Civic Participation

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. . . . Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.¹

These lines from Alexis de Tocqueville, a perceptive French visitor to early-nineteenth-century America, are often quoted by social scientists because they capture an important and enduring fact about our country. Today, as 170 years ago, Americans are more likely to be involved in voluntary associations than are citizens of most other nations; only the small nations of northern Europe outrank us as joiners.²

The ingenuity of Americans in creating organizations knows no bounds. Wading through the *World Almanac* list of 2,580 groups with some national visibility from the Aaron Burr Society to the Zionist Organization of America, one discovers such intriguing bodies as the Grand United Order of Antelopes, the Elvis Presley Burning Love Fan Club, the Polish Army Veterans Association of America, the Southern Appalachian Dulcimer Association, and the National Association for Outlaw and Lawman History. Some of these groups may be the organizational equivalent of vanity press publications, but surveys of American communities over the decades have uncovered an impressive organizational vitality at the grassroots level. Many Americans today are actively involved in educational or school service groups like PTAs, recreational groups, work-related groups, such as labor unions and professional organizations, religious groups (in addition to churches), youth groups, service and fraternal clubs, neighborhood or homeowners groups, and other charitable organizations. Generally speaking, this same array of organizational affiliations has characterized Americans since at least the 1950s.³

Official membership in formal organizations is only one facet of social capital, but it is usually regarded as a useful barometer of community involvement. What can we learn from organizational records and social surveys about Americans’ participation in the organized life of their communities? Broadly speaking, American voluntary associations may be divided into three categories: community based, church based, and work based. Let us begin with the most heterogeneous, all those social, civic, and leisure groups that are community based—everything from B’nai B’rith to the Parent-Teacher Association.

The record appears to show an impressive increase in the sheer number of voluntary associations over the last three decades. The number of nonprofit organizations of national scope listed in the *Encyclopedia of Associations* more than doubled from 10,299 to 22,901 between 1968 and 1997. Even taking account of the increase in population during this period, the number of national organizations per capita has increased by nearly two-thirds over the last three decades (see figure 7). Excited by this fact, some observers speak, perhaps too hastily, of a "participation revolution" in American politics and society. This impression of a rapid growth in American organizational life is reinforced—but also qualified—by numerous recent studies of the explosion of interest groups represented in Washington since the 1960s. What these studies reveal is ever more groups speaking (or claiming to speak) on behalf of ever more categories of citizens.⁴

In fact, relatively few of the tens of thousands of nonprofit associations whose proliferation is traced in figure 7 actually have mass membership. Many, such as the Animal Nutrition Research Council, the National Conference on Uniform Traffic Accident Statistics, and the National Slag Association, have no individual members at all. A close student of associations in America, David Horton Smith, found that barely half of the groups in the 1988 *Encyclopedia of Associations* actually had individual members. The median membership of national associations in the 1988 *Encyclopedia* was only one thousand. A comparable study of associations represented in the 1962 *Encyclopedia of Associations* had found a median size of roughly ten thousand members.⁵ In other words, over this quarter century the number of voluntary associations roughly tripled, but the average membership seems to be roughly one-tenth as large—more groups, but most of them much smaller. The organizational eruption between the 1960s and the 1990s represented a proliferation of letterheads, not a boom of grassroots participation.

Also revealing is the increasing geographic concentration of national
headquarters. Membership organizations with local chapters and substantial grassroots activity are headquartered in places like Irving, Texas (Boy Scouts); New Haven, Connecticut (Knights of Columbus); Indianapolis, Indiana (American Legion and Kiwanis); Birmingham, Alabama (Civitan); Tulsa, Oklahoma (Jaycees); Oak Brook, Illinois (Lions Clubs); St. Louis, Missouri (Optimists); Baltimore, Maryland (NAACP); Kansas City, Missouri (the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Camp Fire Boys and Girls); Atlanta, Georgia (Boys and Girls Clubs); or even New York City (Hadassah and Alcoholics Anonymous). These venerable organizations are headquartered near important concentrations of their members.

The headquarters of the nation's largest organization and one of the most rapidly growing, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), however, is not in Florida or California or Arizona (where its constituents are concentrated), but at 6th and E Streets in Washington, a few minutes' walk from Capitol Hill. Similarly, the most visible newcomers to the national association scene are headquartered within ten blocks of the intersection of 14th and K Streets in Washington: the Children's Defense Fund, Common Cause, the National Organization for Women, the National Wildlife Federation, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Wilderness Society, the National Right to Life Committee, and Zero Population Growth. The "new associationism" is almost entirely a denizen of the Washington hothouse. The proliferating new organizations are professionally staffed advocacy organizations, not member-centered, locally based associations. The newer groups focus on expressing policy views in the national political debate, not on providing regular connection among individual members at the grass roots.

