and volunteering takes place through religious organizations (see Bakal, 1979, 10; Hayge, 1991, 21). Yet the dimension also includes voting, which seems more surprising.<sup>1</sup>

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#### Table 2 about here

There is a modest relationship between both religious and political activities and community engagement, but both correlations are far from strong. Most striking in Table 2 is how many group memberships are *unrelated to any other form of participation*. Membership in labor unions, veterans groups, elderly groups, ideological organizations, parents associations, arts clubs, hobby groups, fraternal societies, self-improvement organizations, and even political and civic associations *do not cluster with any of the three basic dimensions*. *There is no single syndrome of participation*. Some people take part in communal activities, others in political engagement, and still others focus on religious activities. Many people seem to belong to groups that have no connection to other associations at all. And, of course, a great many people simply stay home.

This suggests another, and perhaps equally important, distinction among types of

### Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (5)

participation: **those activities that are more demanding in time and resources and those that are less demanding.** Perhaps the least demanding activity are voting, signing petitions, discussing politics, and attending religious services. Joining voluntary associations also does not seem very demanding, since most people do not spend more than a few hours a week in such groups (Newton, 1997, 579). Giving to charity may not seem to demand much time, but it requires two other forms of resources: economic and moral (for nonpolitical causes; see below). Volunteering time is more demanding. So are working with others on a community problem, campaigning for candidates, writing articles, attending a rally, and running for office. Attending public meetings and writing letters to public officials rank in the middle. We would expect that the most demanding activities would have the lowest levels of engagement—and would require the greatest effort to stimulate.

There is not uniform evidence of a decline in civic participation. Verba *et al.* (1995, 71) find that some forms of political activity increased from 1967 to 1987: persuading others to vote, working for candidates, contributing money to candidates and parties; and contacting public officials (among others). Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, ch. 3) find no clear in working for parties or candidates, but strong increases in campaign contributions, and no clear trend in signing petitions.

My own analysis of data from the Roper Social and Political Trend data set from 1974 to 1994 finds more support for consistent patterns of decline for political participation. Roper asked about participation in a range of activities every year from 1974 to 1994: contacting public officials, attending rallies and public meetings, running for office, organizing and serving as an officer on committees, writing letters or articles for the press, working for a party, giving a

### Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (6)

speech, and being a member of a political club. For every one of these political activities, there has been a decline in participation over time. Often, the correlation is substantial (especially for party work, organizing a committee, serving as an officer in a committee, and attending a rally or a public meeting).

The evidence is less conclusive for other forms of organizations. While Putnam argues that traditional civic groups have declined in membership, Wuthnow (1998) presents evidence that there are many new forms of civic organizations that may have supplanted older style civic groups. As people opt out of the Elks and the Shriners, they join self-help groups and environmental clubs, neither of which was popular when Putnam's data series began (in the 1920s in many cases). Even the vaunted decline in civic participation that Putnam (1995) initially reported from the General Social Survey (GSS) turns out to be the result of a coding mistake. Overall, there are decreases in membership for only four groups of 15 in the GSS data: religious and church, labor, and fraternal organizations. Others either remain flat (almost all groups in the survey) or have actually had increases (professional associations).<sup>2</sup> There is actually a 4% increase from 1974 to 1994 and (since the 1974 figures were anomalously high for the period) a 17% increase from 1975 to 1994 for secular groups excluding labor.

These diverse patterns provide further evidence for the argument that there is no one single syndrome of participation. So we should not expect that what works in one domain will work in another.

I now turn to the task at hand. I shall first discuss demographics, which may often be difficult to affect in the short run (age, race, income, education, and resources). Next I focus on determinants of participation that are more malleable: newspaper readership, consumption of

## Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (7)

electronic media, internal and external efficacy. I next consider factors shaping engagement that may be most subject to change: our social connections, including joining civic groups, informal social networks, attendance at religious services, mobilization of people to social and political action, and socialization in youth. Then I turn to “pro-social” values that might spur participation.

### Demographics

#### **Education: Highly educated people participate more in social and political life.**

More so than anything else, levels of education shape social and political participation. Highly educated people are more likely to vote (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1992, 273; Teixeira, 1992, 200; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, 24-25). They are also more likely to write office-holders and to attend local political meetings (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1992, 74). Higher levels of education are associated with a greater propensity to join voluntary associations (Gutерbock and Fries, 1997, 64; Verba and Nie, 1972, 181). Educated people are more likely to volunteer (Gaskin and Smith, 1995, 30; Hayge, 1991, 18; Wilson and Musik, 1997, 703-704) and to give to charity (Hodgkinson, Weitzman, and Associates, 1992, 220; Reed and Selbee, 2002).

Putnam (2000, 247-248) argues that education is the strongest predictor of civic engagement, though Verba et al. (1995, 444) rank it somewhat lower (behind interest in politics, civic skills, and information). Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, 75, 130-131) find education considerably more important for participation in government (writing Congress and attending a meeting) than for electoral politics. All agree that it is critical. Educated people are more likely to develop organizational and communication **skills and resources** (see below). Highly educated people are likely to get jobs that will foster the skills that make for civic activists (Verba et al., 1995, 435-436, 457). *Increased educational opportunities seem to be the most important key*



Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (8)

*to social and political engagement. Education seems to shape all forms of civic involvement, but the effects are weaker for less demanding activities (voting) and stronger for more demanding forms of participation that require more resources (campaigning, attending meetings, writing public officials, volunteering time).*

**Age: Young people participate less in social and political life.**

Young people are less involved in virtually every type of social and political engagement. Young people have not established roots in their communities. They move more often, so they do not devote the time to become informed on local issues. They generally make less money than older people, so their stake in politics is less (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, 42). Putnam (2000, 247-8) argues that age is the second strongest predictor of participation in general (ranking only behind education). Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, 75, 130-131) find overwhelming age effects for turnout, though less powerful ones for governmental participation. Younger people pay less attention to the news, attend religious services less often, volunteer less, vote less frequently, and spend less time working on community problems. Older people are more likely to make donations to charity (Jencks, 1987, 326).

Young people today are even less participatory than their cohorts were several decades ago. If there has been a drop in some forms of civic engagement, it is largely attributable to the drop-off in participation by younger people. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, ch. 7) estimate that 17% of the decline in turnout from 1960 to 1988 can be attributed to generational change: Older people, who had high levels of participation, die and are replaced in the potential electorate by younger cohorts who opt out of political life. Young people have withdrawn from more than

### Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (9)

voting. Putnam (2000, 283) argues that they have dropped out of almost all forms of civic engagement. Generational replacement accounts for half of the total decline in participation in both social and political life in the United States, he argues.

These trends are disturbing for two reasons. First, in the past young people would become more participatory as they grew older. Age brought with it greater material wealth and greater responsibilities. As young people got married, had children, and bought their own homes, they would become more concerned with issues such as the quality of schools and rates of taxation. They would develop more clear-cut ideologies and have stronger attachments to political parties. Ultimately they would participate more in political and social life. Yet participation has not increased as rapidly as it once did. Many young people continue to opt out of civic life as adults.

Second, people who are active as young people continue to participate as adults. Early socialization is an important determinant of later civic involvement. So when young people withdraw from civic life, they are setting a pattern for the future (see the discussion of **socialization** below). *It is thus important to find ways of getting young people involved in social and political affairs, yet it is difficult to do so because young people are less interested in civic life. Also, young people read fewer newspapers, have less of a sense of efficacy, attend religious services less often, have lower incomes, and are less trusting than their elders. Each of these factors shape some form of civic engagement—and on each, the young fall behind. **Engaging young people is a key problem facing American society. Young people seem to have opted out of most forms of civic engagement. Volunteering may be an exception, but only because many school systems require “volunteering” for graduation from middle and high school (see***

*below).*

**Income: Wealthier people participate in most forms of political and social life more than lower-income people.**

There are at least three dimensions to income: (1) the amount of money people have; (2) the resources that people have; and (3) the distribution of income in society. These three components are clearly related, but they are distinct.

