July 2005 · Volume 87 · Number 6

COVER STORY

A New Movement for Civic Renewal

by Robert Putnam

Revolutionary times call for revolutionary thinking. For the past generation, the ways in which Americans live, work, and play have been dramatically transformed. Increasingly, we live alone, work late, and entertain ourselves by staring at television or computer screens. We spend less time in groups-with family, friends, neighbors, or fellow club members. We are less trusting, less civic-minded, and less participatory in the affairs of public life. We don't like what we've become, and now, growing numbers of us are ready and eager to embark on a national journey of civic renewal. It is time for individual and institutional innovation.

Mindful of our increasingly fast-paced, mobile, and technology- driven lives, today's civic reformers must focus also on building informal networks of people to bridge the divides of race, class, and geography.

America did not reach this state of civic crisis overnight; nor will we rebuild a civic community in a day, a week, or a year. But great strides always begin with small steps. One by one, we need to emerge from our cocoons of individualism and indifference. Just as the Salvation Army was founded to "save one soul at a time," we call on every American to make just one change in his or her life that will contribute to the commonwealth. These individual actions will quickly multiply into a great spiritual and moral force for rebuilding social capital in America.

An Approach to Rebuilding

The causes of America's civic declines are many, and we therefore have advocated a multipronged approach to reversing this deterioration. We have focused on five categories of institutions to generate broad social and political change.

1. Employers should allow their space to be used for forums, association meetings, and civic skill building; allow expanded leave for civic and family purposes; provide employees with greater flexibility in work hours; and focus corporate philanthropy and community relations efforts on building social capital, especially across socioeconomic groups.

2. Arts organizations should strengthen their role as occupants of civic spaces, emphasizing community-based productions and citizen dialogue about important issues; ought to collaborate across artistic disciplines and ethnic traditions; should take center stage in community planning and social problem

solving; and would do well to offer their unique services to other community organizations working to build social capital.

3. Government and elected officials must help revive and support intermediary institutions linking citizens to the state; reform the campaign finance system so that participation matters more than money; provide incentives for citizens to discuss how to make public agencies work better; develop smart-growth strategies to revive community life; foster innovative programs to reward civic participation and make it habit-forming; finance local efforts to use technology for networking and community building; and review legislative and administrative decisions (past and future) to understand more fully their role in building or depleting our nation's stock of social capital.

4. Faith-based organizations should step up their efforts to collaborate with one another and with nonreligious institutions (including government) on pressing social problems; to provide leadership in bridging cultural and ideological divides; and to use their moral authority to promote civic salons and civic participation among congregants.

5. Youth organizations, schools, and families should redouble their support for expanding community service, leadership opportunities, and extracurricular activities for young people; for reducing class sizes to maximize youth participation; for teaching civics in a way that engages real-world issues; for reengaging high school dropouts; for rewarding mentors and young people who take part in community life; and for providing social capital-rich alternatives to television, computers, and video games.

Every American, and every American institution, has a unique role to play. The task of regenerating social capital will succeed only if each one of us, as private citizens and as leaders of institutions, leverages our particular talents and positions toward civic ends. Of course, there are millions of ways in which individuals can make their own lives and communities richer in social capital. We can have friends over more often, hold more block parties, start a reading group, even found a civic organization. Without individual dedication, social capital (especially the informal sort) will continue to dissipate.

We want to focus briefly on one especially hopeful sign-the possible advent of a new "Greatest Generation." As often happens in the immediate aftermath of community crises from hurricanes to snow storms, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, produced among all Americans a powerful surge of community-mindedness. Unfortunately, among most Americans this increase in community engagement melted away almost as fast as a late spring snowfall, leaving us back on the same downward trajectory.

We don't like what we've become, and now, growing numbers of us are ready and eager to embark on a national journey of civic renewal.

But among younger Americans-those in high school and college on 9/11-the upsurge in community involvement and interest in public affairs has not faded. By now, several independent studies show that the 30-year decline in youth civic engagement has over the past four to five years been reversed. A three-decade trend cannot be declared ended after only a few years, but this evidence is a most welcome harbinger perhaps of a newfound respect for the values of public service.

Institutions, Networks, and Values

However, as important as individual action is, whether by boomers or others, we have chosen to focus on networks and institutions-private, public, and nonprofit-because we believe that wholesale social change is not possible unless individuals work together in structured and ongoing ways-precisely what networks and institutions offer.