Though these new groups often depend on financial support from ordinary citizens and may speak faithfully on their behalf, they are not really composed of citizen members in the same sense that a church congregation or a reading group or a fraternal organization is. One distinctive feature of a social-capital-creating formal organization is that it includes local chapters in which members can meet one another. Of eighty-three public-interest groups in the early 1970s (including virtually all such organizations at the national level, from the Agribusiness Accountability Project to Zero Population Growth and from the American Civil Liberties Union and Common Cause to the Liberty Lobby and Young Americans for Freedom), two-thirds had no local chapters at all, and another 12 percent had no more than twenty-five chapters nationwide, or an average of one for every two states. Only nine of the eighty-three groups had as many as one hundred local chapters nationwide. By way of comparison, there are seven thousand local Rotary chapters in America, to take a typical "old-fashioned," chapter-based civic organization. In other words, Rotary alone has nearly twice as many chapters as all eighty-three public-interest groups combined.

Another survey of 205 national "citizens groups" in 1985 confirmed that less than one-third of them had chapters to which individual members belonged and paid dues. Moreover, the more recently founded the citizens group, the less likely it was to be chapter based, so that among all citizens' groups founded after 1965, barely one in four had chapters with individual members. These are mailing list organizations, in which membership means essentially contributing money to a national office to support a cause. Membership in the newer groups means moving a pen, not making a meeting.

These new mass-membership organizations are plainly of growing political importance. Probably the most dramatic example is the AARP, which grew from four hundred thousand card-carrying members in 1960 to thirty-three million in the mid-1990s. But membership in good standing in the AARP requires only a few seconds annually—as long as it takes to sign a check. The AARP is politically significant, but it demands little of its members' energies and contributes little to their social capital. Less than 10 percent of the AARP's members belong to local chapters, and according to AARP staff, the organization's grassroots activities were on life support even during the period of maximum membership growth. In many respects, such organizations have more in common with mail-order commercial organizations than with old-fashioned face-to-face associations. Some of the new organizations actually have their roots in commercial ventures. The AARP, for example, was originally founded
as a mail-order insurance firm. Similarly, although the American Automobile Association has the form of an association with members, it is essentially a commercial organization, providing services in exchange for fees.

The national administrators of such organizations are among the most feared lobbyists in Washington, in large part because of their massive mailing lists. Ironically, group involvement with government has exploded at the same time that citizen involvement with both government and groups has diminished. To be sure, political representation is not a new role for voluntary associations. Among the most energetic examples of voluntary association in American history are the abolitionist and temperance movements of the early nineteenth century. Much of the best (as well as some of the worst) in our current national politics is embodied in those advocacy organizations around 14th and K Streets.

From the point of view of social connectedness, however, the new organizations are sufficiently different from classic “secondary associations” that we need to invent a new label—perhaps “tertiary associations.” For the vast majority of their members, the only act of membership consists in writing a check for dues or perhaps occasionally reading a newsletter. Few ever attend any meetings of such organizations—many never have meetings at all—and most members are unlikely ever knowingly to encounter any other member. The bond between any two members of the National Wildlife Federation or the National Rifle Association is less like the bond between members of a gardening club or prayer group and more like the bond between two Yankee fans on opposite coasts (or perhaps two devoted L. L. Bean catalog users): they share some of the same interests, but they are unaware of each other’s existence. Their ties are to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but not to each other.

So the vigor of the new Washington-based organizations, though they are large, proliferating, and powerful, is an unreliable guide to the vitality of social connectedness and civic engagement in American communities. Several illustrations may clarify.

According to the Encyclopedia of Associations, the number of independent veterans’ organizations nearly tripled between 1980 and 1997. This was the single most vigorous sector of organizational growth during this period, at least measured by numbers of organizations. In fact, however, careful national surveys over this same period show that the rate of membership in veterans’ organizations among American men and women fell by roughly 10 percent. This slump is not surprising, since the number of living veterans fell by 9 percent across these same eighteen years. Explosive growth of organizations claiming to speak on behalf of veterans coincided with declining involvement by veterans. Similarly, the number of trade unions cataloged in the Encyclopedia of Associations grew by 4 percent between 1980 and 1997, while the fraction of employees belonging to unions plummeted by more than 35 percent. More organizations do not mean more members.

