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National Security, Suburbanization, Technology, And the Prospect of Renewing Civic Participation¹

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Abstract

In a series of books and articles, Robert Putnam outlined his famous "bowling alone" theses of declining civic participation, which he attributed in considerable part to television and other alternative leisure time pursuits. Putnam also acknowledged the possibility of other possible factors. This presentation will identify two such possibilities that coincide with the decline Putnam noted, as well as more recent and more ambiguous, technology-related factors.

Introduction

I assume that everyone in contemporary third sector studies is at least vaguely familiar with Robert Putnam's famous "bowling alone" theses:² The issue of declining civic participation has been a popular as well as a scholarly concern, as we see in Figure 1 from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart Presents America*. (Stewart, 2004)

Through two books, at least one scholarly article in a political science journal and one or more widely-popular articles, as well as who-knows-how-many interviews, guest appearances and consulting gigs over the past two decades, Putnam has consistently purveyed at least four major assertions (Putnam, 1995a; Putnam, 1995b; Putnam, 1995c; Putnam, 2000):

- 1) Civic participation in the United States has been declining in real terms. Not only are fewer people voting in major national elections, but there is also evident decline in a wide variety of other civic and voluntary associations, the most celebrated of which has been Putnam's assertion that people are less inclined to join bowling leagues today, and more likely to engage in bowling as an individual pursuit.
- 2) Evidence to the contrary, e.g., that organizational memberships continue at high levels, is mitigated by qualitative changes in the

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² Contemporary third sector studies is a broad umbrella term of art within which one might include interdisciplinary perspectives on nonprofit management, civil society, volunteer management, fundraising, philanthropy, the nonprofit portions of social enterprise, social administration, social movements and deliberative democracy as well as assorted other related topics.

- nature of participation. (Millions may belong to AARP, for instance, but relatively few actually participate.)
- 3) This decline, according to Putnam, can be attributed to what I like to think of as the “couch potato” thesis: That television and other private and individualistic leisure time pursuits, (including such non-couch potato activities as working out at the gym) have replaced participation in voluntary associations in the preferred lifestyle of ordinary Americans.
 - 4) As illustrated by the differences between Northern and Southern Italy over several centuries, civic participation and the emergent social capital it produces is important in explaining differences between “advanced” and “lagging” regions in economic development. This latter is of more than passing interest to those of us resident in such lagging areas, whether Appalachia or post-industrial Cleveland.

I would like to focus briefly and exclusively on the issue of causation of this momentous phenomenon, setting aside the multitude of other interesting questions we might pursue. I will assume, even in the face of criticism of Putnam’s argument on methodological grounds, that it is true that civic participation has declined and is continuing to decline and that the implications of such declines for social capital and economic development are approximately as Putnam presented them. The question of what to do about those declines, however, hinges in part on how the problem is defined.

Is civic participation synodical or congregational?

