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Civic Disengagement in Contemporary America*

OVER THE PAST TWO GENERATIONS THE UNITED STATES HAS UNDERGONE a series of remarkable transformations. It has helped to defeat global communism, led a revolution in information technology that is fuelling unprecedented prosperity, invented life-saving treatments for diseases from AIDS to cancer, and made great strides in reversing discriminatory practices and promoting equal rights for all citizens. But during these same decades the United States also has undergone a less sanguine transformation: its citizens have become remarkably less civic, less politically engaged, less socially connected, less trusting, and less committed to the common good. At the dawn of the millennium Americans are fast becoming a loose aggregation of disengaged observers, rather than a community of connected participants.¹

In social science terms, Americans have dramatically less ‘social capital’ than they had even 30 years ago. Social capital simply refers to the social norms and networks that enhance people’s ability to collaborate on common endeavours. These social norms and networks have important consequences, both for the people who share and participate in them and for those who do not. All things being equal, social capital makes individuals – and communities –

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¹ Because this essay was originally delivered as a lecture, I forgo extensive citation. However, the lecture drew heavily on the material subsequently published in my *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, London, Simon & Schuster, 2001, and I there provide much fuller documentation of the arguments presented in synthetic form here. I want to thank Kristin Goss for her skilled help in editing my extemporaneous oral remarks into written form. I am also grateful to Sir Nicholas Bayne and Rosalind Jones for their forbearance during the unavoidable delay between my original lecture and the appearance of this written essay, as well as for their exceptional hospitality during my visit to LSE.

healthier, wealthier, wiser, happier, more productive and better able to govern themselves peaceably and effectively.

Social capital is a term originating in an analogy with two other forms of capital. The first, physical capital, is simply some tangible object that makes a person more productive than he or she would otherwise be. A screwdriver is a bit of physical capital. So, if an individual saves his money and buys a screwdriver, he can repair more bicycles more quickly. That physical capital improves his productivity.

The second form of capital, human capital, is a term coined by economists about a quarter-century ago. The term draws an analogy between buying a screwdriver and going to school. An individual can save up her money to pay for education or training, and she will be more productive than she would have been if she lacked that human capital. Moreover, there are external effects. People around her benefit from the fact that she is more educated and more productive: they learn from her knowledge, and enjoy the fruits of her labour.

Like physical and human capital, social capital may have individual and collective effects. A person who is involved in networks, particularly networks with certain features, will be more productive than a demographically identical individual who is not so involved. Networks and organizations with high levels of trust and reciprocity are especially conducive to efficient collective action. One need only imagine trying to function in a low-reciprocity environment, where each person had to look over her shoulder and worry about being undercut by somebody else. So distracted, each individual would be less productive than if she could count on the others. That example demonstrates the meaning of social capital – and the fact that social networks have consequences. They tend to produce norms of reciprocity, and that tends to enable people to be more efficient.

What has happened to America's stock of social capital – its civic norms, networks and organizations? My best estimate is that by many different measures the stock has been depleted by roughly one third since the early 1970s. Of course, that broad conclusion masks a lot of variation. Some measures of social capital have declined more; others have declined less. But, broadly speaking, the trends are pronounced and consistent.

Take trust, for example. The degree to which Americans have faith in their government and politics, their social institutions and their fellow citizens has dropped dramatically over the past two

generations. In the 1960s, when the American National Election Studies asked Americans whether they trusted the government to do what is right ‘just about all’ or ‘most’ of the time, seven out of ten respondents said Yes. In 1999, fewer than two out of ten respondents agreed. That is a 75 per cent drop, reflecting a 30-year erosion of faith in democratic institutions. People have similarly jaded evaluations of the performance of religious institutions and unions and business and universities and so on.

Americans are also far less likely to trust one another – which is logically quite different from trusting public authorities. A variety of different kinds of evidence makes this clear. In round numbers, nearly two-thirds of Americans a generation or two ago said they trusted other people; today, the fraction is closer to one-third. And there is some reason to believe, though the evidence on this is much spottier, that Americans are actually less honest than they used to be, meaning the decline in trust may be an understandable response to an actual decline in trustworthiness.

‘BOWLING ALONE’

Other indicators of declining connectedness are equally surprising and should be of deep concern to Americans as citizens. Five years ago, in a short article called ‘Bowling Alone’,² I reported familiar trends, such as that Americans are a lot less likely to vote than they were 25 or 30 years ago. There’s been about a 25 per cent decline in the fraction of Americans who vote, and that’s true at all levels – national, state and local. The article used metaphors like ‘bowling’ and ‘choral societies’ to indicate that political participation is embedded in social activity more generally. It is important not to mistake what might be a broad social trend for merely a political trend. And, indeed, the decline in voting is only one of many indicators of civic and social disengagement.

