

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Though some scholars might worry, it's still abundant on soccer fields and in 12-step meeting rooms

Essay by Ed Wojcicki

The Auburn Rotary Club disbanded last summer. The few remaining members were getting older and having trouble recruiting younger people. The club folded, a Springfield newspaper reported, “due to lack of interest.”

The collapse of Auburn’s Rotary would not surprise Harvard scholar Robert D. Putnam. He would see it as part of a larger, alarming trend. His extensive research shows that membership in traditional organizations is on the decline everywhere and that Americans are less engaged in their communities, attending church less frequently and voting less often. His concern is that such disengagement could spell trouble because the “social capital” produced by community associations and other forms of networking is necessary for a strong democracy.

But the real trouble is that Putnam, though widely quoted and acclaimed, might be wrong. The decline in association memberships may not be as detrimental to community life as he thinks. Putnam’s critics say his fundamental argument is off base because people in towns like Auburn are still connecting in ways that do not show up in club member counts or traditional survey research. Therefore, they argue, the basis for Putnam’s concern about the collapse of American communities is not sound.

With the jury still out on whether American “social capital” is collapsing, or just changing, people have good reasons not to be as pessimistic as Putnam.

“If we looked more carefully at the history of civic participation and the differences among generations,”

Michael Schudson writes in *The Good Citizen*, “we would have to abandon [Putnam’s] rhetoric of decline.”

Robert Samuelson of the *Washington Post* examined Putnam’s data and found increases, not decreases, in participation among several types of organizations, such as literary and arts groups, professional associations and sports clubs. “Americans mingle across racial, sexual, and ethnic lines more now than ever,” he wrote in 1996.

And Nicholas Lemann, in an article entitled “Kicking in Groups,” found that the number of U.S. Youth Soccer participants doubled in 10 years from 1.2 million to 2.4 million.

Schudson adds that millions of people now go to fitness centers, “often making friends and thereby developing an informal group life.” He believes people would not mention to researchers that they go to a fitness center as a form of association, whereas past generations would have listed the YMCA.

If Samuelson, Lemann and Schudson are correct that Americans’ activities are merely changing without affecting a general loss in overall interaction, then it becomes impossible to conclude, as Putnam does, that a decline in traditional group memberships means the impending breakdown of American communities.

Putnam first received national attention in 1995 after publishing a journal article titled “Bowling Alone.” He embellished his arguments last summer in a book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. His analysis blamed almost half of the decline of American communities on a “generational

change.” He found that today’s young adults are less engaged than their baby boomer parents, who, in turn, are less engaged than their parents. Putnam is especially fond of what he calls “the long civic generation,” people born between 1910 and 1940, who he says were remarkably active in their communities. Putnam also blames electronic entertainment, especially television, for about a fourth of the decline. He cites other factors as relatively minor, saying that pressures of time and money, including the rise of two-career families, along with social changes related to suburbanization, account for about 20 percent of the reasons American communities are collapsing.

But the emphasis on decline and collapse, many scholars say, is premature. Michael Dawson of the University of Chicago’s Center for Race, Politics and Culture thinks too little empirical evidence exists. He’s skeptical of research in which people report their own activities. So he’s going further. His research on race and civil society in several cities, including Chicago, is looking at cultural factors that influence growth and change. That kind of research, called ethnography, should enrich the debate about whether communities are declining or changing.

In some ways this is an old American debate. In the 1800s, Alexis de Tocqueville noted the strength America’s communities attained through their voluntary associations. Since then, scholars have continued to study American democracy through the lens of “civil society” or “civic culture.” Current research addresses not only associations and political participation,

but culture, philanthropy and volunteerism.

Even Putnam concedes that volunteerism by young people showed significant increases in the 1990s.

Evidence abounds in Illinois of new forms of engagement in communities. The Illinois Coalition for Community Services, according to its executive director Joe Dunn, is reaching into communities in isolated rural areas, poor neighborhoods and public housing to teach so-called "disempowered" individuals basic leadership and organizational skills. The coalition just completed a five-session program in DuQuoin, Dunn says, for 10 to 15 African Americans who are now trained to work on behalf of their community.