Environmental organizations have been among the growth stocks in the associational world over the last several decades. In tracking the expansion of several of the most dynamic associations, we noted several periods of rapid growth, presumably reflecting major shifts in grassroots engagement with environmental issues. Probing further reveals that mail-order “membership” turns out to be a poor measure of civic engagement. For example, membership in the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) tripled from one hundred thousand in 1988 to three hundred thousand in 1995. EDF officials, however, attribute this breathtaking expansion to “better marketing efforts,” including a switch to “front-end prospecting” (providing a free gift to nonmembers and then asking for a donation) instead of “back-end prospecting” (sending the gifts after donations have been received). Greenpeace became the largest environmental organization in America, accounting for more than one-third of all members in national environmental groups at its peak in 1990, through an extremely aggressive direct-mail program. At that point Greenpeace leaders, concerned about the spectacle of an environmental group printing tons of junk mail, temporarily cut back on direct-mail solicitation. Almost immediately their membership began to hemorrhage, and by 1998 Greenpeace membership had plummeted by 85 percent.

Trends in numbers of voluntary associations nationwide are not a reliable guide to trends in social capital, especially for associations that lack a structure of local chapters in which members can actually participate. What evidence can we glean from organizations that do involve their members directly in community-based activity? The membership rolls of such associations across the twentieth century reveal a strikingly parallel pattern across many different civic associations. This pattern is summarized in figure 8, which is a composite of the changing membership rates for thirty-two diverse national, chapter-based organizations throughout the twentieth century, ranging from B’nai B’rith and the Knights of Columbus to the Elks club and the Parent-Teacher Association. In each case we measure membership as a fraction of the pool of members in the population—4-H membership as a fraction of all rural youth, Hadassah membership as a fraction of all Jewish women, and so on. Embodied in the broad outline are a number of crucial facts about associational life in American communities throughout the twentieth century.

For most of the twentieth century growing numbers of Americans were involved in such chapter-based associations. Of course, the U.S. population was growing, too, but our analysis here eliminates that inflation factor by considering the membership rate as a percentage of the relevant population. So the
long upward wave in this figure reflects the fact that more and more women belonged to women's clubs, more rural residents belonged to the Grange, more youths belonged to the Scouts, more Jews belonged to Hadassah and B'nai B'rith, and more men belonged to service clubs. Probably one important factor in this steady growth was the continuing rise in educational levels, but in the aggregate the increase in membership exceeded that. As the decades passed, America seemed more and more to fit Toqueville's description.

The sharp dip in this generally rising line of civic involvement in the 1930s is evidence of the traumatic impact of the Great Depression on American communities. The membership records of virtually every adult organization in this sample bear the scars of that period. In some cases the effect was a brief pause in ebullient growth, but in others the reversal was extraordinary. Membership in the League of Women Voters, for example, was cut in half between 1930 and 1935, as was membership in the Elks, the Moose, and the Knights of Columbus. This period of history underlines the effects of acute economic distress on civic engagement, a topic to which we shall return in chapter 11.

Most of these losses had been recouped, however, by the early 1940s. World War II occasioned a massive outpouring of patriotism and collective solidarity. At war's end those energies were redirected into community life. The two decades following 1945 witnessed one of the most vital periods of community involvement in American history. As a fraction of potential membership, the "market share" for these thirty-two organizations skyrocketed. Because of growing population, the increase was even more dramatic. The breadth of this civic explosion encompassed virtually every organization on the list, from "old-fashioned" ones like the Grange and the Elks (roughly a century old in the 1960s) to the newer service clubs like the Lions and the League of Women Voters (roughly four decades old in the 1960s).

By the late 1950s, however, this burst of community involvement began to tail off, even though absolute membership continued to rise for a while. By the late 1960s and early 1970s membership growth began to fall further behind population growth. At first, club secretaries long accustomed to announcing new membership records with monotonous annual regularity did not notice that their organizations were failing to keep pace with population growth. As the decline deepened, however, absolute membership began to slip and then to plummet. By century's close the massive postwar boom in membership rates in these organizations had been eliminated.