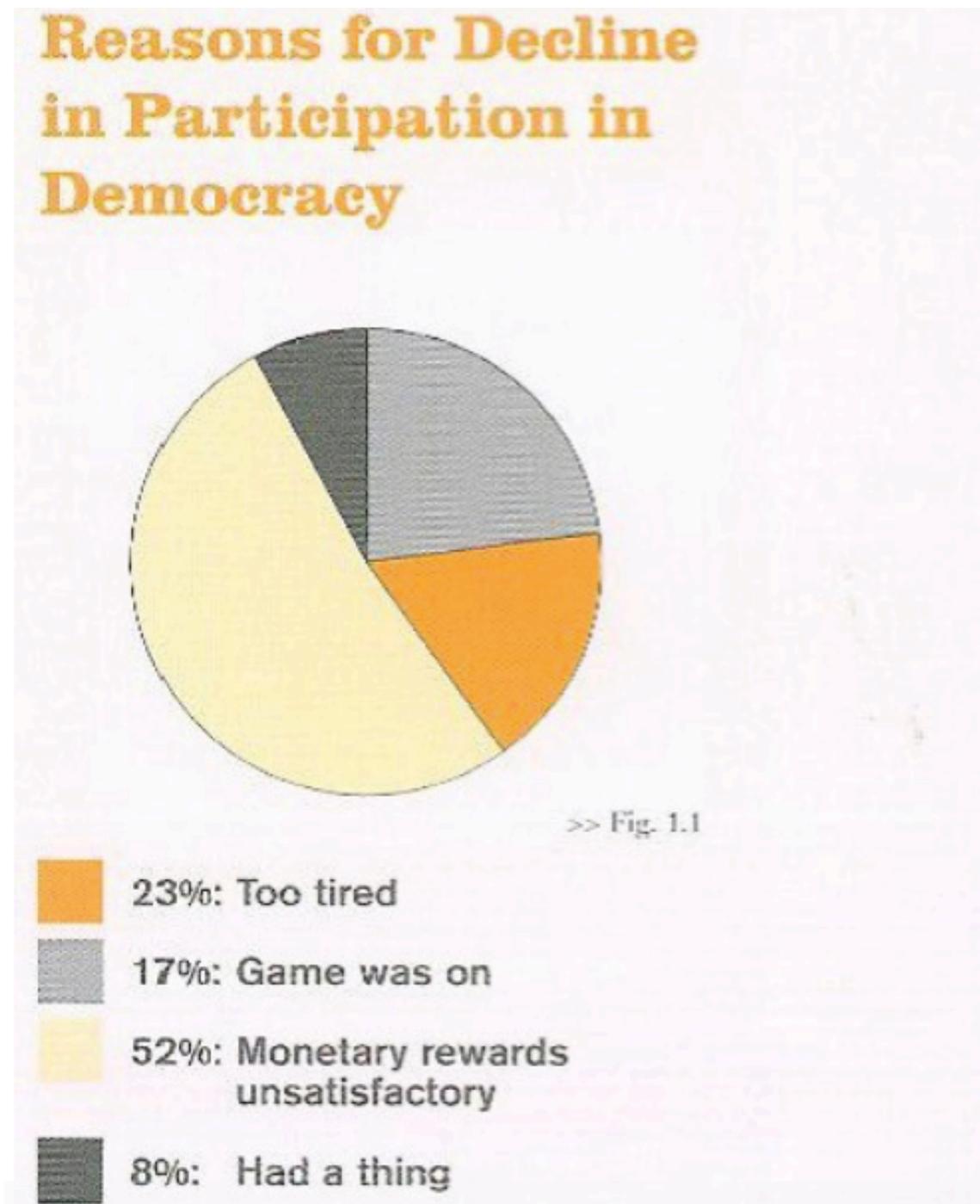
Where Putnam emphasizes a “grassroots” or community perspective suggesting that social capital is built by individual members from the bottom up, his Harvard University colleague Theda Skocpol builds a top-down model of mass-membership groups within a highly organized, complex federal network with national headquarters, regional offices, state units and then, finally, grassroots level organizations. (Skocpol, 2003) She asserts that vigorous local civic participation requires national leadership, institutions and networks. In doing so, she challenges the continuing validity of the Tocquevillian model of independent grassroots action and suggests directly that civic participation has declined because national opinion elites have failed to tend to them adequately.

What is at issue here is very reminiscent of other debates over the proper form of ecclesiastical organization; whether it is better to build downward from a centralized leadership (something we can call the synodical model) or upward from the grassroots (the congregational model). From the standpoint of the causes of decline, I don’t see these as either/or choices. Approached from either direction, one still faces the issue with Skopol’s model of why local people (the “grassroots”) would choose to join or not join national movements of the sort she describes. This strikes me as just another way of approaching Putnam’s basic question of causation.

Why civic decline?

Regardless of approach, I am interested in why declines in civic participation occurred in the last half of the twentieth century and what the implications of this may be for the twenty-first. The first portion of this presentation deals with a side effect or byproduct of national security concerns, whether McCarthyism in the 1950s, Civil Rights and Vietnam protesters in the 1960s or opposition to the war in Iraq today. These comments are adapted from my “Editors Note” in Volume 14, Issue 4 of *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*.

Figure 1



(Stewart, J. (2004). The daily show with Jon Stewart presents America (the book) : a citizen's guide to democracy inaction. New York, NY, Warner Books., p. 1.

