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Bowling Together

Civic engagement in America isn't disappearing but reinventing itself

By RICHARD STENGEL

ROLL OVER, ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE. THE OFT MENTIONED (but less frequently read) 19th century French scribe is being invoked by every dime-store scholar and public figure these days to bemoan the passing of what the Frenchman described as one of America's distinctive virtues: civic participation. "Americans of all ages, all conditions and all dispositions," he famously wrote, "constantly form associations." In France, Tocqueville observed, a social movement is instigated by the government, in England by the nobility, but in America by an association. Tocqueville and small d democrats from Ben Franklin (who started a volunteer fire brigade) to John F. Kennedy (who told Americans not to ask but to do) have warned that the health of American democracy depends on vigorous civic participation.

That is why Robert Putnam's 1995 essay "Bowling Alone" touched a national nerve. Putnam, a Harvard professor of government, used the catchy image of more Americans bowling by themselves and fewer in leagues to assert that traditional civic engagement in America has been on a long, slow decline for the past 25 years. Citing diminished participation in organizations like the PTA and the League of Women Voters, Putnam's essay seemed to reinforce a widespread feeling that civic life in America just wasn't what it used to be. The nation's diminishing social capital was lamented far and wide, from Bill Clinton's bully pulpit to angry sermons by Bill Bennett to Bill Bradley's eloquent envoi to the Senate.

So widely accepted is this notion of civic decline that both Bill Clinton and Bob Dole have been exhorting Americans to pull up their socks. (Rhetoric is free; programs cost money. Besides, who isn't for volunteerism?) Clinton has used a series of Executive actions regarding teen smoking, gun sales and truancy as a paternal prod—in effect, making the Federal Government the village patriarch who reminds members of the community of their obligations to one another. Last week Clinton introduced a schoolhouse-repair program, which is meant to spur local investment, not as a public-works effort but as a communitarian one. "It would help those who help themselves," Clinton declared. As for Dole, he often uses as a metaphor the cigar boxes of cash that his neighbors in Russell, Kansas, raised for him when he was a wounded vet, while his wife says that as First Lady she will encourage Americans to give 5% of their income to charity and 5% of their time to volunteerism.

But despite the near unanimity with which it was accepted, there are many weaknesses to the civic-decline argument. By many measures, even traditional forms of civic activism are flour-

ishing. In Colorado, volunteers for Big Brothers and Sisters are at an all-time high. PTA participation, as of 1993, was on the rise, from 70% of parents with children participating to 81%. According to Gallup polling, attendance at school-board meetings is also up, from 16% of local residents in 1969 to 39% in 1995. In a TIME/CNN poll last week of 1,010 Americans, 77% said they wish they could have more contact with other members of their community. Thirty-six percent said they already take part in volunteer organizations. In low-income areas, says Bob Woodson, president of Washington's National Center for Neighborhood Enterprises, during the past decade there has been a tremendous upsurge in the number of people who want to help out in their own communities. Even young people are looking more generous: a survey for the In-

dependent Sector, an organization that promotes volunteerism, shows that 57% of American teenagers say they participate in some kind of community service. Rise up, Alexis de Tocqueville.

But the principal flaw in the civic-decline argument is that it misses a new and different direction in American life. There hasn't been a disappearance of civic activism in America so much as a reinvention of it. It is not dissolving, but evolving. Yes, Little League participation has leveled off, but that's because everyone's kicking a ball not catching it. The number of kids in U.S. Youth Soccer has swelled to 2.4 million, 20 times the figure of two decades ago. Yes, fewer people are signing up for the Y, but they are joining health clubs for the StairMasters and the camaraderie. Yes, there are fewer ladies' garden clubs, but work-

ing women are meeting in evening book clubs to discuss high literature and low husbands. And instead of downing brews at the local American Legion, guys are beating drums together in the woods. Or replying their troth at stadium-size gatherings of Promise Keepers. In some cities, industrialists are grouping together to remedy a perceived lack of civic engagement. Last month in New York City, a group of 50 major corporations and business leaders, spearheaded by financier Henry Kravis, announced that it had raised \$50 million for self-sustaining venture-capital investments to create jobs and promote economic development, with no direct gain for themselves.

And while people may not be going to political clubs anymore, they are discussing politics in the Internet equivalent of smoke-filled rooms. In fact, Putnam's essay provoked weeks of round-table discussion among the political-science set at a Los Angeles-based Website called Aapornet. "We were sitting alone staring into our computer screens," said the site's moderator, associate professor of communications James Beniger of the University of Southern California, "but we were bonding together." While com-



ILLUSTRATION FOR TIME BY BRIAN GREEN

municating on the Internet isn't exactly like attending a town-hall meeting or a speech on the village green, it is not being alone either. It is being alone together, which will increasingly be a form of togetherness. Who is to say the Internet is not just the newest manifestation of the commonweal? "Thus, the most democratic country in the world," Tocqueville wrote, "now is that in which men have carried to the highest perfection the art of pursuing in common the objects of common desires." Sounds like ad copy for an Internet stock's initial public offering.