The ‘Bowling Alone’ article reported, for example, a massive decline in participation in local parent–teacher associations, an especially ominous development given that PTA participation is one of the most common forms of civic engagement in America. The

² Robert D. Putnam, ‘Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital’, *Journal of Democracy* (Jan. 1995), pp. 65–78.

fraction of American parents who belong to a PTA has fallen by roughly half since the 1950s. Note that this is not a 50 per cent decline in absolute numbers, but rather a 50 per cent drop in the fraction of relevant population that is participating. Obviously, during the baby boom, there were more parents, and so, not surprisingly, there were more parent-teacher association members. It is necessary, therefore, to statistically adjust for the declining numbers of school-aged kids since that time to get at the interesting indicator, which is the propensity of parents to participate in PTAs. Simply put, parents have only about half the propensity today that they did in the 1960s.

This is also true for what we might colloquially call the 'animal clubs' – that is, fraternal organizations. In the United States, most men's organizations are named for animals: the Lions, Moose, Elks, Eagles and so on. 'Bowling Alone' showed how all of those organizations have experienced declining membership since the mid-1960s or mid-1970s. Again, these declines reflected a population-adjusted drop in the propensity to join these organizations. The story is the same for women's clubs and also for the group that inspired the article's title, bowling clubs.

Bowling is big in America. The sport consists of throwing a ball down a lane and knocking pins down. The player who knocks the most pins down wins. You can bowl by yourself, as many people do, or you can bowl in teams. Bowling is very popular, the most popular participant sport in America. It is also one of the most egalitarian sports, in the sense that participation is not especially correlated with social class. This is a middle-class and working-class sport. It is a sport that is far more diverse than are many other sports by gender, marital status, race and educational attainment. Because bowling attracts all types, it is an interesting social barometer.

The nature of the game affords important opportunities for face-to-face interaction. Normally, two teams, with five players apiece, square off in a game. But at any given point, there are only two people up at the lane, rolling the ball or getting ready to do so. That leaves eight people who are not doing anything except sitting on a semicircular bench and waiting their turn. Most of the time, they chat about the previous night's game or the latest gossip. But occasionally and inevitably, they will also discuss whether the local bond issue should pass, or whether the trash is picked up promptly, or how the local schools are performing. So, in a profound sense,

those eight people sitting in the back are involved in civic deliberation, even if it is not recognized as such at the time. They are having a conversation with other folks that they see regularly, and in a context of mutual understanding. They know Joe always says crazy things, so they know how to interpret what Joe's position is; they know that Barbara is always on top of matters, so they pay attention to her point of view.

Bowling is increasingly popular in America. The fraction of people who bowl has risen by roughly ten per cent over the last decade or so. But bowling in leagues, bowling in teams, is down by forty per cent. That is of importance to the bowling industry because it turns out that people who bowl in teams drink four times as much beer and eat four times as many pretzels. The money in that industry is in the beer and pretzels, not in the ball and shoe rentals. So, the bowling industry actually worries a lot about the decline of league bowling. Everyday citizens should be concerned as well, but for a different reason: less team bowling means less civic deliberation.

That short article touched off a debate in America about the so-called 'bowling alone' issues, because claims made on the basis of a couple of gripping examples may not be broadly generalizable. Both ordinary people and other scholars responded with thoughtful questions, insights and critiques that have helped to enhance understanding of the changing scope and nature of social capital in America.

Here, I update 'Bowling Alone' by presenting new evidence on trends in American civil life. Parenthetically, it would be fascinating to determine whether comparable trends exist in other countries. But for the time being, I address four questions:

First, what's been happening to civic life in America?

Second, why?

Third, so what – why should we be concerned?

And fourth, what do we do about it?

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO CIVIC LIFE IN AMERICA?

It turns out that answering this question is more methodologically complicated than it might appear. There are many approaches, but each one has serious drawbacks. For example, examining the membership in fixed-named organizations, such as the Lions or

Elks Clubs, provides some sense of the vitality of those particular organizations, and it allows roughly comparable measures of organizational activity over long periods of time. However, that approach does not capture the possible displacement of members from old organizations to new ones. Thus, examining membership in a set of long-established organizations does not necessarily provide a valid picture of social connectedness trends in general. Instead, it is necessary to use myriad approaches to answering the question, on the theory that each approach can make up for the shortcomings in some other approach.