In Figure 79 of *Bowling Alone* (Simon & Schuster, 2000, 284), Robert Putnam offered several rough-and-ready “guesstimates” for the decline from 1965-2000, assigning each a particular estimated proportion:

- Pressures of time and money (10%);
- Suburbanization, commuting and sprawl (15%);
- Electronic entertainment, especially television (25%);
- Generational change (50%, overlapped with TV).

It is his estimate of an unknown “other?” category (25%) that is the immediate focus of attention here. “Work, sprawl, TV and generational change are all important parts of the story,” Putnam says, “but important elements in our mystery remain unsolved.”

In my previously mentioned *Editors Note*, I speculated at length on one such factor, the cold war rise of the National Security state, in which – among other things, fighting communism offered an important rationale for the interstate high way system and student aid in higher education. I want to develop that argument a bit more here in light of the passage of the U.S. Patriot Act and also to introduce a second possibility – that technology may be enabling new and rather robust forms of civic participation.

TV, baby boomers and the daily commute notwithstanding, it is possible to propose an entirely different line of explanation for at least part of the decline of civic participation in the United States; one that links directly into the centrally-important concept of social capital. This particular explanation makes a critically important distinction between social participation generally (including participation for reasons of entertainment and related leisure time pursuits) and civic participation in a more robust sense.

Formally stated, the argument is this: *Americans are participating less in public affairs, defining civic participation more narrowly and generally behaving in the other ways detailed by the decline of civic participation thesis because of the corrosive cumulative effects of decades of a hostile public sphere characterized all too frequently by ideological, partisan, opportunistic and often patently false assaults on participants in public issues. The strategic uses of derogatory public labeling for short term partisan advantage tends to have the long term consequence of undermining trust among participants engaged in civic participation, thereby eroding social capital as well.*

Mean-spirited and hostile public life characterized by politically motivated labeling for alleged partisan advantage, has a long and sad history in the U.S., starting with a litany of racial, ethnic, gender and sexual orientation slurs that need not be repeated here. Such labeling also extends to the use of political labels like “Bolshevik” and “Red” during the “Red scare” following World War I against union organizers, social activists and others, and “communist” and “communist sympathizer” during the Cold War period.

Regrettably, public officials, including Attorney General Palmer, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, and it would appear, the current Attorney General and Defense Secretary have too often been parties to such behavior. It also extends to labels like “hippy” against Vietnam War protesters, and the derogatory labels applied to women’s rights activists (e.g., “feminazi”). In many smaller Southern communities today, strangers in town are still considered to be potential “outside agitators” come to “stir up trouble”.

While this thesis has an important historic angle for many of us who lived through those days, it also has a contemporary twist. One might also interrogate the 1960s in a similar manner: We simply do not know how many ex-hippies, yippies, recreational drug users, commune dwellers and other distinct participants in the counter-culture of the 1960’s are refraining from civil participation today because of their pasts?

The latest occasion which brought this long and sorry history back to mind was the unfortunately frequent use of the term “traitor” which has been applied by one public official, political party or group or another to virtually everyone who has publicly opposed the war in Iraq. It is important to note also that such labeling is certainly not confined to any one political position as the use of such labels as “right wing fanatic” and the increasingly popular “fascist” shows. However, civic engagement cannot be expected to thrive in a climate like this where labels like this are so easily hurled.

Such labels, whenever or wherever applied, and whether or not they may be justified almost certainly have a “chilling effect” on civic participation, and an accompanying increase in alienation and civic withdrawal. In many communities the mere act of holding public office is synonymous with the ability to tolerate huge and constant quantities of similar (and much worse) verbal abuse administered in person, over the phone, in “hate mail” and increasingly by email.

Whether for reasons of career advancement, personal dignity, protection of personal business interests or the privacy of their families, or hundreds of other equally legitimate private reasons, a great many people, it would seem, simply are unwilling to submit to such verbal treatment and simply withdraw from public life. Others, knowing of this sorry record, are never willing to enter the public sphere.