Each type of major institution has a unique role to play. Corporations and other employers can foster social capital inside their walls-where most Americans spend their days-and institute policies that make it easier for employees to get away from work to participate in their communities. Religious leaders have the advantage of a spiritual doctrine and moral authority, which can be used to repair broken community bonds.

Schools and youth organizations have the unique opportunity to influence a whole new generation of Americans before it is too late-an especially important task, given that generational succession is the major cause of the current state of affairs. Arts organizations have the special advantage of providing creative, fun, and powerfully moving ways to rebuild social capital.

And, of course, government, with its vast spending and decision- making authority, and elected officials, with their powerful bully pulpits, can influence society on a scale that is hard for private organizations and individuals to match. Some burgeoning movements for social, economic, and political reform promise also to strengthen our bonds of trust and to spur greater civic participation.

The growing backlash against big chain stores and suburban sprawl is rooted in a belief that mom-and-pop shops and vibrant town centers are civic resources. The movement for charter schools is partly about enhancing parents' engagement in their children's education.

We have called for a new period of civic renaissance, harking back to a century ago, when a broad array of civic-minded reformers coming from diverse backgrounds and political ideologies devised a new set of institutions to replace those that industrialization and urbanization had rendered ineffectual or even obsolete.

Today's movement for civic renewal might involve both the forming of new institutions-such as the community service corps that began to spring up in the

1980s-and the reinvigoration of existing organizations. Mindful of our increasingly fast-paced, mobile, and technology-driven lives, today's civic reformers must focus also on building informal networks of people to bridge the divides of race, class, and geography.

Artists might be linked to urban schools, for example, to produce plays about community life. Suburban entrepreneurs might be linked to displaced blue-collar workers to help them navigate the unsettling seas of the new economy. Congregations might join in partnerships with social-service agencies to help families in crisis. Families might emerge from their cocoons to join with environmental engineers in cleaning up neglected areas.

There are many important similarities between today and the Progressive Era of a century ago, similarities that give us hope that civic renewal is not an impossible dream. But there are important differences as well. For one, many more American women are, by choice or necessity, in the full-time paid workforce and thus without the time that their foremothers had to devote to community work. The data suggest that this transformation has had a smaller influence than many people imagine on the quantity of women's civic work.

But it is nonetheless important to recognize that the civic demands on women must be tailored to meet their new, busier schedules. Likewise, in keeping with changing gender roles in the labor market and the family, the Saguaro Seminar participants (see box) call upon men to commit themselves to what 100 years ago was largely "women's work": the various social and civic reform activities labeled "municipal housekeeping." As women share the productive work once dominated by male wage-earners, men must share the civic work once dominated by female volunteers.

Saguaro Seminar

The Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America is an ongoing initiative of Professor Robert D. Putnam at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The project focuses on expanding what we know about our levels of trust, social connectedness, and community engagement and focuses on strategies to increase this engagement. A signature effort was the multi-year dialogue on how we can increasingly build bonds of civic trust among Americans and their communities. The Seminar is currently undertaking research on the workplace and social capital, religion and social capital, and the inter-relation of diversity, equality, and social capital.

For more information on the Saguaro Seminar and on "social capital," visit the Saguaro Web site at http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro.

Another major change of the past 100 years has been the ascendance of multiculturalism as a core democratic value. While America has always been a nation of immigrants and hence has always been multicultural, the multiculturalism model of the Progressive Era was white, middle-class Protestant reformers' helping newcomers to assimilate to white, middle-class Protestant values.

Today, white, middle-class Protestants do not monopolize the positions of power, and the nation's value system places greater emphasis on preserving and managing underlying cultural differences. To be successful, today's efforts to build social capital must complement, rather than challenge, the prevailing standards. That is, "bonding" social capital is unlikely to find fertile ground if it appears self-consciously exclusive, and "bridging" social capital is unlikely to flourish if it appears to give privilege to one set of cultural norms over another.

The High-Tech Life and Its Demands on Community

The last major change-and perhaps the most profound of all-is the revolution in technology. One hundred years ago, Americans traveled mostly by horse-drawn carriage, were just beginning to communicate by telephone, learned about public affairs from local newspapers and local notables, and entertained themselves on front stoops, at church halls, and in opera houses.