As an initial cut, I have gathered membership data on a large number of voluntary associations over the course of the twentieth century. These were all organizations with local chapters where people met face-to-face, rather than advocacy organizations whose members do not do anything more than send a cheque to national headquarters. For example, I have collected data over time on the percentage of Catholic men who belong to the Knights of Columbus; the percentage of Jewish women who belong to Hadassah; the percentage of rural kids who belong to 4-H; the percentage of middle-aged men who belong to one of the animal clubs, and so on. These percentages reflect what corporate executives call 'market share'.

Astonishingly, the market share of all of these organizations followed virtually the same trajectory over time. Over the course of this century, all of these organizations showed rising market share, year after year, for the first half of the twentieth century. More doctors belonged to the American Medical Association, more women belonged to women's clubs, more Catholic men belonged to the Knights of Columbus, and so on. A graph would show a long rise from 1900 to roughly 1960. There is only one notch in that graph, which comes in a dramatic, catastrophic decline in membership in the Depression years, as one might expect. Many organizations lost half of their members in four or five years.

But then, astonishingly, beginning around 1945, America experienced what may well have been the greatest organizational boom in its history. Membership in most groups (as a fraction of the relevant of the population group) basically doubled between 1945 and 1960. And that is true in virtually all of these organizations after the Second World War. It is perhaps no surprise that there were more members of the American Legion, a veterans' group, right after the Second World War. But it is quite surprising that the

Grange, a nineteenth-century organization of farmers, showed a similar boom in membership. The Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts and 4-H, which are all organizations for kids, showed a boom, as did the League of Women Voters, and so on.

Then, in the 1960s, suddenly, surprisingly and mysteriously, all of these groups almost simultaneously began to experience stagnation in their market share. Soon after, their market share began to fall. Most of these groups did not notice because the number of people – the pool of potential members – was growing, and that partially offset the declining propensity for potential members actually to join. In other words, club secretaries kept track of actual members, not what fraction of potential members had actually signed up. So it took some time before voluntary association leaders realized that there was something happening to their membership. And, of course, their first thought was that they had done something wrong – a bad programme chair that year, dues that were too high, or whatever. For a good while, many organizations engaged in tough self-analysis. There are scores of consultants' reports commissioned by these organizations analysing the question, 'Why are we in trouble?'

Of course, what was happening to one organization was happening to all of them, though the declines did not all happen at exactly the same time. The first of the organizations to maximize their market share was the National Federation of Women's Clubs, which peaked in 1957. The last organization to hit the wall, appropriately enough, was a civic organization in Middle America called the Optimists. Their peak year was 1980, but they have now plunged so far that they are at the level of the other organizations that started declining earlier.

Interestingly, these trends also hold for professional organizations, even though it looks on the surface that they could be an exception to the general organizational downturn. With rising rates of professional education in America, membership in these organizations has soared since mid-century. The American Bar Association (lawyers) had more than ten times as many members in 1991 as it had in 1945; the American Medical Association (doctors) more than doubled its membership in that time-frame. Professional associations of engineers, dentists and architects also posted huge increases. But, in terms of the market share – the fraction of professionals who actually belong to their respective professional

association – the trend looks exactly like the trend in other voluntary groups. That is, professional associations posted rising membership rates until about 1960 or 1965, and then began a steady decline. The American Medical Association hit the wall in 1961, for instance. Again, the Association's leaders did not notice it right away because the number of doctors was growing so rapidly that the expanding pool made up for the fact that the Association was capturing a smaller and smaller share of that pool.

But that evidence in itself does not prove anything. Although suggestive, it is not conclusive insofar as membership data from specific organizations do not necessarily reflect an underlying propensity to join groups in general. A critic might ask – and many did – whether this analysis is limited to old-fashioned organizations on their way out. Indeed, there is an inherent problem with this kind of analysis in that organizations that have long-term membership data are by definition organizations that have been around for a long time. So, critics asked, what if there is a whole new set of organizations that people are joining instead: New Age encounter groups, Alcoholics Anonymous and Drugs Anonymous, book clubs and so on? What if people are dropping out of older, better-known organizations but not dropping out of organizations entirely? That is the first critique. The second critique goes as follows: maybe Americans are no longer formally joining groups or going to organizational meetings (that feels kind of square and '1950s-ish' anyhow) but people *are* still hanging out together, maybe even more than they used to. Perhaps they are going to bars, like the one on the popular American television programme 'Cheers', where (according to the programme's slogan) 'everybody knows your name'. Hanging out with friends at the bar fosters social capital just as much as hanging out at the bowling alley does.