This argument probably also intersects with what Putnam labeled the “generational effect.” We currently suspect that patterns of civic participation are learned early and practiced consistently for a lifetime. It is quite likely, therefore, that someone successfully labeled a “Know Nothing”, for example, at a young age may at first be inclined to “drop out” of civic involvement and may remain out for a lifetime, thereby reproducing the generational effect. In fact, I have spoken with a number of individuals roughly 5 years younger than me who shared many of the same experiences of the 1960s and who

claim to still possess “anti-establishment” feelings from that experience in ways that I have not. Whether or not this is the reason, it seems likely also that any number of survivors of the period 1965-1974 may be, in effect, permanently barred from public life because of youthful experimentation with drugs, sexual indiscretions captured on film, a period of residence in a counter-cultural commune or similar reasons. Moreover, there may well be a plausible “contagion” effect here as friends, family members, and other associates are able to observe at close hand the effects of such labeling, stigmatizing and/or self-imposed alienation.

The other side of the coin, of course, are continuing efforts on the part of some to police the purity of the polity by keeping out the ideologically undesirable. We saw this in most vigorous form recently as one administration official after another attempted to paint all those with doubts about the war in Iraq, those who adopted a critical stance toward the case for war, and finally in Zell Miller’s remarkable speech at the Republican Convention, all members of the Democratic Party, as traitors.

If my thesis is correct, we can expect to see further continued declines in civic participation in the coming years on the part of anyone and everyone not strictly adhering to an imagined consensus. Think of it: Someone successfully (and falsely) labeled as “supporting terrorists” at age 20 who withdraws from public life as a result could well be a nonparticipating member of the community for at least the next fifty years! I suspect that something like this occurred in response to Attorney General Palmer’s “Red Scare” in 1919, and the impact on civic participation was evident throughout the 1920s.

The consequences of public incivility are not only profound. They are long-lasting. In this regard, the implications of the past four years are not very encouraging for the future of civic participation in the U.S.

Suburbanization and Civic Participation

Now let us turn to suburbanization. I am in complete agreement with Putnam on his basic assertions in this area, which are two: 1) Participation declines when people have too little time and money; 2) Travel time (and presumably, the associated costs of commuting) have had a negative impact. Both of these are most likely the case; I want to go beyond that and point up at least one implication of Skocpol’s more recent analysis.

By suburbanization I mean much more than simply population movement from center cities and farms into the suburbs. Those signature moves to the suburbs now implicate nearly half of the population. One of my favorite anecdotes along these lines is the suggestion that in 1940 West Virginia and Florida had nearly identical populations – 1.9 million each. Today, WV is at 1.8 million population and Florida is passing 19 million in large part because of such population shifts. Much of the economic and social transformation in

Florida over the past few decades has been of a type that one might readily characterize as “suburban”. For that matter, the fact that West Virginia has just stayed even masks the massive suburbanization that has also taken place in that state. As the rural counties empty out, people not only move out of state, there has also been a massive internal population movement to the suburban fringe of the dozen small cities (<100,000 population) in the state. Thus, although the state is still classified, and like to think of itself as rural and holler-dwelling, the census data suggest that anyway from 60-80% of the population live in the dozen small cities of the state – and more immediately relevant to the case here – their suburban fringes.

This would be an interesting topic in itself to digress onto, but I brought it up really to highlight some features of suburbanization that Putnam points to – e.g., long commutes between home and work – and also to point up some he doesn’t mention. For example, for many people the move to the suburbs – whether from the city or from the farm – was more importantly a movement out of an intact, multi-generational ethnic community which was the important frame for their civic participation – church, social clubs, political activities, leisure time pursuits like bowling leagues and all the rest. In the suburbs, importantly, new residents typically find more than just fewer associations and institutions within which to participate. Just as importantly, they had moved out of the largely homogeneous ethnic and religious communities within which those associations had arisen, into the pluralistic, heterogeneous circumstances we today label “diversity”; and for the most part nationwide they (we) are still living in those heterogeneous circumstances. For too many suburbanites, no newer matrix for socialization has apparently yet arisen, and so they stay at home watching television and surfing the net.