On average, across all these organizations, membership rates began to plateau in 1957, peaked in the early 1960s, and then began the period of sustained decline by 1969. On average, membership rates more than doubled between 1940–45 and the peak and were slightly less than halved between the peak and 1997. These averages conceal some important differences among the experience of the various organizations. For example, the effects of the Great Depression varied from organization to organization, with massive declines in the Masons and Hadassah, while membership in youth organizations like the 4-H, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts seems to have been immune to the economic distress affecting adults. The postwar boom appears in virtually every case, but for the Grange and the General Federation of Women's Clubs the good times had ended by the mid-1950s, whereas other organizations, like Rotary and Optimists, remained on a higher plateau until the 1980s. NAACP membership spiked sharply during World War II, collapsed in the early 1950s, regained its highest levels in the early 1960s, and then stagnated and slumped again from the 1970s onward. These organizational peculiarities remind us that behind each of these membership declines are scores of individual tales of leadership success and failure, organizational tenacity and strategic blunders, and the vicissitudes of social life and politics.

One useful illustration is provided by the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). In the middle years of the twentieth century the local PTA was among the most common of community organizations. For example, one grassroots survey of associational membership in the early 1960s found that the PTA had more members than any other secular organization. More than one in every six adult Nebraskans reported membership in their local PTA. That the absolute number of PTA members was relatively high during the baby boom is, of course, no surprise at all—more parents, more PTA members. What is more
striking, however, is that the percentage of parents nationwide who joined the PTA more than doubled between 1945 and 1960, continuing the vertiginous and almost uninterrupted growth of this organization since its founding in 1910. On average, every year throughout the quarter century up to 1960 another 1.6 percent of all American families with kids—more than 400,000 families a year—was added to the PTA membership rolls. Year after year, more and more parents became involved in this way in their children's education.

The reversal of six decades of organizational growth—captured graphically in figure 9—came with shocking suddenness in 1960. When the subsequent decline finally leveled off two decades later, membership in the PTA had returned to the level of 1943, utterly erasing the postwar gains. A brief rebound in the 1980s had all but vanished by the late 1990s. On average, every year throughout the quarter century after 1960 another 1.2 percent of all American families with kids—more than 250,000 families a year—dropped out of the PTA. The best recent study of the PTA concludes that membership declined from a high in the early 1960s of almost fifty members per 100 families with children under eighteen to fewer than twenty members per 100 families with children under eighteen in the early 1980s. Although participation rebounded somewhat in the 1980s and the early 1990s, the organization never recaptured its membership heights of the late 1950s and early 1960s. [Recently the organization has experienced renewed decline.] Between 1990 and 1997, the PTA lost half a million members, even though the number of families with children under eighteen grew by over 2 million and public school enrollment grew by over 5 million.\textsuperscript{19}

The explosive growth of the PTA was one of the most impressive organizational success stories in American history, its unabated, almost exponential growth over the first six decades of the twentieth century interrupted with only the briefest of pauses during the Great Depression and for a single year during World War II. This success—membership encompassing eventually nearly half the families in America—was due no doubt to the fact that this form of connectedness appealed to millions of parents who wanted to be engaged in some way in their children's education. It is easy in our cynical era to sneer at cookies, cider, and small talk, but membership in the PTA betokened a commitment to participate in a practical, child-focused form of community life.

Yet the PTA's collapse in the last third of the century is no less sensational than its earlier growth. What could account for this dramatic turnaround? Some part of the decline in rates of membership in the PTA is an optical illusion. Parental involvement in local school service organizations (not all of which are affiliated with the national Parent-Teacher Association) did not fall as rapidly as membership in PTA-affiliated groups. First, during the 1970s, following disagreements about school politics, as well as about national dues, some local parent-teacher organizations disaffiliated from the national PTA either to join competing organizations or to remain wholly independent. As a result, many of the missing local PTAs reappeared as local PTOs (parent-teacher organizations unaffiliated with the national PTA), although many of these new independent local associations themselves subsequently withered. Moreover, bitter battles over school desegregation in the 1960s caused wholesale disaffiliation from the national PTA in several southern states. While a genuine organizational loss, this development may not have marked the withdrawal of southern parents from the organizational life of local schools. Nevertheless, after accounting for all these specific gains and losses, it is reasonably clear that parental participation in parent-teacher groups of all sorts suffered a substantial decline in the decades after 1960.\textsuperscript{20} One need not romanticize PTA meetings of the 1950s to recognize that many Americans nowadays are less involved with their kids' education.