People with more resources participate more in both political and social affairs. Wealthier people are more likely to have greater resources that make their voices heard in politics. The voices of the poor are far less likely to be heard, and the issues on the political agenda will reflect the class bias of those who participate most (Verba *et al.*, 1995, 222). *Since income inequality has increased dramatically in the United States over the past four decades, there is cause for concern that some voices are increasingly being excluded from social and political discourse.* In Figure 1 below, I document the almost linear rise in income inequality in the United States. I plot the Gini index of income inequality, the most widely used measure of income disparity between the wealthy and the poor (with higher scores indicating greater inequality) from 1960 to 1998. In 1960, it was .364 and in 1998 it had risen to .430.<sup>3</sup>

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Figure 1 about here

As with education, the effects of income are strongest for those activities that demand the most effort. The poor vote less often than the wealthy (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1992, 134; Teixeira, 1992, 200). Yet education dwarfs income as a factor predicting turnout in more

## Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (11)

elaborate models of turnout (Verba et al., 1995, 281; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, 25).

Voting is not a very demanding activity compared to other forms of political and social involvement, so the effects of turnout are *not* as highly stratified by class (cf. Keeter et al., 2002).

Higher income people are more likely to join voluntary associations (Guterbock and Fries, 1997, 26-27; Wright and Hyman, 1958, 288-289) and to volunteer (Guterbock and Fries, 1997, 81-82). However, these relations are rather weak. In my own estimates, income is barely significant as a predictor of volunteering (Uslaner, 2002, 132-133) and the simple correlations of group membership with subjective social class are very modest, except for professional associations.<sup>4</sup> Income is a powerful determinant of being affiliated with a political organization, board membership, informal community activity, contacting public officials, campaign work, and signing petitions (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1992, 134, 272; Verba et al., 1995, 189-190)—all relatively demanding forms of civic and political involvement.

Hardly surprising is the powerful impact of income on donating to political campaigns: The poor simply do not have resources to give to candidates who are far wealthier. Income is also an important determinant of charitable giving (see also Uslaner, 2002, 133). However, the impact of income is far greater for the *amount of money donated to either political or social causes than for the simple decision to give or not to give.*

There is a much smaller gap between the rich and the poor when it comes to donating time, either for political or social causes. While the rich give far more money to both causes, the poor are as generous with their *time* as the well-off. Indeed, the wealthiest citizens give less of their time than do the poorest. The rich have more money, but each of us has but 24 hours in a day. The rich may have more leisure time—and they use it to become involved in politics. But the

## Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (12)

poor are more likely to be mobilized by churches—and to give of their time through religious institutions (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1992, 134; Verba et al., 1995, 192, 198, 202). **Religious activity** is thus a great force for equalizing social and political participation (see below). *Income is an important determinant of social participation; its effects are greatest in those arenas that require resources (donating to both political and social causes) or are the most demanding. Voting and volunteering seem less affected by income than other forms of engagement.*

**Resources: People with greater organizational and communications skills are more likely to be involved in both political and social life.**

Income and education are often not so critical in themselves, Verba et al. (1995), argue. High levels of income and education go along with important jobs and key positions in society that either require organizational or communications skills or provide incentives for people to learn them. These resources and skills include writing, bringing people together, making presentations, contacting public officials, and making decisions. Each of these resources/skills translates into political or social activism (Verba et al., 1995, 342-353, 444). These skills are more important for local political and social activity than for national politics (Miller, 2001). Yet, people with many resources also are more likely to vote as well as to take a more active part in voluntary associations, campaigning, and contacting public officials (Klofstadt, 2001; Verba et al., 1995, 353). Civic skills are among the most important determinant of civic engagement in general, far outdistancing income and education (Verba et al., 1995, 444).

While the wealthy and highly educated are more likely to develop civic skills, those at the lower end of the economic scale do have an outlet for developing these resources: churches.

### Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (13)

Joining religious groups can foster the same set of organizational and communication skills (Verba et al., 1995, 519).

*Resources and skills are particularly important determinants of most forms of activity. Like education and income, they are most important for the most demanding forms of civic engagement. Charitable giving, however, does not depend upon skills. Giving time often does utilize people's skills to a much greater degree, though this varies by the form of volunteering. Doing good even within an organization often does not require learned skills. Religious volunteering often gives people the opportunity to develop skills that they may not have learned through higher education or on the job.*

### **Inequality**

**High levels of economic inequality may depress participation as people with lower incomes may feel that their participation in civic affairs does not count as much as wealthier people's.**

Establishing a direct connection between economic inequality and civic engagement seems easy, but is actually quite difficult. We know that people with greater resources and greater wealth take much more active roles in many forms of civic and political life. We also know that elites respond more to the well-off than to those with fewer resources. However, making the leap from income inequality to less participation is more difficult.

We measure income inequality at the aggregate level, rather than the individual level. And there is scant evidence that most forms of participation are strongly linked (either across nations or states) by levels of economic inequality. Uslaner with Brown (2002) show that turnout, group

#### Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (14)

membership, and religious activity are not strongly related to economic inequality either across countries or across the American states. Changes in participation are also very weakly related to the growth in economic inequality in the United States, either across states or over time.

Participation in some forms of civic association are more skewed by income and class than others, notably membership in professional associations. And the more demanding forms of political activity (attending rallies and public meetings, organizing a committee, working for a political party, writing an article for a newspaper, running for office) do decline from 1974 to 1994 as the level of economic inequality has risen. Even here the relationships are moderate. My findings generally corroborate those of Leighley and Nagler (1992) and Putnam (2000).<sup>5</sup> Putnam (2000, 193-194) argues that the more general decline in civic engagement in the United States has occurred across income groups:

Examined with a microscope, the dropouts may be faintly greater among the financially distressed but the differences are slight and inconsistent....At most the spread of financial anxiety might account for 5-10 percent of the total decline in church attendance, club membership, home entertaining, and the like. Neither objective nor subjective economic well-being has inoculated Americans against the virus of civic disengagement.

While some forms of participation are marked by more unequal participation than others, the overall levels of participatory skew have been remarkably consistent over time: The distribution of participation across a wide range of activities was no greater in the 1990s than it was in the 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

There is a greater impact of inequality on charitable giving and volunteering time. As

## Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (15)

economic inequality has increased in the United States, we give *less* (not more) of our income to charity and spend less time volunteering (at least for the Red Cross, see Uslaner, 2002, ch. 6).

The relationship between inequality and participation may be indirect rather than direct. Uslaner (2002, ch. 6) and Brown and Uslaner (2002) argue that inequality leads to weakened social bonds across classes and groups within society. High levels of inequality lead to less generalized trust—and generalized trust in turn lays at the foundation of many good deeds such as giving to charity and volunteering time (see below). There is no corresponding effect of trust on most other forms of participation, including (or especially) political activities (Uslaner, 2002, chs. 5 and 7; Brown and Uslaner, 2002). This may well explain the weak link between inequality and many forms of political and social participation such as joining voluntary associations.

