Review Article: Inaccurate, Exceptional, One-Sided or Irrelevant? The Debate about the Alleged Decline of Social Capital and Civic Engagement in Western Societies

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In his 1790 address to the Académie Française in Paris, Condorcet noted that every new generation has a tendency to accuse itself of being less civic-minded than previous cohorts.[1] Two centuries later, this argument has once again regained front-page status. The debate is currently focused on the question of whether or not social capital and civic engagement are declining in Western societies. In his academic best-seller *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam argues that younger age cohorts, socialized in the prosperous economic conditions of the 1960s and onwards, are less inclined to engage in community life and in politics, and also less likely to trust their fellow citizens.[2] By contrast, the 'long civic generation', born roughly between 1910 and 1940, is portrayed as much more motivated in these respects. They readily volunteer in community projects, read newspapers and take on more social responsibilities.[3] In this view, a process of generational replacement is responsible for a steady decline of social capital and civic engagement in American society. As the long civic generation is replaced by younger age cohorts, the social capital stock of American communities slowly diminishes. The indicators used to substantiate this claim are numerous and diverse: measures for voter turnout, attendance of club meetings, generalized trust, the number of common family dinners, the number of card games played together, and even respect for traffic rules. All of these attitudes and behaviours, it is argued, depict a significant downward trend.

Although Putnam is by far the most vocal of all scholars in the 'decline of social capital' choir, he certainly is not the only author describing an erosion of traditional societal relations. Almost two decades ago, Robert Bellah and his team warned that more individualistic motivations are threatening the traditional social bonds in American society.[4] Robert Lane, among others, finds that this decline in social cohesion is not just a phenomenon of American society, but can be seen as a manifestation of a general process of disenchantment in Western societies: 'The haunting spirit is manifold: … increasing distrust of each other and of political and other institutions, declining belief that the lot

[1] Elisabeth Badinter and Robert Badinter, *Condorcet, 1743–1794* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

[2] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

[3] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, pp. 247ff.

[4] Robert Bellah *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

of the average man is getting better, a tragic erosion of family solidarity and community integration …'[5]

These arguments have encountered fierce academic opposition. The *Bowling Alone* thesis has been variously characterized as plainly wrong, pessimistic or traditional. A number of authors have claimed that Putnam idolizes the vanished hierarchical world of the 1950s, in which most women were home-makers and therefore had more time on their hands to engage in various civic duties. Others depict the decline thesis as pure nostalgia, a manifestation of the longing for a civic and engaged era that has clearly ended. Putnam's sweeping statements have stirred re-interpretations of the available evidence on civic participation and social cohesion, in addition to a multiplicity of new research efforts. As with many hotly debated phenomena in political science, these have come in multiple or even contradictory versions.

While some social scientists have claimed that the numbers do not show the erosion of social capital,[6] others portray the decline of civic engagement as another manifestation of American exceptionalism. Still other authors have taken the argument a step further; while they accept the claim that traditional forms of cohesion and participation are losing ground, they emphasize that newer forms of participation and interaction, all too easily dismissed in the work of Putnam and others, can replace traditional forms. Yet another body of researchers largely accepts the evidence substantiating the decline thesis, but they do not, unlike Putnam, perceive this as being a threat to the viability of democratic political systems. Conversely, they argue that processes of postmodernization have produced a cohort of critical citizens who embrace democratic values, such as autonomy, self-expression and support for democracy.[7]

These disparate empirical and normative assaults against the decline thesis have engendered a kind of trench warfare, with fiercely opposing sides bogged down in the mud of an antagonistic duel about the vitality of democratic political culture in Western societies. Thus far, most of these challenges have been lumped together, and have been treated as interchangeable arguments in a comprehensive conflict between modernists and postmodernists. The 'modernists' are accused of remaining hooked on the traditional forms of sociability and political behaviour characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s, while the 'postmodernists' are more sanguine about the opportunities and possibilities being created by current trends in political behaviour. While the 'modernists' seem to perceive the rise of a new generation of 'critical citizens' as a threat to democratic stability, the 'postmodernists' see them as an indication of the maturity of our political systems.