I had been aware of these problems, but it was not immediately obvious how to get around them. For example, it would be nice to know the number of picnics that people went on every year since 1975, but I knew of no 'national picnic registry'. Likewise, it was not obvious how to find good data on how many club meetings people attended, not just meetings of well-known clubs (where a secretary might be keeping track) but also of new clubs for which no organizational records existed. Astonishingly, just as the methodological situation was looking very dire, two rich new sources of data became available, and between them, they not only

confirmed the ‘Bowling Alone’ story, but also made it much more compelling. My critics had suggested that if we took a more comprehensive look at social capital in America – not just membership in old-fashioned organizations – things might not look so bleak. With the new data we could take a much wider view of various forms of social connectedness, and with that new evidence things actually looked bleaker than I had originally suggested.

The first of these datasets was actually known to exist, but the data were not previously available for analysis. This dataset consists of surveys conducted by a reputable polling firm called the Roper Organization. Roughly every month for 25 years, Roper asked 1,000 Americans – a good nationally representative sample every month – a set of questions that had the following form:

‘Now here is a list of things some people do about government or politics. Have you happened to have done any of those things in the past year?’

– ‘Attended a public meeting on town or school affairs.’ (Note that this asked about any public meeting, and that the meeting could have been about any number of specific issues.)

– ‘Served on a committee for some local organization.’ Again, note that the question asks about membership in *any* organization, not just in one of a handful of well-established organizations.

– ‘Become or served as an officer of some club or organization’

– ‘Written your congressman or senator’

– ‘Held or run for political office’.

Now, few people run for office, of course. But when 1,000 people a month are surveyed for 25 years, the cumulative number of respondents adds up pretty fast – there are 415,000 people in the Roper dataset. In that large a survey, with that large a sample, you can get statistically reliable estimates of the number of people who run for office, or who have written letters to the editor of the newspaper, or who belong to local good government organizations, or who have signed petitions. In all, the surveys asked about twelve different ways in which one can be politically or civically involved. Unbelievably, according to these surveys, participation in every single one of those activities massively declined over the period. For example, between the early 1970s and the early 1990s, there was a decline of about 40 per cent in the fraction of Americans who served as a

club officer, and a decline of 35 per cent in the fraction who attended a public meeting. All told, there was a decline of about 25 per cent in the fraction of Americans who had done any of the twelve activities in the previous year.

The declines were not of equal magnitude across all types of activity. That, in itself, is intriguing, and helps to illuminate how the character of American civil society is changing. The sorts of activities that a citizen can do alone without coordinating with anyone else – activities such as signing a petition or writing a letter to an elected official – are down just 10 to 15 per cent over this period. On the other hand, activities that involve coordinating with somebody else – activities such as public meetings – are down far more sharply, about 40 to 50 per cent. Obviously, if you go to a meeting and there is nobody else there, it is not a meeting. Likewise, it is hard to be a secretary of an organization if the organization has no other members to elect you. This evidence is consistent with the following explanation: everybody has cut back a little bit. Each individual decision has ripple effects, and these individual ripples together have a multiplicative, rather than an additive, effect that makes group coordination especially challenging.

Because the Roper dataset is so large, it lends itself to many interesting analyses. But the major conclusion emerging from them is that all kinds of organizations (not just traditional organizations) have experienced this same kind of decline in membership. That implies that although there are obviously some new groups now that did not exist 30 years ago, they do not begin to make up for the catastrophic declines in membership of the traditional mainline organizations.

The second newly available dataset is, in many ways, even more useful.³ Every year since 1975, the market research firm DDB has commissioned a survey that asks 3–4,000 Americans a whole range of ‘lifestyle’ questions. Most of these questions centre on what brand of car or laundry detergent or some other product they prefer. But 25 years ago, one of the marketers realized that companies could

³ This is a dataset of which social scientists were previously unaware. I learned about it by accident when a graduate student at the University of Minnesota wrote a term paper critical of ‘Bowling Alone’ that included a footnote saying that there was a dataset that he had learned about from his marketing professor that might be relevant to this. So, I followed up that lead, and the firm that owned the dataset – DDB – allowed us to use it for this project.

more easily sell products if they knew about the background and tastes of potential customers. Therefore, the surveys contain a lot of questions about people's attitudes toward family, race differences, economic policies, politics and so forth. But the surveys also ask an even more interesting set of questions: how many times, in the course of the last year, did you take part in various specific social activities?

For example, the survey asks, 'How many times in the last year did you go to church?' (That's useful information for the marketers because church-goers turn out to buy and send more Christmas cards.) But, unbeknownst to the survey designers, they created what is probably the best data series in America on the frequency of church attendance. The DDB data, among other things, can be examined together with other surveys that ask about church attendance to see if all the data sources are telling the same general story.