*Participation in most political and social activities is unequal, but there is little systematic variation across countries, states, or over time between most forms of engagement and the level of economic inequality. However, there is an indirect link from inequality to charitable giving and volunteering time through generalized trust.*

### Minorities

**Minorities generally participate in both social and political life less than whites. However, this lower level of engagement generally reflects the lower incomes, less education, and fewer resources minorities have. A strong sense of racial identity can increase the level of civic engagement dramatically.**

African-Americans generally vote at a lower rate than whites; they also are less likely to campaign for candidates for office, to get involved in their communities, or to contact public



## Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (16)

officials (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Teixeira, 1992, 47). Latinos also have lower levels of turnout (get cite). Putnam (2000, 280) reports that there are few racial differences in membership in voluntary organizations.

Black participation in politics was long depressed by Jim Crow laws in the South that prohibited African-Americans from voting. Since the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1967, the main barriers to African-American participation are resources. Once we take the levels of income, resources, and especially education into account, African-American participation is generally equal to that of whites or even greater—especially for voluntary organization memberships (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Verba *et al.*, 1995, 447; Williams and Ortega, 1986, 37). Latino turnout is also depressed by lower income levels (Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee, 2000). At equal levels of education, there are no significant differences between black and white participation in civic, electoral, or political activity (Keeter *et al.*, 2002).<sup>7</sup>

There is mixed evidence as to whether neighborhood context matters. Cohen and Dawson (1993) argue that poor African-Americans are less likely to attend community meetings if they live in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty. However, Alex-Assenoh and Assenoh (2001) argue that neighborhood economic context has little effect of African-Americans' organizational membership.

There is much greater agreement that a sense of racial and community identity leads minorities to vote and to participate more in their communities (Cohen and Dawson, 1993; Guterbock and London, 1983; Shingles, 1991). Minorities with strong ties to their neighborhoods are more likely to take part in political life (Marschall, 2001). For both African-Americans and Latinos, a sense of community and ethnic/racial identity leads to greater

### Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (17)

participation, although there are conflicting arguments over whether high trust in public officials (and integration into mainstream political life) or low trust in officials (with a more exclusivist sense of racial identity) leads to more participation (cf. Marschall, 2001 with Cohen and Dawson, 1993 and Shingles, 1991; Garcia, 1997).

The importance of racial identity depends upon the political and social context: Where there are black mayors, African-Americans are more likely to believe that the political system will be responsive—and they will take a more active role in civic affairs (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990, 382). African-Americans (though not Latinos) are less likely to vote and to participate in civic affairs more generally when they live in racially mixed environments. Oliver (2001, 137) finds a similar effect for whites and argues:

...racial segregation seems to boost certain types of civic activities, particularly those involving more symbolic gestures or social connections between residents.

Both whites and blacks are more interested in local politics, are more likely to take part in local organizational activity, and are more likely to vote in local elections when surrounded by people of their own race.

However, Tate (1994) argues that racial identity is not always a strong determinant of turnout. It stirred turnout much more in the Democratic Presidential primaries of 1988 (when Jesse Jackson ran for President) than in 1992. And Gilliam and Kaufmann (1998) find that minority empowerment under black mayors has a limited life-span: Once minority mayors become a political fact of life in a city (after several decades), African-American turnout begins to fall. Empowerment gives way to cynicism and alienation, as African-Americans believe that black mayors cannot by themselves turn city government around. Oliver (2001, 93-97) argues

### Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (18)

(consistent with Dawson and Cohen, 1993) that economic segregation makes it difficult to maintain a participatory culture in poor communities; the poor become disenchanted with their inability to shape their own destiny and lose interest in political life.

**Minorities generally participate less in politics than whites, but their rates of other forms of civic engagement (such as membership in voluntary associations) are similar to those of whites. Minorities participate less because they have fewer resources such as education, income, and organizational skills. When minorities (at least African-Americans) have a greater sense of group identification, they are more likely to participate in political and social life, although this effect wears off after several decades of empowerment. I shall argue later that minorities are less frequently mobilized than whites and this too depresses their level of civic engagement.**

### Information, Efficacy, and Incentives

Well informed people and citizens who feel more powerful are more likely to participate in all forms of civic and political life. This should not be surprising, since education is a strong determinant of engagement and more highly educated people are also more likely to become informed. However, keeping informed (through reading newspapers) spurs participation, above and beyond education. Similarly, educated people will feel more empowered—and also that the government is more likely to pay attention to them. But again, efficacious people are more likely to become involved in civic and political life even controlling for education levels.

Not all forms of media exposure lead greater engagement. **Newspaper readership leads to much greater civic involvement, while there is less agreement on the effects of television**

## Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (19)

### and the Internet.

People who read newspapers are much more likely to vote (Teixeira, 1992, 200), to give to charity (Uslaner, 2002, 133), and to take part in civic life more generally (Putnam, 2000; Markus, 2002; Guterbock and Fries, 1997, 26-27). High levels of newspaper readership are connected with high levels of volunteering in Netherlands (Social and Cultural Planning Office, 1996, 518).

Newspaper readership is not sufficient in itself to increase civic engagement. Newspapers have a bigger impact on participation when they are rooted in their communities. Local newspapers that pay a lot of attention to civic affairs can spur increases in engagement. National newspapers (such as USA Today in the United States) may even prove to distract our attention from civic life, since they focus attention on events outside our communities.

In the United Kingdom, John et al.(2001, 25) found that the connection between newspaper readership and volunteering was particularly strong when people read local (rather than national) newspapers and broadsheets rather than tabloids. The linkage of newspaper readership and turnout is particularly strong in media markets where newspapers practice “civic journalism,” educating their readers by presenting extensive coverage on political campaigns (Markus, 2002, 31f). Verba and Nie (1972, 245) found a similar impact for *all forms of external media*: Communal activity was significantly lower in communities with newspapers owned by national chains and with television stations owned by outside interests. Ironically, however, campaign activity was *higher* in such communities. It seems that the media can stimulate participation when they devote a lot of attention to local affairs. When they pay more attention to national politics, campaign activity goes up but community activism decreases.

## Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (20)

This nuanced view of media effects may explain the contradictory findings in the literature on television and civic and political engagement. On the one hand, there is the “mean world” argument most closely associated with Gerbner et al. (1980) and Putnam (1995b, 1996, 2000). On the other hand, there is the “virtuous circle” argument of Norris (2000, ch. 11):

Putnam’s (1996, 677-680) case against television rests on two foundations. The first is a direct cause of waning participation in civic affairs: Television viewing eats up time. If you are hooked in front of your television set, you can’t be out and about partaking in civic life. The second part gets to civic participation through television’s affect on personality. Television dramas bring us violence and bad guys. The news highlights crime, war, disease, and other plagues. A viewer might reasonably think that the real world is cruel as well. People who watch a lot of television, Gerbner and his colleagues argue, rank low on social capital, or trust (Gerbner et al., 1980, 17-19).

Putnam (1995b; 1996; 2000, 229) finds that people who watch a lot of television take less are less trusting of their fellow citizens and take active roles in their communities (see also Brehm and Rahn, 1997). He argues (2000, 283) that the increase in television viewing over the past several decades may account for up to a quarter of the total decline in civic engagement in the United States. Newton (1999), Norris (2000, ch. 11), and Teixeira (1992, 200) find that people who watch television news (as opposed to entertainment programs) are more likely to take part in political activities (especially voting). A Dutch study found that when television was initially introduced in the Netherlands, civic engagement declined, but later increased (Social and Cultural Planning Office, 1996, 216).