It would be a mistake, however, to reduce this debate to a binary distinction between 'good' and 'bad'. In this review article, we discern and critique four different arguments formulated against the *Bowling Alone* thesis. This differentiation allows us to build a solid research agenda, aimed at addressing each of the disputed questions. In developing this programme, our aim is to move the discussion away from the current situation of antagonistic and sterile trench warfare.

The ground covered in this debate is both extremely broad and vaguely bounded, in that it runs the gamut of participatory and behavioural indicators. For example, we often find

[5] Robert Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000).

[6] Everett C. Ladd, 'The Data Just Don't Show Erosion of America's "Social Capital"', *The Public Perspective* (June 1996), 5–22.

[7] Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

that indicators of social interaction, networks, trust between citizens, civic engagement and sometimes even political participation are thrown into the debate together. Such a kitchen-sink approach to the social capital concept has been criticized by adherents of the more stringent network perspective,[8] as well as by others who had hoped that Putnam's original contribution[9] would help to distinguish important aspects of political culture.[10] We will not go into that discussion here, and, in order to give a comprehensive review of the debate, we will follow the usage of most contemporary social capital studies that take the inclusive approach.[11]

In the remainder of this article, we first give an overview of the decline thesis, followed by a review of the four different types of arguments and evidence formulated against it. In the final section, we show the limits of these critiques and build a research agenda aimed at testing the grounds more thoroughly for each one of these positions.

WORRIES ABOUT SOCIAL CAPITAL AND PARTICIPATION

Concerns about the erosion of traditional social ties and institutions have always been a centre of attention in the social sciences. As early as the nineteenth century, authors like Tönnies, Durkheim and Weber wondered how social order and cohesion could be maintained given the political and economic modernization of Western societies. Since the 1980s, philosophical debates between liberals and communitarians seem to have fostered a revived interest in the maintenance of social cohesion among political and social scientists. If vibrant communities are indeed essential for individual and collective development and well-being, as communitarian theory proclaims,[12] it becomes all the more crucial to know whether such communities are still thriving in Western societies. In response to this communitarian agenda, researchers have increasingly turned their attention towards the study of various aspects of social cohesion, social interaction and the vitality of democracy.

One of the first and most seminal books in this respect was *Habits of the Heart*, which demonstrated how the rise of a new, more utilitarian kind of individualism has the tendency to destroy traditional forms of interaction in the United States based on co-operation and close-knit social ties within small communities. These old 'habits of the heart', Bellah and his associates argue, are rapidly being replaced by more fluid and sporadic ways of socializing based on self-interest and individual preferences.[13]

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[8] Nan Lin, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[9] Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[10] David Laitin, 'Political Culture at 30', *American Political Science Review*, 89 (1995), 168–73.

[11] In this article, do not wish to focus directly on acts of political participation: we only include items such as voter turnout and party membership if they have been used as an argument in the social capital and civic engagement debate. It is not the aim of this review article to offer a review of the burgeoning literature on party change, voter turnout and party membership. On these topics, we can refer to recent work by Peter Mair (*Party System Change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997)), Martin Wattenberg (*Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002)) and Mark Franklin (*The Dynamics of Voter Turnout in Established Democracies Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)).

[12] Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community* (New York: Crown, 1993); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Michael Walzer, 'The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism', *Political Theory*, 18 (1990), 6–23.

[13] Bellah *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart*.

The most systematic account of the potential erosion of social and civic life, however, can be found in the work of Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam.[14] According to Putnam, the loss of confidence and degradation of social ties has pervaded all aspects of society. Not only do Americans participate less actively in all kinds of voluntary associations, but they also refrain from typical political involvement, such as membership in political parties. Drawing on commercial life-style surveys, Putnam finds a negative trend even with regard to various forms of social interactions involving face-to-face contact beyond formally organized engagements; indeed, even the frequencies of traditional common meals at the family dinner table, visits to friends and neighbours, card games with friends, and social dinners at restaurants have all been the victims of this trend.