No doubt diligent detective work would turn up equally interesting and nuanced stories behind each of the plunging memberships, but the common features across these very diverse organizations—rapid growth to the 1960s, abruptly halted, followed by rapid decline—is a significant piece in the mosaic of evidence on changing civic involvement in American communities. Even after we had explored the details of each organization's rise and decline, we
would be left with the remarkable fact that each of these organizations—very different from one another in its constituency, age, and leadership—seems to have entered rough water at about the same time in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

In two important respects, however, membership figures for individual organizations are an uncertain guide to trends in Americans' involvement in voluntary associations. First, the popularity of specific groups may wax and wane quite independently of the general level of community engagement. Even though our historical analysis so far has cast as wide a net as possible in terms of different types of organizations, it is certainly possible that newer, more dynamic organizations have escaped our scrutiny. If so, the picture of decline that we have traced may apply only to "old-fashioned" organizations, not to all community-based organizations. As sociologist Tom Smith has observed, "Ultimately, if we want to know whether group membership in general has been increasing [or decreasing], we have to study group membership in general."

Second, formal "card-carrying" membership may not accurately reflect actual involvement in community activities. An individual who "belongs to" half a dozen community groups may actually be active in none. What really matters from the point of view of social capital and civic engagement is not merely nominal membership, but active and involved membership. To address these two issues, we need to turn from formal organizational records to social surveys, which can encompass organizational affiliations of all sorts and can distinguish formal membership from actual involvement.

Several reviews of national surveys conducted between the early 1950s and the early 1970s found evidence of steady and sustained growth in organizational memberships of all sorts, but other scholars have questioned whether changes in survey wording might undermine this conclusion. In other words, subtle shifts in the lens of our social time-lapse camera may have sufficiently blurred the successive images that we cannot be sure about the trends during the 1950s and 1960s. However, in 1957 a team of University of Michigan researchers conducted a careful nationwide survey on behalf of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), and in 1976 a group led by one of the earlier researchers replicated the 1957 study, taking great care to make the studies as nearly identical as possible. The first wave of surveys was carried out roughly a decade before what organizational records suggest was the postwar peak of civic engagement, whereas the second was conducted roughly a decade after the peak.

In many respects, the Michigan-NIMH study found considerable stability in the life experiences of Americans across these two turbulent decades. Nevertheless, one of their central findings was a "reduced integration of American adults into the social structure." Over these two decades informal socializing with friends and relatives declined by about 10 percent, organizational memberships fell by 16 percent, and church attendance (a topic that we shall address more directly in a moment) declined by 20 percent. Examined more closely, these surveys found significant declines in membership in unions; church groups; fraternal and veterans organizations; civic groups, such as PTAs; youth groups; charities; and a catch-all "other" category. Thus the best available survey evidence is consistent with the organizational record that membership in voluntary associations among ordinary Americans declined modestly between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s.

For the years after the mid-1970s, the survey evidence becomes substantially richer, and our judgments about trends in this quarter century can be fuller and more confident. Three major survey archives contain relevant information: the General Social Survey (GSS), the Roper Social and Political Trends archive, and the DDB Needham Life Style archive. How has group membership in general changed over the last quarter century? The GSS provides the most comprehensive measure of trends in Americans' formal membership in many different types of groups. The short answer is that formal membership rates have not changed much, at least if we ignore rising educational levels. The percentage of the public who claim formal membership in at least one organization has fallen a bit, but that trend has been glacial so far, from a little less than 75 percent in the mid-1970s to a little less than 70 percent in the early 1990s. Membership in church-related groups, labor unions, fraternal organizations, and veterans groups has declined, but this decline has been mostly offset by increases in professional, ethnic, service, hobby, sports, school fraternity, and other groups. To be sure, the only substantial increase is in the domain of professional organizations, and as we shall see later, that growth has barely kept pace with occupational growth in the professions themselves. If we take into account the rise in educational levels in this period—on the assumption that many more Americans nowadays have the skills and interests that traditionally brought people into civic life—the overall declines are more marked. Among college graduates, for example, organizational membership has declined by roughly 30 percent, while among high school dropouts the decline has been roughly the same. Nevertheless, the net decline in formal organizational membership is modest at best.