My own work on the United States (Uslaner, 1998) as well as that of John et al. (2001,

## Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (21)

25) for Great Britain shows little effect of television viewing on trust, civic engagement generally, or volunteering more specifically.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, my work challenges the argument that *what you watch matters*. Across a variety of forms of television viewing—from news to soap operas, I found little effect on trust or civic engagement (Uslaner, 1998). John et al. (2001, 25) found in a British sample of high school students, there was no impact of the number of hours one watched television and willingness to volunteer; and, indeed, they found that young people who watched a lot of television were *more trusting, not less*.

If electronic media demobilize people, we might expect to find that the Internet might also lead to less civic engagement. Nie and Erbring (2000) report that heavy Internet users report that they have cut back on their social ties and thus might participate less in civic life. On the other hand, the Internet connects people from all over the world—and may be, as Hauben and Hauben (1997, 5) argue “a grand intellectual and social commune in the spirit of the collective nature present at the origins of human society.” Bimber (1998) argues that there is little reason to expect a link between technology and civic engagement: With each new technology, from the post office to the telephone to television and the Internet, more and more people have access to information that would make it easier to participate in civic life. Yet, participation rates have expanded, not contracted, as information resources proliferate.

The evidence on the Internet's effects also seems contradictory. Uslaner (2000a) finds that heavy users of the Internet have marginally *larger* social networks than people who are not online. Guterbock and Fries (1997, 81-82) argue that people connected to the Internet are much more likely to volunteer their time (see also Keeter et al., 2002). Yet, Bimber (2001) finds little impact of Internet usage on political participation, and his argument seems more compelling.

## Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (22)

*Simple usage of the Internet should not increase or decrease civic engagement. There is such a wide variety of sites to visit on the Internet that we need (as Verba and Nie argued three decades ago) a more nuanced view of what people do on the Internet. Even if we find that people visit sites that connect them to volunteering activities, we must first ask whether there is a self-selection effect at work (cf. Stolle, 1998): Do people who plan to volunteer go to the Internet to look for volunteering options, or simply information on how to get involved, or (as seems less likely) might people get involved in their communities while randomly surfing the net?*

**Overall, there is mixed evidence for media effects on civic engagement. People who read newspapers are more likely to get involved in their communities, but this effect is strongest when newspapers are locally owned and devote considerable attention to local politics. In an era of homogenized newspapers owned by a smaller and smaller number of conglomerates, there is less local news in newspapers. The incentives for newspapers to cover political life in great detail are not great. The evidence is far more mixed on whether television or the Internet mobilizes or demobilizes people.**

Media effects might be indirect rather than direct. If the media informs people and makes them feel more powerful, then they might become more involved in their communities. There is considerable evidence that people who feel that they have the power to effect change (a sense of "internal efficacy") vote more often, give more to political campaigns, and participate in local meetings (Teixeira, 1992, 200; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, 144, 271, 280). Indeed, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, ch. 7) argue that almost one tenth of the decline in turnout from 1960 to 1988 is attributable to decreasing feelings of political efficacy.

It is not only the belief that you are powerful but that political officials are listening (a

### Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (23)

sense of “external efficacy”) that shapes participation. Believing that public officials are responsive leads to greater public participation in elections as well as attending local meetings, signing petitions, contributing to political candidates, volunteering in politics, and persuading others to vote (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, 75, 145; Squire, Rosenstone, and Glass, 1987; Teixeira, 1992, 200). There is scant evidence in the literature, but it should seem that the responsiveness of public officials might also shape other forms of civic engagement such as working with others on community problems, volunteering, and giving to charity. However, the simple correlations with a measure of external efficacy (“people like me have no say” in public affairs) and these communal activities is modest.<sup>9</sup> *The belief that government officials are responsive shapes political rather than communal participation.*

There is not a clear link between the media and efficacy. The media do *not* seem to empower citizens. Indeed, the *opposite* seems to be the case: The more people read about political life, *the less confidence they have in public institutions such as Congress* (Hibbing and Thiess-Morse, 1998). This may well explain why efficacy matters more for political rather than social engagement: When people pay attention to the media, they become more *alienated from government and more open to mobilization to “throw the rascals out.”* *The motivation to join with others to do good works is substantially less when citizens lack confidence in their political system.*

**The media has rather limited effects in spurring civic and political engagement. There is little evidence that television or the Internet either spurs participation or leads people to become disengaged. Civic journalism by newspapers and strong local roots can stimulate engagement, but this is becoming less common. The media can have an indirect**



Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (24)

effect, by spurring popular discontent with politics and leading people to mobilize against those in power. This offers the potential for political mobilization, but probably works *against* working with others on community projects.

### Social Connections

People with strong social networks are far more likely to get involved in all sorts of civic and political activity. Informal social networks can lead people to get involved in their communities. These networks reflect strong attachments to communities and a commitment to making them better places to live. Smaller communities have greater levels of commitment by their citizens. There are other routes to mobilization as well: religious life leads people to greater involvement, as does (perhaps most critically) mobilization by political parties and other organizations. The type of social connections that seem to matter least is membership in civic associations. Much of the impetus toward greater involvement comes from the earliest connections we have—our families, and perhaps also, our schools. *This eclectic set of social ties has the greatest potential to increase civic and political engagement of the many factors I have considered. There is a downside to these close social connections, however: When people are closely tied to their social networks, their civic engagement will take place within those networks rather than across a wide range of society. It will be easier for people who think alike and have similar interests to band together for their common good, but it will become more difficult to build ties and coalitions across the society.*

## Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (25)

Social connections come in many different forms: (1) informal networks of friends and (2) neighbors; (2) membership in civic associations; (3) participation in religious life; (4) mobilization by political parties and other “organizers”; and (5) early socialization experiences through the family and schools. I shall consider each in turn.

### **Informal social ties**

The theoretical framework of social capital makes a simple prediction: When people get together, either formally or informally, they are more likely to work together in political or social causes. Social ties work to generate participation in two ways. First, social contacts provide opportunities for people to meet with others with common interests. Friends recruit each other for causes they believe in. Second, as people interact with each other, they “learn” to trust each other and trust, in turn, leads people to become more involved in their communities (Putnam, 2000, esp. pp. 137, 288). The importance of social ties to civic engagement was recognized over 40 years ago by Lane (1959, 165). These ties played a key role in the initial debates over social capital in American life by Loury (1977). He argued that a major reason why African-Americans faced continued economic problems in the United States was their paucity of social connections. Whites had more extensive social networks than blacks and this helped get them jobs and promotions.

There is plenty of evidence to support the link between informal ties and mobilization for civic engagement, but considerably less for the connection between participation and trust (see below). Miller and Shanks (1996, 101) report that people with close social ties are more likely to vote (see also Cassel, n.d., and Knack, 1992, 141). Uslaner (2002, 137) finds that as we spend more time socializing with friends from work and from our sports clubs, we are more likely to

## Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (26)

volunteer. Knowing and talking to neighbors makes us more likely to give to charity, to join business groups, and also to join ethnic associations (Uslaner, 2002, 132-133, n. 24). Keeter *et al.* (2002) report that informal social ties leads to more participation by high school graduates in civic affairs but not for political or electoral activities. But Smith (1999, 20) finds that informal social ties among high school students do not lead to greater participation in extra-curricular activities.

We might think that social ties would foster civic engagement more in smaller communities than in big cities (see Putnam, 2000, 206). We have visions of small towns as places where people get to know each other well and take a more active role in their communities. We envisage the model of a town meeting contrasted to the strong isolation of an urban environment. Even suburban life may not foster civic engagement, because many people commute to the city to work and time in your automobile cannot be spent in civic groups (Putnam, 2000, 213). Yet, Oliver (2001, 47-50) argues that most forms of participation—working informally on community issues, contacting local officials, voting, and even attending community meetings—are *lower* in rural areas than in big cities—almost exclusively because city folk have higher incomes and more education.