Putnam argues that this loss of civic engagement and social interaction is not only troublesome with regard to social cohesion, but also in terms of its political consequences.[15] Since Almond and Verba, it has been generally assumed that a thriving civic culture contributes to the stability of democratic political systems.[16] In an earlier publication on civic culture in Italy, Putnam demonstrated that regions depicting the highest density of voluntary associations also tend to be those whose regional governments and institutions perform most strongly; the argument is essentially that institutional performance should be seen as a consequence of regional civic engagement among the population.[17] Therefore, Putnam's conclusion that engagement is declining in the United States implies that this downward trend could threaten the long-term stability of American democracy. The underlying message is quite clear: the loss of community in American society will eventually destabilize democratic civic culture, which in turn will have negative consequences for the performance of American political institutions and the viability of democracy itself.

In the Putnam volumes, a great deal of attention is devoted to the study of voluntary associations, and indeed the level of associational membership has become a standard litmus test for the health of a society's social capital.[18] Authors inspired by the communitarian philosophy consider them important for two main reasons.[19] First, their socialization function implies that they train the members' into a more civically-oriented mindset, which in turn leaves them better disposed towards co-operation, trust and reciprocity. The available evidence on the occurrence of this effect, however, is at best

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[14] Robert Putnam, 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital', *Journal of Democracy*, 6 (1995), 65–78; Putnam, *Bowling Alone*; Robert Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Susan Pharr and Robert Putnam, eds, *Disaffected Democracies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

[15] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

[16] Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963); Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington, eds, *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

[17] Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*.

[18] It should be noted that Putnam and Goss have recently qualified this claim: 'Early research on social capital concentrated on formal associations for reasons of methodological convenience so it is worth emphasising here that associations constitute merely one form of social capital' (Robert Putnam and Kristin Goss, 'Introduction', in Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux*, pp. 3–19, at p. 10). Since 1993, however, quite some research has been focused on voluntary associations, drawing its inspiration directly from *Making Democracy Work*.

[19] Mark Warren, *Democracy and Association* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

rather mixed.[20] Secondly, associations matter because of the external link they provide between citizens and the state – they offer vital (if, for the most part, indirect) access for citizens wanting to influence state and governmental affairs. Intermediary organizations aggregate individual interests, and thus contribute to processes of complexity-reduction and gate-keeping that are necessary for a political system to function effectively. A decline in associational life implies, therefore, that both of these functions are being threatened.

Especially with regard to the political domain, an impressive array of empirical evidence has been marshalled to substantiate the claims about the decline of institutional trust and civic engagement. Since the 1960s Americans have been losing trust in their government and in government institutions, a trend that has been documented for most liberal democracies.[21] In addition, various conventional forms of political participation have lost much of their appeal. Political parties have traditionally served as a connection mechanism between citizens and the political system, but in a number of countries the party system is confronted with a rapid decline of party identification. Not only are membership figures dwindling,[22] especially among young people,[23] but in addition citizens seem to rely less on ideological clues provided by political parties to establish their own political and world views; as a consequence, voter volatility is on the rise.[24] Partly as a result of diminishing trust in government and the weakening of party identification, voter turnout has also followed a downward spiral. This phenomenon is not limited to the United States, but has indeed been shown to be prevalent in other Western societies.[25]

In sum, studies supporting the decline thesis not only describe and document the erosion of traditional integration mechanisms; they also interpret this evolution as a fundamental threat to the survival of healthy communities and democratic political systems. As stated at the outset, this kind of literature has been met with fierce opposition, the different facets of which will be revisited and examined in the remainder of this review article.