"Our job is to bring people together who haven't been involved in any kind of public advocacy," says Dunn, once the downstate director for former U.S. Sen. Paul Simon. Dunn hopes this project eventually reaches 130 communities and links newly empowered leaders from different regions of the state.

In addition to getting involved in traditional community organizing, citizens are connecting with their communities through the Internet. A new Web site initiated by the Putnam-led Saguario Project at Harvard, www.bettertogether.org, already cites dozens of stories, including three from Illinois. One is about the Citizen Advocacy Center in DuPage County, which creates a program to help people learn such basic tools of civic engagement as writing to elected officials and obtaining information under the Freedom of Information Act. Another is about a project called Imagine Chicago, which provides modest start-up funds to individuals trying to make positive changes in their neighborhoods.

Illinois businesses also are trying new

ways to encourage their employees to be involved in civic affairs. Some are making new corporate contributions to nonprofit organizations where their employees volunteer, and others are giving time off to employees who work together on special community projects.

One issue that arises quickly in discussions about citizen involvement is voter participation. Four years ago, Americans endured a civic hand slapping for producing the lowest voter turnout in any presidential election in history. But last November, according to the Illinois State Board of Elections, 69 percent of Illinoisans voted, an increase from 66 percent in 1996. That

"America's Promise" and the 10-year-old Points of Light Foundation have been successful in emphasizing what individuals can do to help communities. Further, a project of the National Civic League put out a list of 100 things anybody can do for his or her community in the new millennium (see www.ncl.org). And the Saguario Project, in its final report released in December, introduces a list of 100 ways to build social capital. It stops at 79 and invites people to add their own creative ideas.

Despite the rhetoric about citizen cynicism and a decline of social trust in our major institutions, individuals in many places still believe they can make a difference. They don't have to join a group permanently. They only need, as longtime activist Monsignor John Egan of Chicago suggests, to say yes to a commitment when asked. Asking is important, he adds, and so is putting a time limit on the commitment. That may be one of the biggest differences in civic involvement today as compared to a generation ago: a commitment of short duration for a specified project rather than a lifetime commitment to an organization.

In towns and cities such as Auburn and Chicago, people may not be trekking to the weekly Rotary luncheons as religiously as they used to. But that does not mean social capital is declining; it might just suggest that baby boomers and their children have different lifestyles than their parents did.

If those younger people can't be found in the old Elks building on the town square, try the local soccer field. Or look in the gym where girls and boys have more opportunities to learn about dancing and volleyball. Or look in a deli, a microbrewery or one of the hundreds of 12-step meetings that occur every night.

That's where social and civic activities clearly are changing. So, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the demise of an engaged American citizenry may be greatly exaggerated. □

CHICAGO CONFERENCE



The Illinois Civic Engagement Project will host a conference March 6 at the Hyatt Regency in Chicago. E.J. Dionne of the *Washington Post* will be the keynote speaker.

Project organizers will release the results of statewide research about Illinoisans' involvement in their communities and an assessment of why they become engaged or disengaged. They'll also release some "action steps" for building or maintaining civic engagement at the local level.

The conference is designed for representatives of government, business and nonprofits.

Illinois Issues is a co-sponsor of the project, along with the United Way of Illinois, with assistance from the Institute for Public Affairs and the Donors Forum of Chicago. Financial assistance will be provided by Capterillar Inc., State Farm Insurance, the Woods Fund of Chicago and the McCormick Tribune Foundation.

To register, see the ad on page 37 in this issue, or go to the Web site: civic.uis.edu.

should produce a glimmer of hope for those who like to see the civic engagement glass as half full.

Beyond Illinois are high-profile examples of Americans' passion for interacting with one another. Richard Harwood and colleagues at the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation have concluded that the kinds of changes Americans want in their communities must start not with legislative fixes or grand schemes, but with individuals. Indeed, Colin Powell's