Particularly in this respect, Skocpol’s analysis may yet prove prescient. It isn’t the case that somehow around 1960 we had this magic failure of imagination among national associational leaders. It seems to me far more likely that the new circumstances wrought by suburbanization, the old, inner city and agrarian leadership and organizing “tricks” didn’t work as they had previously, but under the combined pressures of cold war concerns for communists, “outside agitators”. This was a blanket term very like the medieval “vagabonds” and meant to include political leftists of all types, labor organizers, civil rights workers, hippies, Vietnam War protesters and virtually anyone else who was “different” from some specious suburban normalcy. It seems almost strange to suggest now, but the musical comedy *Bye Bye, Birdie* from the late 1950s should remind us that white, suburban young people listening to rock and roll music were widely regarded as a threat to national security at about this same time.

National associational entrepreneurship in suburbia would have been further hampered, particularly in recent decades, by the “sunbelt” phenomenon – the fact that so much suburbanization has taken place in southern and western states, where suspicion of outsiders is typically highest. Thus, who can say how many attempts to create new national association networks of the type indexed by Skocpol may have been hamstrung by the need to carefully thread their way through the ideological minefields of the recent past?

In the broadest terms, we are still in the midst of the project of building a new national suburban culture. In a few cases – the women’s movement, for example, or AARP – genuine victories for national associational entrepreneurs are evident. The relatively small number of such victories, however, may indeed be related to declines of civic participation associated with suburbanization.

Technology and Civic Participation

One of the implications of this take on suburbanization is that it may well turn out to be – in historical terms - a temporary phenomenon. The old familiar Tocquevillian forms of association of farming communities and urban ethnic enclaves may actually be replaced by newer forms of civic engagement and participation even as we speak. That is the essential form of the argument put forth consistently over the past decade that the internet offers the basis for entirely new forms of civic participation.

For more than a decade now “pros” and “antis” with much higher levels of certainty on this issue have been hurling verbal grenades at one another over the question of whether the internet can lead to more or less civic participation. On the “pro” side it is often suggested that, television, movies and radio are quiescent media in which participation comes largely in the form of passive reception of an “information wash” produced by others. That the given and take of live interaction cannot be sustained in any form of technology-enhanced medium.

By contrast, newer information technologies offer opportunities for civic participation – in such diverse forms as electronic discussion lists, blogs, electronic publishing, electronic journals and news services and the very substantial capacity to produce one’s own CDs, DVDs, videos and full-scale movies. Anyone who knows that the calling to account of Dan Rather and CBS News was initiated by bloggers also knows that something in national politics is different as a result., Likewise, anyone who has gotten multiple daily mailings from their favorite political parties and interest groups knows that potentially at least there is an opportunity there for new and different forms of participation in activism, advocacy and deliberation.

On the “con” side, opposition arguments to a role for technology in enhanced civic participation tend to be of two types: 1) Luddite-style arguments that technology is not producing any such beneficial effects, but is instead producing vastly increased potentials for passivity and should be smashed; and 2) what might be called “disneyfication” arguments that like “reality TV”, technology allows only varieties of plastic, synthetic or denatured approximation of civic participation rather than the real thing.

I tend to come down on the “real thing” side of this issue, at least as a possibility. I thought briefly of attempting to deliver this presentation via two-way interactive video rather than in person to prove the point, but decided against it. I did so more because of the traditionalism of the academy to which I am for the most part thoroughly socialized, than for any other reason. Even though I know the technology can work and effectively, I’ll leave it some younger innovator to be the first to demonstrate that format in this series. For the right person, someone with a stronger flair for promotion than I, there would probably be five conference papers, possibly a book, and maybe even a rather healthy foundation grant in such a demonstration.

Earlier, in the democratic primaries, former Vermont Governor Howard Dean demonstrated convincingly that these electronic resources could be used to mount a powerful national fundraising effort. One suspects by the sheer volume of email currently devoted to such fundraising that other politicians and political parties have learned the lesson quickly and well.