Contrary to expectations, people in rural areas know *fewer* of their neighbors (Oliver, 2001, 60). For women, however, the picture is different: With fewer social contacts in big cities, women take a less active role in civic, and especially, in political activities (Oliver, 2001, 60). For both men and women, there is slightly more volunteering in small communities (at least in Canada, see Reed and Selbee, 2002).

What matters more than community size is how attached people feel to their community.

### Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (27)

People who have deep feelings for their towns and who have lived in them for longer periods of time are more likely to vote (Squire, Rosenstone, and Glass, 1987; Teixeira, 1992, 200; Knack, 1992, 141; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, 130) be active in local politics (Verba et al., 1995, 519) and to volunteer (Guterbock and Fries, 1997, 81-82). Verba et al. (1995, 519) argue that these strong feelings can help equalize political and social influence, since the less mobile citizens also are likely to come from lower economic groups.

There is a powerful effect of commuting on civic activism. Verba and Nie (1972, 244) argued three decades ago that cities with a high percentage of commuters have significantly lower levels of participation in civic life—and Putnam (2000, 283) has estimated that commuting may be responsible for up to 10 percent of the decline in civic engagement in the United States. Our weakened sense of social connectedness is responsible for about half of the decline in turnout from 1960 to 1988 (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, 215; Teixeira, 1992, 47).

### Voluntary organizations

Much of the work on social capital and civic engagement focuses on voluntary organizations. People who join voluntary associations *are* more likely to vote (Olsen, 1972, 322; Wright and Hyman, 1958, 293). There is contradictory evidence about other forms of participation: Olsen (1972, 322) finds that group members are only slightly more likely to participate in political activity and *no more likely to participate in other forms of civic life*, but Verba et al. (1993, 493) argue that people who join nonpolitical voluntary associations *are* more likely to take part in political life. They are also more likely to contribute to charity (Wright and Hyman, 1958, 293).

## Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (28)

Verba and Nie (1972, 186-188, 193) argue that only *active organizational members* will take a more direct role in political life. When you are active in an organization, you are more likely to talk about politics than if you are a passive member. *Simple group membership is not a significant predictor of political activity—and this should not be surprising since even the handful of active members rarely spend more than a few hours a week in their groups* (Newton, 1997, 579).

Group membership does not seem to mobilize people as strongly as social ties do. For many people, simple group membership is not very demanding. And there is often little evidence that people talk about anything political in their clubs (Mondak and Mutz, 1997), so there is little reason to expect any mobilization.

### Religious Activity

Among the most powerful mobilizing forces in social life is religious activity. And in many spheres religion stimulates political action as well. Religion plays a particularly strong role in mobilizing minorities and low income citizens.

Religious activity (attendance at religious services, membership in religious organizations) plays a much stronger role in stimulating participating in civic and political life than does faith itself (Wuthnow, 1991; Cassel, 1994; but see Harris, 1999, 129-130). Religious people, like their more secular fellow citizens, need to be mobilized. And houses of worship provide a ready avenue for getting people to give of themselves (for both time and money) and to take part in political life. For an hour or more at least once a week, people who attend religious service are a captive audience.

## Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (29)

Religion is the source of most volunteering and charitable giving in the United States (Bakal, 1979; Guterbock and Fries, 1997, 69; Hayge, 1991, 21). And it should hardly be surprising that religious activity is among the strongest determinants of both volunteering and charitable giving (Dynes and Quarantelli, 1980; Gerard, 1985; Guterbock and Fries, 1997, 81-82; Hodgkinson et al., 1990; Keeter et al., 2002; Reddy, 1980; Uslaner, 2002, 132–133; Wuthnow, 1991, 51, 125). Cnaan et al. (1991, 37) argues that religious people do not automatically give of their time. They are no more likely to help people on the street having car trouble, to care for an elderly relative, to help a fellow worker in an emergency, to help beggars on the street, or even to help people stop using drugs or alcohol (Wuthnow, 1991, 125-126; cf. Wilson and Musik, 1997, 709). Instead, they participate through *organized volunteering* through their houses of worship (Cnaan et al., 1991, 43). Informal socializing with members of your religious community also leads people to donate to charity and to volunteer (Uslaner, 2002, 137).

Religion can also motivate people to participate in other forms of civic life: Attendance at services predicts civic engagement more generally (Guterbock and Fries, 1997, 26-27) and group membership more specifically—especially for Protestants (Wuthnow, 1999, 11).

Regular attendance gets people to the polls with an impact as strong as we find for income and education (Harris, 1994, 59; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, 130-131; Strate et al., 1989, 452; Teixeira, 1992, 47). Much of the decline in turnout from 1960 to 1988 can be attributed to lower levels of religiosity and attendance at services: People who attend services regularly have actually *increased their turnout levels since the 1960s* (Miller and Shanks, 1996, 77; Teixeira, 1992, 47). Verba et al. (1993, 493) find that religious attendance is *not* related to political participation beyond voting. However, Djupe and Gilbert (2001) find that members of the liberal Episcopalian

### Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (30)

denomination who attend services regularly and who are mobilized by clergy are more likely to become politically engaged (contacting officials, working in campaigns, donating money, joining national political groups); there is no effect, however, for the more conservative Evangelical Lutherans.

Religious activity is particularly important for minority communities. It stimulates both civic and political engagement more for African-Americans and Latinos than for whites (Harris, 1999, 129-130; Marschall, 2001). The effects are particularly strong for community involvement. Minorities and the poor are at least as likely as the well-off to attend religious services. Verba et al. (1995, 519) suggest that *religious activity can help level the playing field in political and civic life that the well-off have because of their greater resources*: "...religious activity has the potential to act as a compensatory factor for participation, partially offsetting the impact of socioeconomic advantage."

*Religious activity is one of the most important spurs to civic engagement in American civic and political life. Its effects are particularly strong in communal affairs and voting turnout. It is easy for religious leaders to exhort people to do good works for the cause of the faith and it takes little effort to follow the call for turning out to vote. However, the more demanding secular activities may be less amenable to religious mobilization. Not all religious traditions are equally hospitable to political mobilization and some forms of religious activity discourage engagement with people of different backgrounds.*

The Djupe and Gilbert result that liberal denominations spur civic engagement more than conservative ones should not be surprising. Putnam (1993, 107) saw religion in Italy as an alternative to the civic community rather than as a part of it. The hierarchical structure of the

### Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (31)

Catholic church discouraged participation in civic life, as do some conservative denominations (Wald, 1992, 36).

Deep involvement with one’s religious community may lead people to associate overwhelmingly with people like themselves. Fundamentalists are *more participatory than members of liberal denominations, but they shy away from membership in secular organizations and donate their money and give their time overwhelmingly for church-based organizations* (Guth et al., 2002; Uslaner, 2000b; Uslaner, 2002, ch. 5; Wuthnow, 1999). Religion leads people to do good deeds, but generally only for their own kind. And while it is an important source of mobilization, especially for minorities and the poor, it can lead to a polarization of society when groups only care for their own and where civic associations have a limited vision.

Religion clearly stimulates participation in both political and communal life. It is one of the most powerful determinants of all forms of engagement. Mainline (or “liberal”) religious movements lead people to get involved with the larger society. Mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy were prominent in the civil rights movement and continue to work in inter-faith movements for a range of social causes. Fundamentalists are more active in many communal activities, but mostly with people who share their faith (Guth et al., 2002, 14).