This ambiguous conclusion, however, is drastically altered when we examine evidence on more active forms of participation than mere card-carrying membership. Service as an organizational officer or committee member is very common among active members of American organizations. In 1987, 61 percent of all organization members had served on a committee at some time or another, and 46 percent had served as an officer. Among self-described "active" members—roughly half of the adult population—73 percent had served at some time as a committee member, 58 percent had served at some time as an officer, and only 21 percent had never served as either an officer or a commit-
te member. Sooner or later, in short, the overwhelming majority of active members in most voluntary associations in America are coaxed into playing some leadership role in the organization.

How has the number of Americans who fit this bill changed over the last few decades? Between 1973 and 1994 the number of men and women who took any leadership role in any local organization—from "old-fashioned" fraternal organizations to new age encounter groups—was sliced by more than 50 percent. (Figure 10 summarizes this evidence by showing the changing fraction of the population who have been actively involved in organizational life as either a local officer or a local committee member.) This dismaying trend began to accelerate after 1985: in the ten short years between 1985 and 1994, active involvement in community organizations in this country fell by 45 percent. By this measure, at least, nearly half of America's civic infrastructure was obliterated in barely a decade.

Eighty percent of life, Woody Allen once quipped, is simply showing up. The same might be said of civic engagement, and "showing up" provides a useful standard for evaluating trends in associational life in our communities. In twenty-five annual surveys between 1975 and 1999 the DDB Needham Life Style surveys asked more than eighty-seven thousand Americans, "How many times in the last year did you attend a club meeting?" Figure 11 shows how this form of civic engagement has dwindled over the last quarter of the twentieth century. In 1975–76 American men and women attended twelve club meetings on average each year—essentially once a month. By 1999 that figure had shrunk by fully 58 percent to five meetings per year. In 1975–76, 64 percent of all Americans still attended at least one club meeting in the previous year. By 1999 that figure had fallen to 38 percent. In short, in the mid-1970s nearly two-thirds of all Americans attended club meetings, but by the late 1990s nearly two-thirds of all Americans never do. By comparison with other countries, we may still seem a nation of joiners, but by comparison with our own recent past, we are not—at least if "joining" means more than nominal affiliation.

Thus two different survey archives suggest that active involvement in local clubs and organizations of all sorts fell by more than half in the last several decades of the twentieth century. This estimate is remarkably consistent with evidence of an entirely unexpected sort. Each decade between 1965 and 1995, national samples of Americans were asked to complete "time diaries," recording how they spent every minute of a randomly chosen "diary day." From these sets of diaries we can reconstruct how the average American's use of time gradually evolved over the three decades between 1965 and 1995. Broadly speaking, as John Robinson, director of the time diary project, has shown, our time allocations have not changed dramatically over this period—we have averaged just about exactly eight hours of sleep a night throughout the decades, for example—but there are some important exceptions. Watching
TV consumes more time now than it used to, while we spend less time now on housework and child care. The slice of time devoted to organizational activity has always been relatively modest on any given day, since even faithful reading groups or service clubs usually meet only once a week or once a month, not once a day. Nevertheless, the diaries clearly show that the time we devote to community organizations has fallen steadily over this period.

Measured in terms of hours per month, the average American’s investment in organizational life (apart from religious groups, which we shall examine separately) fell from 3.7 hours per month in 1965 to 2.9 in 1975 to 2.3 in 1985 and 1995. On an average day in 1965, 7 percent of Americans spent some time in a community organization. By 1995 that figure had fallen to 3 percent of all Americans. Those numbers suggest that nearly half of all Americans in the 1960s invested some time each week in clubs and local associations, as compared to less than one-quarter in the 1990s. Further analysis of the time diary evidence suggests that virtually all of this decline is attributable to generational replacement: members of any given generation are investing as much time in organizational activity as they ever were, but each successive generation is investing less.

If we take into account the rapid growth in educational levels over this period, all these slumps in associational involvement (leadership involvement, meeting attendance, time spent, and so on) are even more dramatic. Among the burgeoning numbers of college graduates, the average number of club meetings per year fell by 55 percent (from thirteen meetings per year to six), while among high school graduates, the drop in annual meeting attendance was 60 percent (from ten meetings per year to four), and among the dwindling numbers of Americans who had not completed high school, the drop in annual meeting attendance was 73 percent (from nine meetings per year to two per year).

In absolute terms the declines in organizational activity and club meeting attendance were roughly parallel at all educational and social levels. However, because the less well educated were less involved in community organizations to begin with, the relative decline was even greater at the bottom of the hierarchy. A similar pattern appears in the time diary data—declines at all levels in the educational hierarchy, though slightly greater in this case among the more educated. In other words, the gross decline in community involvement has been masked to some degree by the fact that more and more Americans have the skills and social resources that traditionally encouraged participation in community affairs.