Besides inquiring about church attendance, the DDB survey asked:

- How many times last year did you go to a club meeting?
- How many times last year did you have friends over to your house?
- How many times last year did you go to a dinner party?
- How many times last year did you work on a community project?
- How many times last year did you volunteer?
- How many times last year did you play cards?
- And certainly not least, how many times last year did you go on a picnic?

So, it turns out, there is after all a record of picnicking in America. Consistent with other trends, the frequency with which Americans go on picnics has been cut in half over the past quarter-century. Americans went picnicking, on average, four times a year in 1975, but only twice in 1999.

Another social activity that is popular in America is card-playing. Even today, card-playing is actually much more common than is going to movies. The average American plays cards about twice as often as he or she goes to the cinema. However, the new data make clear how rapidly that form of social entertainment is disappearing.

In the late 1950s, 40 per cent of American adults played bridge regularly. That number is now about 8–9 per cent, and bridge is mostly confined to retirement communities. Bridge is essentially dying out. If you say 'bridge' to an audience of young people, it

sounds as 'whist' does to Americans of my generation. That is, it is a game that you have vaguely heard of, but you cannot imagine any real person playing it. Indeed, card-playing is dropping at such a fast rate that a straight line projection has card-playing disappearing from America in little more than a decade. If card-playing continues its 20-year downhill slide, the activity will disappear.

Now perhaps that is not the end of the world – unless you are a card manufacturer. But, actually, card-playing is important because card games are intrinsically social. In bridge, for example, the players are not allowed to talk about the game, but they have to talk about something. At its height, bridge was probably the most important site for extra-familial, cross-gender discussions in America. That was an age in which leisure activities were very gendered. But mixed bridge was common. Now it has just about disappeared.

Americans are doing other things instead. For example, going to casinos is up. However, casino gambling is anything but a social activity. Casinos consist of hundreds of people in enormous rooms who are sitting and pulling levers by themselves. Some people are choosing to play bridge on the Internet. These are games involving real people, but there is almost never any side-talk. There is no talk about how the players feel about the local schools. Of course, such talk would be misplaced, because the two players' local schools are almost certainly in different localities or even different countries.

In short, the collapse of actual card-playing is much larger than the rise in Internet card-playing; but even if the Internet version had perfectly replaced the face-to-face version, the Internet version would not generate the kind of social capital that matters. Traditional card-playing will face extinction once the number of card-players sinks below a certain threshold. Once that threshold is passed, it does not make sense for any given individual to learn the rules. It is a coordination problem, in game theory terms. Just as bird populations collapse at the end for lack of adequate partners, so card-games are on the road to collapse for the same reason.

Club activity is also in dramatic decline. In 1975, the average American attended twelve club meetings annually, or one a month. That figure is now at five a year, and it is declining at such a rate that clubs, like card-playing, will disappear in the 2010s unless something changes.

The DDB surveys also asked, 'How many times last year did you go to a bar?' It turns out that activity is down a lot, as well. Several

independent survey archives confirm that going out in the evening (to a bar, night club, disco, etc.) has declined by about 30 per cent. That finding is especially surprising because going out tends to be a ‘singles’ activity and there are more singles in America now compared to a generation ago. I do not know where these singles are hanging out, but it is not in any of the social settings that the surveys could pick up.

Virtually all of the informal social activities – going to club meetings, going to church, having dinner parties, having friends over, going out to bars, going on picnics, etc. – show a substantial decline. The decline is also monotonic, meaning that the prevalence of the activity does not fluctuate from year to year, but rather it just keeps going down in survey after survey.

The DDB surveys not only measure Americans’ retreat from civil society, but they also record the nation’s much-noticed move toward incivility. The survey asked, ‘How many times in the course of the last year did you give the finger [make a rude gesture] to another driver?’ The latest answer is 2.2 times nationwide, running as high as 4.8 times among Americans under 30. Even more intriguingly, the dataset contains information on respondents’ self-reported cheating on their income tax. It turns out that cheating on one’s income tax is strongly correlated with the number of times one issued a rude gesture to another driver. This finding, of course, could provide a powerful clue to the Internal Revenue Service about whose income tax returns to audit.

But the most astonishing single finding in this entire dataset concerns how often people have dinner with members of their family. It turns out that the frequency with which people have dinner with their family has declined by nearly one third since the mid-1970s. This is not simply because fewer people are married. This figure refers only to married people, who are increasingly eating alone.

Somehow, ‘eating alone’ does not have the same rhetorical cachet as ‘bowling alone’, but the fact that Americans are disengaging from their families may be the more troubling trend. We have been going to clubs for five or six hundred years, but people have been breaking bread with their life partner much longer. It is hard to think of any society in which families do not dine together. So, to have that activity on the road to disappearing in one or two generations is an alarming trend – almost like watching a major species go into extinction.