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[20] Dietlind Stolle, 'Getting to Trust: An Analysis of the Importance of Institutions, Families, Personal Experiences and Group Membership', in Paul Dekker and Eric Uslaner, eds, *Politics in Everyday Life: Social Capital and Participation* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 118–33; Eric Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Marc Hooghe and Dietlind Stolle, eds, *Generating Social Capital: Civil Society and Institutions in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

[21] Seymour M. Lipset and William Schneider, *The Confidence Gap* (New York: Free Press, 1983); Joseph Nye, Philip Zelikow and David King, eds, *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); M. Kent Jennings, 'Political Trust and the Roots of Devolution', in Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi, eds, *Trust and Governance* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998), pp. 218–44; Pharr and Putnam, eds., *Disaffected Democracies*.

[22] Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen, 'Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980–2000', *Party Politics*, 7 (2001), 5–22.

[23] Marc Hooghe, Dietlind Stolle and Patrick Stouthuysen, 'Head Start in Politics: The Recruitment Function of Youth Organizations of Political Parties in Belgium (Flanders)', *Party Politics*, 10 (2004), 193–212.

[24] Martin Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Hermann Schmitt and Sören Holmberg, 'Political Parties in Decline?' in Hans-Dieter Klingemann and Dieter Fuchs, eds, *Citizens and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 95–133; Russell Dalton and Martin Wattenberg, eds, *Parties without Partisans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[25] Norman Nie, Sidney Verba and John Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979); Ruy Teixeira, *The Disappearing American Voter* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1992); Robert Jackman and Ross Miller, 'Voter Turnout in the Industrial Democracies during the 1980s', *Comparative Political Studies*, 27 (1995), 467–92; Arend Lijphart, 'Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma', *American Political Science Review*, 91 (1997), 1–14; Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux*.

TRENCH-WARFARE REVISITED

Four distinct modes of criticism have emerged to counter the decline thesis. First, one group of authors rejects it on empirical grounds. Their claim is that authors supporting the *Bowling Alone* thesis did not get their numbers right and therefore do not offer an adequate description of real trends in contemporary American society.[26] Proposing a careful reconsideration of time-series data for the United States, these critics argue that there are no grounds for pessimistic concern about participation levels and social cohesion.

A second group of critics accepts the decline thesis with the reservation that it is merely another example of American exceptionalism. They claim that in other Western societies, social capital and civic engagement are not declining to the same extent as in the United States.[27] This particular criticism calls for wide-ranging comparative research on meaningful indicators of social capital and civic engagement.

The third critique accepts that traditional social and civic participation have declined, but accuses the decline thesis of conceptual one-sidedness, in that it fails to pay attention to the simultaneous rise of new forms of participation and interaction that fulfil the same functions with regard to socialization and interest mediation.[28] This view is echoed by feminist scholars who argue that the participation indicators being used in most of the research focus too exclusively on formal participation acts, thus neglecting more informal forms of connectedness and participation that are traditionally preferred by women.[29] This kind of criticism entails a fundamental challenge for survey and other quantitative research, as new instruments will have to be developed to capture these informal and network-based interactions before their social importance and prevalence can be effectively assessed.

Finally, a fourth group of authors accepts the decline thesis, but disputes its normative consequences. The decline of traditional participation formats is seen as largely irrelevant for the future of democratic systems. The radical version of this argument avers that democracies can prosper even in the absence of conventional widespread mass participation, as highly educated postmaterialist citizens have other means at their disposal to get their voices heard in political decision making.[30] This thesis calls for a different test altogether: in the absence of mass-based interest mediation organizations, how can we ensure that governments and political systems are accessible to citizen influence?

The disentangling of these distinct counterarguments to the *Bowling Alone* thesis is absolutely essential if we are to arrive at scientifically-tested findings about the

[26] Michael Schudson, 'What if Civic Life Didn't Die?' *The American Prospect* (March, 1996), 17–28; Everett C. Ladd, *The Ladd Report* (New York: The Free Press, 1999); Pamela Paxton, 'Is Social Capital Declining in the United States?' *American Journal of Sociology*, 105 (1999), 88–127; Robert Wuthnow, 'The United States: Bridging the Privileged and the Marginalized?' in Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux*, pp. 59–101.