In community life, as in the stock market, past performance is no guarantee of future performance, so it is hazardous to assume that trends over the next several decades will mirror those over the last several. Nevertheless, the downtrend shown in figure 11 has been more or less uninterrupted for more than a quarter century, and if the current rate of decline were to continue, clubs would become extinct in America within less than twenty years. Considering that such local associations have been a feature of American community life for several hundred years, it is remarkable to see them so high on the endangered species list.

The organizational slumps reported here come from four entirely different streams of evidence—different sampling techniques, different survey organizations, different questions—but each is based on tens of thousands of interviews in scores of independent surveys, and together they cover associational involvement of all sorts. That they converge so closely in their estimate that active involvement in local organizations fell by more than half in the last several decades of the twentieth century is as striking and persuasive as if southwestern tree rings and Arctic ice cores and British Admiralty records all confirmed the same rate of global warming.

Another “hard” indicator of the priority Americans attribute to organizational involvement is the fraction of our leisure dollar that we spend on dues, a measure that the Commerce Department has tracked for the last seventy years. In 1929, 6 cents of every dollar of consumer spending for leisure and recreation was for club and fraternal dues. With the arrival of television in the 1950s (and the nationwide explosion in sales of TV sets), this figure fell to 4 cents, but by the end of that decade it had risen back to 5 cents, in accord with the 1950s-1960s civic boom that appears repeatedly in our evidence. During the last three decades of the century, however, this figure fell to 3 cents, so that by 1997 this measure of the relative priority that Americans give to our organizational commitments was down 40 percent from its postwar peak in 1938.

To summarize: Organizational records suggest that for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century Americans’ involvement in civic associations of all sorts rose steadily, except for the parenthesis of the Great Depression. In the last third of the century, by contrast, only mailing list membership has continued to expand, with the creation of an entirely new species of “tertiary” association whose members never actually meet. At the same time, active involvement in face-to-face organizations has plummeted, whether we consider organizational records, survey reports, time diaries, or consumer expenditures. We could surely find individual exceptions—specific organizations that successfully sailed against the prevailing winds and tides—but the broad picture is one of declining membership in community organizations. During the last third of the twentieth century formal membership in organizations in general has edged downward by perhaps 10–20 percent. More important, active involvement in clubs and other voluntary associations has collapsed at an astonishing rate, more than halving most indexes of participation within barely a few decades.

Many Americans continue to claim that we are “members” of various organizations, but most Americans no longer spend much time in community organizations—we’ve stopped doing committee work, stopped serving as offi-
cers, and stopped going to meetings. And all this despite rapid increases in education that have given more of us than ever before the skills, the resources, and the interests that once fostered civic engagement. In short, Americans have been dropping out in droves, not merely from political life, but from organized community life more generally.

Before reaching any firm conclusion about trends in Americans' involvement in formal social organizations, however, we need to consider changes in the worlds of religion and work. Religion remains today, as in the past, an extremely important sector of American civil society, and work has come to occupy an ever more important place in the lives of many Americans, so trends in those two domains will have an important effect on our collective stock of social capital.

CHAPTER 4
Religious Participation

Churches and other religious organizations have a unique importance in American civil society. America is one of the most religiously observant countries in the contemporary world. With the exception of "a few agrarian states such as Ireland and Poland," observes one scholar, "the United States has been the most God-believing and religion-adhering, fundamentalist, and religiously traditional country in Christendom," as well as "the most religiously fecund country" where "more new religions have been born . . . than in any other society."1

American churches* over the centuries have been incredibly robust social institutions. Tocqueville himself commented at length on Americans' religiosity. Religious historian Phillip Hammond observes that "ever since the nation's founding, a higher and higher proportion of Americans have affiliated with a church or synagogue—right through the 1950s."2 Although most often we think of the colonists as a deeply religious people, one systematic study of the history of religious observance in America estimates that the rate of formal religious adherence grew steadily from 17 percent in 1776 to 62 percent in 1980.3 Other observers, such as E. Brooks Holifield, argue that the meaning of church "membership" has become less stringent over time and conclude that "from the seventeenth century through the twentieth, participation in congregations has probably remained relatively constant. For most of the past three

* For simplicity's sake I use the term church here to refer to all religious institutions of whatever faith, including mosques, temples, and synagogues.