To some these days, volunteerism is so important that it's no longer voluntary. Many universities offer courses in which volunteering is part of the curriculum. At the University of San Diego, students majoring in juvenile justice must work as literacy tutors at the city's juvenile hall. At Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, a third of the 2,000 students are engaged in community-service programs. Gary Miller, Lafayette's chaplain, calls this a "quiet revolution." And it's not just today's university students who are becoming active. Once upon a time, university alumni groups might have met for martinis at the local country club, but in Chicago this year, graduates of Stanford, Williams, Kenyon, Carleton and Brandeis opted instead for an evening of work at a local food depository.

Not all of the new forms of civic engagement can be considered salutary for the republic. Many associations—gated suburbs and business-improvement districts, known as BIDs (which have their own police forces)—are driven in some respects by self-concerned fear. They represent a secession of a smaller, more privileged community from the larger one. The recently arrested Viper militia in Arizona fits Tocqueville's description of a classic American association: a small group of like-minded neighbors gathering together for a common purpose. In this case, the purpose was allegedly planning a violent assault on the government. The Southern Poverty Law Center has tracked some 800 militia and "patriot" groups, many of them formed in the past few years. Tocqueville would not be surprised to learn that America also leads the world in militia movements.

In a strange way, however, healthy and unhealthy forms of engagement may arise from similar causes. The increase in militia groups and the legislation proposed by Indiana Senator Dan Coats to promote volunteerism reflect, in their own ways, a frustration with government and a wariness of its reach. Which is why many scholars have expressed concern that Americans have been turning inward during the past 25 years. Putnam and others argue that such self-help groups as 12-step organizations and New Age religions have usurped and replaced outward-looking civic groups. In his book *Trust*, Francis Fukuyama says that the "rights revolution" of the 1970s and '80s undermined the country's sense of community. *I replaced we as the pronoun of choice. The Me decades supplanted the We century. There is no doubt that America's narcissism is showing. But ever since feminists asserted that the "personal is political," groups designed to remedy individual problems have branched out to solve larger and*

more political ones. The women's movement, which conservatives once derided as a form of mass penis envy, turned what was considered a personal grudge into 25 years of social policy. Who is to say what the political manifestations of the human-potential movement are? Group self-help sessions might just be the PTA meetings of the '90s.

The civic Cassandras are also off-base about the origins of America's social capital. Local barn raisings have never been strictly local. While many conservative thinkers have suggested that America's traditional associations sprang up like indigenous flowers from the soil of American goodness, the recent Oval Office handshakes serve as a reminder that Washington has always been a conspirator in grass-roots organizing. As sociologist Theda Skocpol has written, many of the U.S.'s most cherished volunteer associations, such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and Catholic Charities, worked side by side with government. Conservatives have lamented the fact that today's newest associations are often parochial, NIMBY-style protest groups. But even in the sepia-tinted past, many associations were formed in reaction to perceived injustice—we've just forgotten the original provocation.

The precursor of the PTA, the National Congress of Mothers, was formed in part to help push through laws for women's pensions. The American Legion lobbied for the G.I. Bill. "Organized civil society in the United States has never flourished apart from active government," Skocpol has written.

At first glance, the Bowling Alone thesis would seem to fit neatly with the post-'60s outlook of conservatives who believe an overweening central government is like a great tree whose shadow does not allow civic engagement to grow underneath it. But Putnam's thesis, as Nicholas Lemann wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly*, also has had an appeal for liberals exhausted from their battles to keep federal money flowing into their programs. A revival of civic engagement, Lemann pointed out,

doesn't require spending money or raising taxes, yet it satisfied the liberals' yearning for social activism. And it relieved both liberals and conservatives from having to focus on the fact that much of the so-called civic decline in America was caused by the deterioration of America's inner cities, a problem that has long eluded big bureaucratic solutions.

Liberals and conservatives who are busily rearranging the deck chairs of decline are missing a new reality—that Americans are redefining the forms and nature of their engagement. Robert Wuthnow, a Princeton sociology professor, suggests that Americans are eschewing large bureaucratic organizations like the Red Cross for smaller, flexible ones that fit their life-style. "Civic participation has become more diverse and loosely structured so people can move in and out of issues and organizations," he says. Tocqueville saw in the American character a divide between individualism and communitarianism. Americans today are still trying to find their way through that ancient divide. —With reporting by Ann Blackman/Washington, Jordan Bonfante/Los Angeles and Richard Woodbury/Denver