[27] Peter Hall, 'Social Capital in Britain', *British Journal of Political Science*, 29 (1999), 417–61; Nonna Mayer, 'Democracy in France: Do Associations Matter?' in Hooghe and Stolle, eds, *Generating Social Capital*, pp. 43–66; Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Oscar Gabriel *et al.*, *Sozialkapital und Demokratie* (Vienna: Universitätsverlag, 2002); Lars Torpe, 'Social Capital in Denmark: A Deviant Case?' *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 26 (2003), 27–48.

[28] Ulrich Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997); Paul Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[29] Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[30] Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*; Ronald Inglehart and Wayne Baker, 'Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values', *American Sociological Review*, 65 (2000), 19–51.

actual evolution of social capital and civic engagement in the United States and other democratic societies. We examine each of the arguments and their evidence in turn.

'THE NUMBERS DON'T MATCH ...'

The first argument against communitarian pessimism is largely empirical: it is stated that the available data simply do not support the conclusion that engagement and cohesion are on the decline in the United States. A number of authors question the validity of the data used by Putnam and other authors, in addition to their method of analysis.[31] Building upon a careful analysis of the General Social Survey for the period 1975–94, both Paxton and Wuthnow argue that not all social capital and civic engagement indicators seem to be declining simultaneously. Their conclusion is that generalized trust has been eroding significantly throughout this period, but the same declivity cannot be observed with respect to associational membership, or even trust in institutions. While in 1975 respondents in the General Social Survey reported on average 1.77 group memberships, this was still 1.61 in the 1994 Survey, and the trend line does not show any obvious or significant decline.[32]

Even the reports of declines in voter turnout, generally considered to be one of the best documented downward trends,[33] have come under attack. McDonald and Popkin argue that the apparent decline in turnout figures can be mainly attributed to the way this percentage is routinely calculated. The US Bureau of the Census calculates turnout by comparing the number of cast votes with the total number of residents in the voting age population. However, this figure also includes those who are ineligible to vote, such as non-citizens, felons and the mentally incompetent, and it fails to include US citizens living abroad. For example, the percentage of non-citizens among the voting-age population has risen steadily from 2 per cent in 1966 to 8 per cent in 2000. In other words, the ineligible population has been growing faster than the eligible population, 'which gives rise to the perception that voter participation is declining'[34] even when this is not the case.

One oft-mentioned criticism of Putnam's empirical analyses is that they are founded on the assumption that rising education levels will lead to an increase in participation. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam repeatedly expresses his surprise about the fact that baby boomers, despite their higher average education level, are not more knowledgeable about politics or more active in civic life.[35] Clearly, the supposition is that a rise in education will be associated with a boost in participation levels. Some authors, however, have argued that this expectation is not warranted. While it might be true that at the individual level education is strongly associated with participation and political interest, we cannot assume that the same relation holds at the aggregate level. Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry argue that education is not just instrumental in stimulating cognitive skills and what they call 'democratic enlightenment':

For political engagement, formal education works as a sorting mechanism, assigning ranks on the basis of the citizen's *relative* educational attainment. Relative education is not the absolute

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[31] Schudson, 'What if Civic Life Didn't Die?'; Ladd, *The Ladd Report*; Paxton, 'Is Social Capital Declining in the United States?'; Michael McDonald and Samuel Popkin, 'The Myth of the Vanishing Voter', *American Political Science Review*, 95 (2001), 963–74; Wuthnow, 'The United States'.
[32] Ladd, *The Ladd Report*.
[33] Teixeira, *The Disappearing American Voter*.
[34] McDonald and Popkin, 'The Myth of the Vanishing Voter,' p. 963.
[35] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. pp. 35, 254, 257.