### **Mobilization**

When participation flows from informal social networks, the recruitment process seems rather simple: We respond positively to invitations to get involved in civic and political affairs. The solution to low participation seems rather simple: More people would get involved if only they were asked. INDEPENDENT SECTOR, the premier think tank on charitable contributions



### Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (32)

and volunteering, argues that the main reason why people contribute either time or money is because they are asked by someone they know well (Hodgkinson et al., 1992, 203-211).

Is it so easy? No, for two reasons. First, simply asking people will generally not be sufficient to get most people involved. We must organize people to get involved—or mobilize them—because (and this is the second reason) the people we simply ask to get involved are already those most clearly motivated to participate. If we want to expand the base of participators, we need to do more than ask.

Gerber and Green (2000a, 2000b) report experiments showing that we can mobilize people to vote, but only through face-to-face, nonpartisan appeals. Simply asking people to vote by calling or even sending mail does not work well. Political party and interest group contacts do lead people to vote, to write to members of Congress, to sign petitions, to work for a party or candidate, to try to persuade others how to vote, and to contribute to candidates. Even more important than simple contact was mobilization: Mobilization by the civil rights movement played a key role in turnout from 1960-1988 and governmental enforcement of the Voting Rights Act during this period was the single most important factor in increasing turnout. Overall, half of the decline in turnout from 1960 to 1988 is attributable to declining levels of electoral mobilization. (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, 75, 140, 167, 172, 217).

Mobilization matters for more than political participation: Young people who were canvassed to participate do more of virtually every type of civic and political engagement—ranging from volunteering and charitable giving to persuading others and working on community problems (Keeter et al., 2002). Young people who were canvassed are more likely to participate as adults (Reed and Selbee, 2002).

### Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (33)

Yet mobilization is hardly random. People who are active recruit others who are *likely to become active*. We focus on people we know well, who are like ourselves; in essence, we recruit people we think are good prospects (Brady *et al.*, 1999, 156, 161). We are much more likely to say yes to people we know well (Godwin and Mitchell, 1984).

Mobilization is particularly effective in energizing participation by minorities and the poor (Brady *et al.*, 1999, 161; Harris, 1999, 111-112; Markus, 2002, 33). ***However, minorities and the poor are substantially less likely to be contacted than whites and those who are well-off (Brady et al., 1999, 156; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, 167; Wielhouwever, 2000, 209). Political leaders mobilize people who are easiest to reach and most likely to participate in political life.***

Minorities *are* recruited for political action in church far more frequently than whites and this mobilization matters more for African-Americans than for whites. Participation in church activities stimulates both turnout and membership in secular organizations (Harris, 1999, 111-112, 126). And minorities will participate more in other forms of communal activity when they are mobilized, but such efforts, such as one in Chicago where police recruited poor residents to come to neighborhood "beat meetings" to discuss strategies for more effective law enforcement (Fong, 2001). However, such efforts are not very common. They suggest that mobilization by religious and even governmental officials can mobilize minorities and the poor to get involved in politics, but that there is much work to be done.

Political parties are less likely to contact African-Americans than to mobilize whites. And African-Americans are also much less likely than whites to be mobilized for volunteering and giving to charity.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, higher income African-Americans were only slightly

### Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (34)

more likely to be asked to volunteer than lower income blacks. And African-Americans were almost half as likely to be asked to volunteer by friends as whites, and even slightly less likely to be approached in church. I estimated a statistical model of whether people were asked to volunteer in the 1996 Giving and Volunteering Survey of the INDEPENDENT SECTOR. I found, much as Brady *et al.* (1999) did for political participation striking evidence that recruiters focus on highly educated, well-off whites whom they might know from their civic associations or from sports clubs. The poor and minorities are often ignored.<sup>11</sup>

It is almost certainly easier to mobilize the poor for political action, especially to protest against the powers that be. Minorities and the poor may be less willing to engage in these pro-social activities that would transfer resources (time and money) to others. These good works depend not only on resources, but also on values such as trust in others that minorities often do not share (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 4; see also below). Apart from churches, they also do not have the same circle of social networks that might mobilize them.<sup>12</sup>

### **Socialization**

We know that young people are less likely to participate in both social and political life than their elders. But some young people get involved more than others, especially those who began taking part in civic life when they were young and whose parents were active in civic affairs. Young people who participated in school groups are more likely to continue their engagement when they become adults (Damico, Conway, and Damico, 2000; Stolle and Hooghe, 2002; Reed and Selbee, 2002; Smith, 1999; Youniss *et al.*, 1997, 621-622). If you volunteered with your parents when you were a child, you are considerably more likely to give both time and

### Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (35)

money as an adult (Reed and Selbee, 2002; Uslaner, 2002, 137).

Young people who take part in civic life voluntarily clearly continue their engagement when they become adults. It is less clear that there is an effect for voluntary work mandated by schools (“service learning”). While there is strong evidence that civic education can increase knowledge of politics (Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman, 1999; Niemi and Junn, 1998), there is less support for the claim that these courses increase tolerance or trust or other civic values (Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman, 1999; John *et al.*, 2001, 23; Smith, 1999, 17). Nor is there much evidence that these required courses or “required volunteering” for academic credit actually lead young people to participate in civic life (John *et al.*, 2001; 23).

The earliest social connections (and perhaps the most important) are in the home. If we start to mobilize young people early, we can stimulate engagement in *both* political and communal life. The most powerful socializing agent is the family. Schools also seem to be an incubator for later participation, but only for “spontaneous” activism. Volunteering requirements or mandatory civics courses, according to the most sophisticated studies, do not seem to lead to greater activism later in life—and almost certainly do not lead to the “pro-social values” (see below) that foster civic engagement.

*Social ties are thus very important resources for civic and political engagement. They can help people get together for both partisan and cooperative causes. But there is likely to be a tug of war between these conflicting goals. Woolcock (1998, 171), Newton (1997, 578), and Uslaner (2002, chs. 2, 4, and 5) argue that activities aimed at fostering cooperation (what Nie and Verba called “communal”) depend upon establishing ties across different social groups (see also Oliver, 2001, 93). Exclusive ties may reinforce a we-they attitude in civic life. When*

Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (36)

*people participate, they almost always do so with people of similar interests or backgrounds, creating no public space for cooperative activities. Political organizing, on the other hand, is necessarily conflictual. There are few incentives to expand the scope of your acquaintances—and plenty of reasons not to do so. It is easier to “engineer” greater participation in political than in communal life. However, there is evidence that communal activity often begins when we are young, so if we can foster a sense of civic activism and commitment to cooperative activities among young people, we might foster greater communal engagement for adults.*

**Pro-social values**

Much of the current debate over social capital and civic engagement more generally focuses on the “pro-social” roots of civic engagement and the salutary effects of participation. “Pro-social” values reflect a commitment to cooperate with others and to be willing to put self interest aside for a greater good. In the literature on social capital, it is most frequently expressed by the notion of generalized trust, the belief that other people *should be treated as if they were trustworthy* and that people who are different from yourself are still part of your “moral community” (Uslaner, 2002, chs. 1-2). When people trust each other, they should be more likely to work with others for a common good. In turn, working with others can create pro-social attitudes. As we interact with others, we learn to trust them.

Lane (1959, 164) wrote over four decades ago:

..those w/ a relatively greater faith in people are psychologically prepared to accept the democratic process and to believe that they, and others like them, may

### Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (37)

be effective in elections....If one cannot trust other people generally, one can certainly not trust those under the temptations of and w/ the powers which come with public office.

Almond and Verba (1963, 285) concurred:

In the United States and Britain, the belief that people are generally cooperative, trustworthy, and helpful is frequent, and it has political consequences. Belief in the benignity of one's fellow citizen is directly related to one's propensity to join with others in political activity.