WHY IS SOCIAL CAPITAL ERODING?

Charting the changes in American civil society is easier than explaining their causes. To find the source of social trends, social scientists often act like an epidemiologist looking for the source of a disease: they scout around for 'hot spots', or pockets of the population where the trend might be concentrated. In the present context, one might ask, 'Who used to have lots of picnics but stopped doing so?'

Looking for social trend hot spots is complicated, however, by the fact that the declines in civic and social activity are remarkably equal across all segments of American society. The trends are down among men and down among women. They are down among the rich, and among the poor and the middle class. They are down among people with graduate education, and they are down among high school drop-outs, and among people at all levels in between. The trends are down in central cities, and they are down in suburbs, and they are down in small towns. Even though club meetings and other forms of social capital are more common in small towns than in central cities, the trends are the same in both places. The decline in social capital has also hit all areas of the country: the East Coast, the West Coast, the South, and even the comparatively social-capital-rich upper-Midwest.

However, there is one bright spot in an otherwise bleak picture. Today's older generation appears to have been somewhat immune from the virus that is depressing social and civic participation. People who are in their 60s and 70s today are nearly as participatory as were people who were in their 60s and 70s several decades ago — and in the case of volunteering in the community, today's seniors are actually much more participatory than were seniors in earlier generations.

In general, participation often declines with age, but if we examine the evidence contained in the newly available longitudinal survey archives, we can hold age more or less constant and examine generational differences. Suppose that all Americans were lined up, left to right, from those born in the 1900s to those born in the 1970s. Then suppose that these people are asked a series of questions: how often do you read the newspaper, how many picnics did you go on last year, how often do you go to clubs, how often do you go to church, how often did you go to a public meeting last

year? Among those on the left side of the line, those born from 1910 to 1930, the fraction who do all those activities would be very high, as it always has been. These people constitute what I call the 'long civic generation'.

That generation was born in the years leading up to the mid-1930s. People who were born in the late 1930s and early 1940s are still quite active, but they are a little less active than are the people born in the 1920s and early 1930s. That generational decline would continue for the next four decades. Compare people born in the 1920s with their grandchildren, born in the 1970s. The grandparents are three times as likely to read a newspaper, twice as likely to vote, and twice as likely to trust other people; and the older folks go to clubs three times as often.

The obvious objection is, 'So what? Maybe when the grandchildren get to be their grandparents' age, the younger cohort will be joining clubs and doing all those activities just like their grandparents'. Unfortunately, there is no evidence for that optimistic supposition. In technical terms, there is little evidence that the different participation rates across age groups represent a life-cycle phenomenon. Virtually all the evidence suggests instead that this is a cohort, or generational, phenomenon.

The generational finding is the only strong clue as to what might have caused the decline in civic participation and social capital over the past 25 or 30 years. But it is a striking clue. It also has serious implications for the future because this long civic generation, the people who came of age during the Great Depression or the Second World War, are now in their seventies and eighties and nineties and do not have many years left to contribute. The cohorts coming up behind them, those who came of age after the Second World War, seem to have been exposed to some anti-civic x-ray that made them wary of participation in social and public life. As a result, voluntary organizations are greying because middle-aged people and new retirees are not replacing the long civic generation as members and officers. The average age in church pews and club meetings is rising.

On a positive note, there is some evidence of a slight upturn in civic participation among people now in their twenties. They do not quite match people in their forties and fifties, but the twenty-somethings are more civic than are people in their thirties. So at the very front end of this long-run trend, civic help might be arriving.

In the meantime, however, old age continues to take away the most civic people in America, and this process will keep driving down the average rate of civic engagement and voting for at least the next 20–30 years.

In sum, the process of ‘generational replacement’ is the single most important reason for the erosion of social capital and civic participation. It accounts for about half of the overall decline. What about the other half?

One obvious possibility is that more Americans are working, and working longer hours, and so they simply do not have time for voluntary activity. That explanation has intuitive appeal. Surprisingly, though, an increase in work hours is but a tiny part of the problem. This is because, although women are working more hours outside the home than they used to, men are actually working fewer hours outside the home than they used to, on average. In addition, among women, work has two effects that go in opposite directions. Because work takes time, it cuts down on some forms of involvement; but because it exposes women to wider networks, it also increases the likelihood that they will be an officer of a club, for example. Changes in work patterns, notably the proliferation of two-career families, account for only about 10 per cent of the decline in civic participation.

One might expect that economic hard times and economic discontent are part of the explanation. Others, by contrast, speculate that affluence has caused rampant individualism. But these factors cannot explain very much because over the last 25–30 years the economy has gone up and down and up and down. During the 1970s Americans faced tough times economically, whereas throughout most of the 1990s, the American economy experienced a huge boom. But through good times and bad, social capital kept going down and down. So it seems unlikely that this is simply an economic phenomenon.