As a former community organizer and newspaper reporter and the current operator of more than 20 email discussion lists, at least one of which is now 15 years old and has nearly 1,200 participants in roughly 50 countries, I have seen what can happen in technology-enhanced participation. It doesn’t always happen; in fact it doesn’t usually happen, but it can happen and that makes it one of the most potentially exciting possibilities in the otherwise rather dingy environment of declining participation. Most importantly, this is not an either/or between on-line or face-to-face participation. In fact, things seem to work best, as with the ARNOVA-L list, when electronic and face-to-face participation become mutually reinforcing.

I suspect that many of the very people implicated in this paper: suburbanites intimidated into silence by the national security implications of anti-communism, the Vietnam war and terrorism may have been and currently are disproportionately represented among the innovators and early adopters of internet participation techniques.

I suspect that there is widespread recognition today of such instances as the success of MoveOn.org, the effective use of online fund raising and organizing by the Howard Dean campaign, and the online debunking of the CBS News sources of the story regarding President Bush’s military service.

At that point, the argument twists on itself to reveal an entirely new aspect not previously mentioned: Suburban and rural political libertarians, many of whom are troubled by other “civil liberties” aspects of the national security state have been among the most active of emailers, bloggers and online activists.

So what does this mean? We are far from a mature electronic democracy, but one suspects that there are some very real possibilities yet to emerge.

Conclusion

Quite apart from any actual instances of abuses and regardless of the accuracy of the fears, the sheer vagueness of paranoid political dialogue about unseen enemies and potential threats in our midst tends to have a chilling effect on civic participation. During the cold war it was what turned out to be largely unfounded concerns about secret cells of communist conspirators, often in nativist rhetoric left over from an earlier period. Currently, concern about potential terrorists among us tends to exacerbate tendencies toward paranoia in American political rhetoric noted as early as the 1950s by Richard Hofstadter.

However accurate or grounded such fears (and few of us have any way of knowing), even an intermittent stream of suspicions, insinuations and accusations like those coming recently from the current Administration in Washington and their supporters, seems to me to be the basis a continuing climate hostile to civic participation. “Present danger” rhetoric may, indeed, be necessary. We can (and should) debate whether or not such concerns are justified. Such matters are beyond my concern here. My principal concern is that, in the present climate, any such debate held publicly will be limited only to those courageous enough on all sides to risk the abuse and invective that inevitably goes with it. Thus, it seems to me straightforwardly self-evident that we have here one rather plausible explanation for the currently shrinking public sphere in American life that Putnam detected.

To the extent that suburbanization is a factor, it may be at least partially (in historical terms) a temporary one. There is no question that time spent in commuting from the suburbs may be at least partly time lost to civic participation. We still eat, sleep, work, make love, raise our children and grandchildren, and engage in all the other activities of daily living, but time spent in our cars may be time we cannot spend with our neighbors. This combined with the very mobility that created and sustains the suburbs account for a good bit of the decline, but the larger question is whether this is a temporary or a permanent phenomenon.

Richard Florida’s recent argument of the rise of a national ‘creative class’ focused chiefly on the competitive edge of cities like San Jose, CA, Seattle,

WA and Austin, TX over older industrial centers like Cleveland and Pittsburgh. (Florida, 2004) He didn't as much as one might have expected on the apparently simultaneous rise of a national *haute bourgeois* culture associated with that class; a culture of higher education, Starbucks, international travel, professional employment and engagement with new forms of mass culture, from gyms and personal trainers to internet usage. It remains to be seen whether this new class will continue to evolve in close association with market institutions, or will simultaneously evolve distinctive common, or third sector, institutions of its own. And, if the latter, whether these will arise from the grassroots, ala Putnam, or from a distinct generation of national association entrepreneurs, ala Skocpol.

If this analysis is correct, the antidotes to declining civic participation may prove simpler to identify than to resolve: First, we need to find ways to create kinder, more civil communities even while protecting ourselves against communists, terrorists and other invidious threats. Civic involvement, it seems, is dependent upon larger measures of civil behavior. Further, we need to build entirely new institutions for civic engagement that make sense in the land of the commuting "creative class". Whether or not, and the extent to which those new institutions will depend upon electronic communication media is most likely to be an open question for some time to come.

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