Putnam (2000, 137) expanded the argument: “The causal arrows among civic involvement, reciprocity, honesty, and social trust are as tangled as well-tossed spaghetti.”

A mini industry grew up seeking to establish the linkages between trust and civic engagement (see the summary in Uslaner, 2002, ch. 5). Knack (1992) found that trusting people were more likely to vote. Putnam (1995a, 73) found a strong relationship between social trust and civic engagement across 35 countries, and Wollebaek and Selle (2000, 323) found that even *passive* (dues-paying) membership in organizations led to an increase in generalized trust.

The presumption, then, is that we could generate more civic engagement across the social *and* political realms if we could only find a way to increase trust. Alternatively, we could generate more trust if we could get people involved in civic associations—or even by strengthening more routine social ties such as playing cards or going to picnics—or joining a bowling league (Putnam, 2000). This increased trust would energize people to get involved in their communities.

The argument seemed very appealing. Brehm and Rahn (1997) found considerable empirical support for it, especially for the claim that civic easement builds trust (see also Shah,

### Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (38)

1998). Stolle (1998), however, struck a blow at the idea that membership can increase trust. Her surveys of organizational members in three countries showed that people who join groups *are* more trusting, but their trust does *not* increase with length of membership. There is, she argued, a self-selection effect: Trusting people join groups, misanthropes stay home. There is an increase trust as people spend more time in organizations, but only in trust in *other group members*.

Following Stolle’s challenge, other studies offered a more skeptical view of *either direction of this causal chain*: Is there reason to believe that trusting people are more likely to take part in political and civic life—or that group membership might lead to greater trust?

There are two key problems with the purported linkage between trust and civic and political engagement. First, we join civic groups with people who are like ourselves—with similar interests, largely from similar backgrounds. But the sort of trust that is essential to building a cooperative society is *trust among people who are different from ourselves* (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 2; Woolcock, 1998). And there is no way we can get from trusting people like ourselves to putting faith in those who are different (Rosenblum, 1998, 48; Uslaner, 2002, chs. 2, 5, and 7). Since most civic engagement ties us to people just like ourselves, it is not reasonable to expect our group activities to foster generalized trust. Second, many forms of civic and especially political activity are hardly cooperative. Most political activity presumes distrust, rather than trust: We want to beat the opposition, we protest against unjust laws, we try to convince others that we are right and others are wrong (Warren, 1996). Religious activity often is all about defining who we are and who we are *not*; we separate ourselves from those with different beliefs. So activism within our religious communities *may* (depending upon our faith’s view of others) lead us to confrontation rather than reconciliation.

### Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America" (39)

Some forms of engagement both link us to people who are different from ourselves *and* rest on a spirit of cooperation rather than confrontation. But these are not typical of most participatory acts: Volunteering and giving to charity seem to qualify, since both can connect us to people who are different from ourselves.<sup>13</sup> Most other forms of engagement either are confrontational or (even more likely) take place among people who look and think alike. So they should not produce trust.

And recent research suggests that the link between trust and civic engagement is largely illusory. Surveys of students by Damico, Conway, and Damico (2000), Keeter *et al.* (2002) and Smith (1999) find no link between civic activism and generalized trust.

Only two studies examine the possibility of reciprocal causation between trust and civic engagement. Brehm and Rahn (1997) and Uslaner (2002, ch. 5) estimate simultaneous equation models to test whether trust leads to civic engagement, participation produces greater faith in others, or both. Brehm and Rahn do find support for a reciprocal relationship, though with a much stronger linkage from participation to trust than the other way around. Uslaner's models are more comprehensive; they provide little support for *either* causal chain. The key exceptions are for volunteering and charitable contributions. Each leads people to become more trusting, but each depends heavily on trust in turn. Trust is one of the two or three most important determinants of both volunteering and giving to charity (Uslaner, 2002, 137). Other forms of civic engagement are either not related to trust (most forms of civic engagement) or even negatively related to faith in others: participation in ethnic voluntary associations, membership in religious groups, and participating in protest marches).



## Uslaner, “Civic Engagement in America” (40)

The strong effects of trust on volunteering and giving to charity should not be surprising. If trust is a pro-social value linking us to people different from ourselves, it should lead to pro-social (helping) behavior. The roots of giving and volunteering are a commitment to the well-being of others (Hodgkinson et al., 1992, 203, 206, 211). Volunteers are less likely to be materialistic and more likely to want a life of inner harmony and to be loving and helpful (Williams, 1986, 167).

Since much of political mobilization is confrontational, it is hardly surprising that we do not find a direct link between faith in others and political action. Mobilizing like-minded people does not depend upon trust, and a trusting public may be ill-suited for such direct action. Other factors are clearly more important in shaping political action.

There is little support, however, for the argument that we can increase most forms of engagement by stimulating trust. Trust largely does not depend upon civic engagement. Volunteering and giving to charity are two notable exceptions. People who help others experience a “warm glow” (as economists call it; see Andreoni, 1989). They feel better about themselves and become more trusting. Yet, both of these “cooperative” actions initially depend upon trust (and other pro-social values) in turn. Other forms of participation are *unrelated* to trust in others. So the supposed “virtuous circle” of civic engagement leading to more trust to more participation seems confined to a rather thin slice of communal activity. There does not seem to be a “quick fix” to stimulating civic participation by this route.

## Summary

Demographics, resources, engagement with politics, social networks (including attending religious services), mobilization, and values all shape levels of civic engagement. The impact of

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each varies according to the arena of participation.

Two dimensions of participation are key to understanding the relative importance of determinants of engagement: The amount of effort of the act and the intended consequence. Some forms of engagement are simply more demanding than others. Voting takes relatively little time and most people develop the "habit" of going to the polls in early adulthood (Plutzer, 2002). It is not difficult to stimulate habitual voters to cast ballots. Contacting public officials or newspapers, attending public meetings or rallies, and campaigning for candidates or parties takes time and depends upon skills people may have. So these more demanding activities may depend more on social networks and mobilization. Stimulating participation in politics is also different from getting people to volunteer their time (in a more "communal" spirit). Both tap resources and social networks, but values such as trust in other people will be important only for more cooperative activities.

Simple acts such as turnout depend mostly on age and interest in political affairs. But mobilization is also key and here the good news is that it may be relatively easy to stimulate participation. Face-to-face contact by canvassers, political parties, or members of the clergy may be sufficient to bring many people to the polls. For more time-consuming activities, mobilization is likely to require more effort, especially among minorities and the poor, who may lack the necessary time and resources to become involved in their communities. These more demanding realms of participation rely more upon strong social support networks, which the poor may often lack as well. However, minorities and the poor do have an alternative social network, their churches. Religious activity (attending services and socializing with people from your church) can mobilize people into both simple acts (such as voting), more demanding political activity, and

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communal engagement (giving to charity and volunteering time). Reading newspapers and both internal and external efficacy are also powerful determinants of political engagement (though it is more difficult to “engineer” efficacy).

Cooperative activities such as volunteering and giving to charity, as well as working with others on community problems (though the evidence is less clear here), depend heavily on social networks, early socialization, and pro-social values. They also depend upon mobilization, but here (unlike in politics) simply asking others to help may stimulate engagement. We should not get overly optimistic about this conclusion. When we ask people to get involved in politics or communal activities, we target the most likely candidates. It seems that we might target them even more precisely for communal than for political activities—so many people never are approached to take a positive role in their communities.