Urban sprawl is probably an accomplice. For every ten minutes of time one spends commuting, there is a 10 per-cent cut in almost all forms of social engagement – 10 per cent fewer dinner parties, 10 per cent fewer club meetings, and 10 per cent fewer church services attended. The church attendance figure is especially revealing because most church services are not held on working days. In other words, that pattern implies that there is something about urban sprawl, other than simply the time people are stuck in

a car, that keeps them from attending social and civic events. Most likely, urban sprawl has created a geographical separation between the places where people work, the places where they live and the places where they shop. That dispersion has fragmented citizens' sense of community. The best estimate is that urban sprawl and suburbanization are responsible for about 10 per cent of the decline in civic engagement.

Finally, and significantly, there is the advent of television. TV comes onto the stage at just the right moment to help explain the decline in civic life, and TV has come to occupy a sizeable fraction of Americans' free time. The new dataset makes clear how powerful the correlation is between watching TV and being a civic slug. The most powerful predictor of an individual's level of civic engagement is the answer to the following question: 'Television is my primary form of entertainment – agree or disagree'. Half of Americans agree, and half disagree. Which way they answer turns out to be a better predictor of their involvement than is their level of education, which is normally the strongest demographic correlate of civic activity.

An important caveat is in order. Television per se is not the problem. For example, watching television news is done by people who are older and more civically engaged. But most of Americans' time in front of the tube is spent not watching the news, but rather watching entertainment, and that is strongly negatively correlated with civic activity. It is not clear from the data whether television causes people to be less engaged, or whether people who do not want to be engaged watch television instead. Probably, the causal arrow points in both directions. The best estimate from the data is that the proliferation of entertainment television is responsible for about one-third of the decline in civic participation. Television works in two ways. It contributes to the generational-replacement explanation (because the older civic generation is not as hooked as the younger cohorts are), and television keeps people of all ages in their living rooms.

SO WHAT?

The erosion of social capital in America matters in many important ways. This is not merely about an ageing generation's nostalgia for the tranquil 1950s. Rather, the stark reality is that, in many measurable ways, the health of our communities and even our own health depends importantly on our stock of social capital.

This investigation of the state of social capital in America is an outgrowth of an earlier study of Italy.⁴ That study set out to investigate a rather obscure topic: why some regions of Italy were better governed than other regions were. There were clearly parts of Italy that were poorly governed, and there were other parts of Italy that were well-governed. The research question was, 'What could explain those differences?'

Many hypotheses presented themselves: differences in economic wealth, differences in the education level of the residents, differences in political party systems, and so forth. Some of these factors, such as the level of modernization and economic development, did matter. But it took years of research before it became clear that there was a secret ingredient, a trace element in the soil, that made some regional governments function better than others did. That secret ingredient turned out to be choral societies and football clubs – that is, various forms of community involvement.

Some communities had higher levels of involvement in political life but also in social life. Civic engagement is not purely a matter of politics, which is why 'choral societies' is an effective metaphor and an efficient predictor of good government. Dense networks of civic engagement had given rise to a norm of reciprocity – 'I'll do this for you now, without expecting anything back immediately from you, because down the road, somebody else will do something for me, and anyhow, we'll all see each other on Thursday night at the choral society'. Based on that research, if you tell me how many choral societies there are in a community of Italy, I will be able to tell you, plus or minus three days, how long it will take the average citizen to get his health bills reimbursed. The correlation is strong.

Now communities that have lots of choral societies also turn out to be wealthier, and for some time we thought that this was because

⁴ Robert D. Putnam, with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993.

wealth produces choral societies. That is, in economically underdeveloped regions, the poor residents do not have the time, energy, or inclination to join choral societies. But, actually, that story is exactly backward. It was not that wealth had produced the choral societies, but rather that the choral societies had produced the wealth. That is, the patterns of connectedness predated the differences in wealth. If a region, for whatever reason, happened to have lots of choral societies, it did not begin wealthier, but it gradually became wealthier. Those more connected regions also had healthier citizens, and happier citizens. At the risk of overstatement and simplification, choral societies explain economic development, good government, happiness.

It turns out that there is a large body of research on the positive effects of community connectedness. This research shows, among other findings, that educational systems do not perform as well in places where people are not engaged in their communities or schools. And where social capital is weak, people are much more likely to cheat on their taxes.