Today, we travel by automobile and airplane, communicate through e-mail and in electronic "chat rooms," learn about public affairs from television ads and direct-mail alerts, and entertain ourselves by watching "reality TV" and playing hand-held video games. Technology makes our world faster and smaller, but it also makes our connections to one another more sporadic, tenuous, and remote.

Whether technology, with its myriad manifestations, will end up being a boon to social capital or a drain is open to question. Some research finds that the Internet is socially isolating, while other research finds no evidence of a socially isolating effect. The real trick will be to figure out innovative ways to use cyber-technology to foster real, face-to-face communities.

Beyond the Internet's effect, the sheer pace at which many of us live our lives seems to militate against the relaxed, guilt-free "schmoozing time" on which the nation's stock of social capital depends-the stereotypical chat over the backyard fence on a warm summer's eve. By cutting the costs of travel and communication, however, technology allows us to form and maintain relationships with people who might not otherwise be a part of our lives.

It is now less expensive to call or visit distant friends and family members, and e-mail enables people nationwide and globally to develop "virtual communities" united by shared interests. Whatever hodgepodge of effects technology is having on social capital, technological innovation will be a growing part of Americans' lives and communities.

Robert Putnam will be a keynote speaker at ICMA's 91st Annual Conference, Minneapolis/Hennepin County, Minnesota, September 25-28, 2005.

And so, any effort to boost our stock of social capital will have to harness the immense power of technology: television, computers, satellites, and so forth. There are a few hopeful technological developments like craigslist.org or meetup.com where the Internet is used to reinforce face-to-face ties, but the lion's share of venture capital funds the start-ups that would draw Americans away from community (Internet entertainment, e-shopping, and so forth). We must redouble our efforts to find creative ways to capitalize on technology's potential to bring more of us together, while curbing its potential to strand us in the anonymous ether of cyberspace.

Because of changes in values, demographics, and lifestyles, the job of 21st-century Americans is not precisely the same as the job that faced our predecessors at the turn of the last century. But there are broad similarities. Like them, we must rebuild community amid rapid social change and profound cultural differences among peoples.

Like them, we must find ways to instill greater trust in our civic capacities, in one another, and in our governing institutions. Like theirs, our task is likely to require thousands of local experiments led by visionary reformers, working through both voluntary action and paid positions. And, like theirs, our task is likely to require a wholesale shift in orientation on the part of everyday folks, in which millions of Americans engage less in passive entertainment and reconnect more with those around them.

Perhaps, the greatest lesson of the first Progressive Era is that small changes in habits and attitudes, and seemingly simple innovations, can have a profound and long-lasting effect on large, complicated societies. Few people could have foreseen the revolutionary impact of such Progressive inventions as direct electoral primaries, kindergartens, playgrounds, and ethnic fraternal organizations. The lightning speed with which information and innovation spread in today's media-and-computer age only promises to magnify the effects of otherwise isolated efforts. The challenge to all of us is to leverage new technologies for civic ends.

Concluding Thoughts from the Saguaro Seminar

The Saguaro Seminar invites everyone to join the movement for civic revitalization. For our part, the Saguaro group is moving forward on a number of fronts:

- Social capital on the Web. We believe that the Internet is a wonderful forum for sharing ideas on how individuals and institutions have successfully built social capital in their local areas. We have designed a Web site (www.BetterTogether.org) where citizens can read about innovative ideas, communicate with others about successful examples of social capital building, and post their own ideas on what has worked.
- Taking stock of America's social capital. In partnership with community foundations, the Seminar undertook the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey to quantify levels of social capital in some 36 localities and states that together compose nearly one-quarter of the U.S. population. The foundations are using the data to gauge changes in social capital over time, to assess the civic strengths and weaknesses in their particular communities, and to inform new projects for building or spotlighting social capital.

We urge the leaders of today's institutions to take full advantage of these new social capital resources. And we urge everyone to take bold new steps into the civic life of their communities. We can only imagine where this exciting movement for civic renewal will lead.

Robert Putnam is the Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy and director of the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. He also is author of the books *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community* and *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*.

This article is reprinted with permission from the *Saguaro Report*, a collaborative report prepared by participants in the Saguaro Seminar.