The quest to stimulate participation seems more urgent as fewer people take part in many aspects of civic life. And there is less participation because the roots of participation are also atrophying. We spend less time socializing with others, attend religious services less often, political parties put less effort into mobilizing citizens, and newspaper readership is down (Putnam, 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, ch. 7). The distribution of resources (and presumably skills) is more skewed as economic inequality has increased and the level of generalized trust has fallen by a third (from almost 60 percent to about 40 percent) from 1960 to the present (Uslaner, 2002, 7).

Stimulating participation is more difficult than it once was. Some parts of the participation puzzle are more difficult to change than others: It is not so easy to change the distribution of resources in society or even to get more people to read newspapers—or to convince

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newspapers to put more emphasis on local affairs. It is also not so easy to determine how to increase the size of our social networks, to increase trust, or even to bring people back to houses of worship. It is easier to put more emphasis on mobilizing the people who are already in social networks. Mobilization through parties and houses of worship seem to offer the greatest opportunities for increasing civic engagement.

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TABLE 1

A Summary of What Works in Civic and Political Engagement

**What Works**

Mobilization

Social contacts

Religious activity

Newspaper readership

Personal resources

Income

Education

Civic Values

Personal efficacy

Government responsiveness

Socialization

**What Doesn't Work**

Asking people to get involved

Joining civic groups

Religious values

Electronic media

Service learning

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TABLE 2

Dimensions of Civic Engagement

**Dimensions of Civic Engagement**

<b>Community Dimension</b>	<b>Religious Dimension</b>	<b>Political Dimension</b>
Business group membership	Church membership	Political party membership
Women's group membership	Other religious group member	Talk politics
Education group membership	Volunteer	Wear campaign button
Service group membership	Give to charity	Cultural group membership
Work on community problem		Work for political party
	Vote*	Give money to candidate
		Attend political meeting

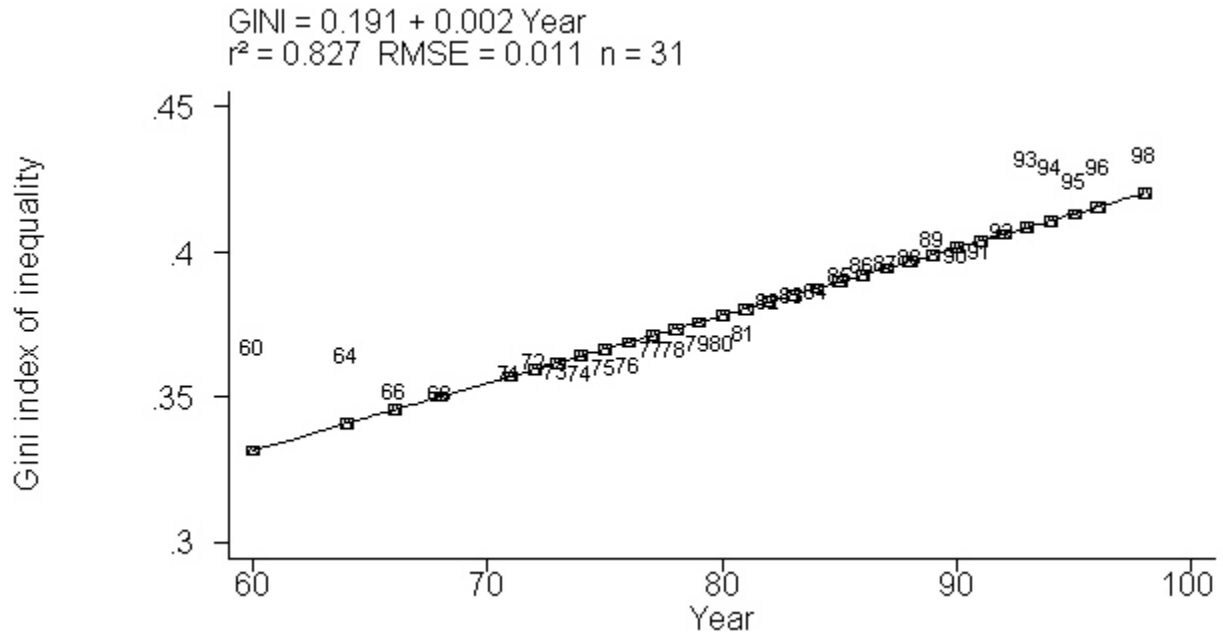
**Activities that Did Not Scale**

Labor union membership	Veterans group membership	Elderly group membership
Political group membership	Civic group membership	Ideological group member
Childrens' group member	Arts group member	Hobby group member
Fraternal group member	Self improvement group	Willing to serve on jury

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FIGURE 1

The Rise of Economic Inequality in the United States: 1960-1998



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### NOTES

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1. I included all measures of civic and political involvement in the 1996 American National Election Study. I uncovered the dimensions using factor analysis with Varimax rotation. An oblique rotation yielded virtually identical results, but the correlations among the factors were larger.
  2. The other organizations are service, veterans, political, sports, youth, school, hobby, Greek, farm, and literary.
  3. The United States has generally had an inequitable distribution of income. The 1960 Gini is comparable to current levels for Portugal and Nigeria. The 1998 figure is close to Uruguay and Turkey. The comparative figures come from Deininger and Squire (199x) and the United States figures come from the Census Bureau.
  4. For the 1970s, the correlations of group membership with social class in the General Social Survey ranged from  $-.097$  for unions (lower class members are more likely to join) to  $.137$  for literary associations (and  $.216$  for professional associations). For the 1970s,

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the correlations range from -.015 for unions to .135 for literary associations (and .254 for professional associations). Of the 15 voluntary associations, 10 are below .100 for the 1970s and 11 are below .10 in the 1990s (Uslaner with Brown, 2002). Income is significant for volunteering only at the .10 level in a simultaneous equation estimation of 1996 American National Election Study data (Uslaner, 2002, 132-133).

5. See, however, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) and Freeman (2001) for contrary evidence.
6. Participatory skew is defined as the share of the public in the top 20% of the income distribution taking part minus the share of the public in the bottom 20% participating for Roper data and the difference in participation rates between the highest and lowest subjective classes for the GSS. The  $r^2$  over time for participatory skew for Roper political activities is .530 and for GSS group memberships, it is .766.
7. Verba *et al.* (1995, 447) report that education plays a key role in African-American participation, but much less for Latinos. In contrast, nonpolitical organizational involvement is important only for Latinos. Resources matter for both minorities.
8. Guterbock and Fries (1997, 81-82) report a negative relationship between television viewing and volunteering.
9. The zero-order correlations (tau-c) are, respectively, .072, .128, and .146 from the 1996 American National Election Study. Measures of external efficacy were not significant in my models of charitable giving and volunteering in Uslaner (2002, ch. 5).
10. From the 1996 American National Election Study, 30.5 percent of whites and 19.4 percent of African-Americans were contacted by political parties. In the 1996 Giving and

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Volunteering Survey of the INDEPENDENT SECTOR, 45.4 percent of whites and 32.7 percent of African-Americans were asked to volunteer and 64.1 percent of whites and 47.3 of African-Americans were asked to donate to charity.

11. Significant predictors of being asked to volunteer are race, income, education, membership in secular organizations, attending religious services, helping neighbors or relatives, participating in sports, being married, whether your parents did volunteer work, being helped by someone when young, and trust.
12. African-Americans are less likely to have been helped when they were young, to have helped neighbors, to have helped relatives, and to have been members of secular organizations. There is only a tiny difference in whether one’s parents had volunteered.
13. Of course, most volunteering and charitable giving has religious roots, and thus may not connect us to people who are different. See Uslaner (2002, chs. 5 and 7) for evidence on the linkages between different types of volunteering and charitable contributions, on the one hand, and trust on the other.