The crime rate is closely related, too. Suppose a mayor wanted to reduce crime in the city, and she had a choice between two strategies: increase by 10 per cent the number of cops on the beat, or increase by 10 per cent the number of neighbours who know one another's first name. The latter approach – building social capital – is likely to be the more effective crime-fighting strategy. The fact that Americans do not know their neighbours' first names as well as they once did is an important part of the reason for the crime rates that have been much higher than they were in the 1950s and 1960s, notwithstanding recent favourable developments.

Finally, social capital has profound consequences for people's health. There are many excellent prospective studies that can disentangle the causes from the effects. Controlling for an individual's blood chemistry, gender, age, status as a smoker and level of exercise, the chances of dying over the next year are cut in half by joining one group. This is about the same order of magnitude as quitting smoking. If you smoke and belong to no groups, it is a close call as to which behaviour is worse for you. There are several reasons why social capital is conducive to health. Partly, it is social support – if you slip in the bath-tub and do not show up at church, someone will notice and come to check on you. But social capital appears to operate mainly through physiology, or biochemical

effects. Going to meetings actually lowers individuals' stress level, hard as that is to believe.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Over the course of the last generation, a variety of technological, economic and social changes have rendered obsolete a stock of American social capital. Because of two-career families, sprawl, television and other factors, Americans are no longer as eager to find time for the PTA, or the Elks club, or the Optimists. There are measurable bad effects for the United States that flow from this social capital deficit.

Now, return to a hundred years ago. At the end of the nineteenth century in the United States, the stock of social capital in America was in a similarly depleted state. America had just been through 30–40 years of dramatic technological, economic and social change that had rendered obsolete institutions and informal patterns of social engagement. Urbanization, industrialization and immigration meant that people no longer had the tight communities of friends that were present back on the farm, and they no longer had the institutions they had enjoyed back in the village in Poland or in Iowa.

At the end of the nineteenth century, America suffered from all of the same symptoms of the social capital deficit that the nation has experienced over the past couple of decades. These include high crime rates, decay in the cities, concern about political corruption, poorly functioning schools, and a widening gap between the rich and everyone else. Then as now, the erosion of social capital happened for the same reason: technological change rendered obsolete the ways Americans had previously connected.

Then, amazingly, Americans fixed the problem. In a very short period of time, at the end of the nineteenth century, most of today's most important civic institutions were invented: the Boy Scouts, the American Red Cross, the League of Women Voters, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Knights of Columbus, the Sons of Norway, the Sons of Italy, the Urban League, the Kiwanis club, the YWCA, the 4-H club, the Rotary club, the Community Chest and most trade unions. It is actually hard to name a major civic institution in American life

today that was not invented at the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth century.

In that period, as now, it was very tempting to say, 'Life was much better back in the old days'. At the end of the nineteenth century, 'the old days' meant 'on the farm,' when everyone knew each other. Similarly, it might be tempting today to say, 'Life was much nicer back in the 1950s. Would all women please report to the kitchen? And turn off the television on the way'. Of course, America should no more return to the days of gender segregation than it should return to a pre-industrial agricultural economy. Instead, Americans today must do what their forebears did a century ago: create new institutions to fit new times. Americans need to reinvent the Boy Scouts or the League of Women Voters or the Sons of Italy.

Here, there is a close connection between British history and American history. Many of the organizations that were 'invented' in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century actually were imported from England, where they had been invented in the mid-Victorian era, probably in response to very similar social problems. Such organizations include the Boy Scouts and the Salvation Army. These patterns suggest that there may be periods in many countries, not just the United States, in which there are bursts of civic reconstruction. Now, the challenge to Americans as a people is to put in a hard ten or twenty years figuring how to reconnect in an era of new demographic, economic and cultural realities. It is not an option to say, 'It doesn't matter if we connect with other people'. There are measurable reasons why connecting does matter.

It remains to be seen what those new ideas and strategies will be. Some might seem a little crazy. One can only imagine the response in some quarters when civic leaders said creating an organization called the Boy Scouts would be a solution to the street-urchin problem – that if urchins get shorts, beanies and badges, this would be a substitute for friends on the farm. In hindsight, we can see which inventions of that period were successful; but it is harder to see the ones that were unsuccessful. Today as then, there will be a lot of false starts.

Quite interestingly, the late-nineteenth century was a period almost unique in American intellectual history in the sense that there was a very close connection, and a lot of direct exchanges, between academics and practitioners. Some American academics

are now trying to create a similar situation in which scholars no longer spend all their time writing for obscure journals read only by other scholars, but rather spend more time learning from practitioners who are addressing vital public issues. In short, addressing the social capital deficit in contemporary society is far from a hopeless task, but it will require that social scientists descend from our ivory tower. That is, of course, a challenge to which the London School of Economics has long been dedicated, and it is the task that lies before American social science today.