number of years attained but the amount of education attained compared to those against whom the citizen competes … Aggregate levels of education can change, but the number and rank of seats in the political theatre are fixed, suggesting some type of sorting model rather than a simple additive model …[36]

Their analysis of the General Social Survey 1972–94 dataset shows that while education does indeed have a positive impact on civic engagement at the individual level, in aggregate terms the rise in the average education level wipes out this effect. Incorporating this insight is important, because even stable trends will be a cause of disappointment if we expect participation levels to rise as a result of the education boom.[37]

These kinds of empirical criticisms obviously call for a careful re-examination and re-interpretation of American time-series data. However, an important issue in such an analysis is that fewer and fewer citizens agree to participate in national or cross-national surveys.[38] In the US National Elections Studies (NES), for example, the response rate declined from 80 per cent in the 1960s to about 60 per cent in the year 2000,[39] which by itself might serve as an indication for a civic decline. Most importantly, declining response rates seriously threaten the validity of time-series data and analysis. As far as the decline thesis is concerned, lower response rates will most likely lead to an overestimation of participation in the most recent surveys, as civic engagement in the real world and co-operation in participating in a survey are strongly related. Therefore, one can assume that in contemporary surveys participation is overestimated more strongly than in surveys of a previous era, and this can be used as an argument to strengthen the decline thesis. In short, the issue of declining responses in surveys has to be integrated into a statistical re-evaluation of social capital and civic engagement time-series trends.

At the same time, the finding that not all social capital indicators seem to be diminishing in the same way raises a theoretical problem. All too often it is assumed that social capital functions as a stable conglomerate of behaviours (participation, engagement, civic ties, sociability, etc.) and attitudes (generalized trust, adherence to democratic norms, tolerance, norms of reciprocity, etc.). This assumption leads to the expectation that all social capital indicators evolve simultaneously and in the same manner; if participation declines, so will generalised trust, and vice versa. Clearly, this is not the case, as for some indicators the evidence showing decline is much more solid than for others.[40] For example, it seems widely accepted that political trust is declining in the United States, although opinions differ on the possible causes of this phenomenon.[41] For other social capital and civic engagement indicators, however, there are far fewer signs of a downward trend. This

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[36] Norman Nie, Jane Junn and Keith Stehlik-Barry, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 6, 100.

[37] This argument, too, however, only leads to new questions. While it might be true that there is a 'natural limit' to the number of leading jobs within associational life, the same does not hold for the rank-and-file members. While the number of school board directors in a community might be limited, the number of bowling leagues in principle can grow idefinitely. So while a rise in aggregate education levels will not necessarily boost all forms of participation, it should have a positive effect on at least some of them.

[38] Wim De Heer, 'International Response Trends: Results of an International Survey', *Journal of Official Statistics*, 15 (1999), 129–42.

[39] NES (2003). http://www.umich.edu/ ~ nes/studyres/datainfo/dataqual.htm

[40] Paxton, 'Is Social Capital Declining in the United States?' p. 121; Norris, *Democratic Phoenix*; Mayer, 'Democracy in France: Do Associations Matter?'

[41] Nye, Zelikow and King, eds, *Why People Don't Trust Government*; Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi, eds, *Trust and Governance* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998).

observation implies that the composition of the social capital complex is not invariant; some components might in fact be declining more rapidly than others.[42] This suggests that the various measurements used for social capital, such as civic attitudes and behaviours of various sorts, are not necessarily depicting one social capital syndrome. Social capital, in other words, does not come in a one-size-fits-all format.[43] Ultimately then, this critique challenges the theoretical formulation of the social capital concept. Even if we stick to a comprehensive definition, one that includes various aspects of social interactions, civic attitudes and engagement, it seems plausible to admit that all these components do not necessarily form a syndrome.[44] Strong variations in its numerous aspects are possible across time and across societies.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM?

A second critique invoked against the *Bowling Alone* thesis is that an erosion of civic life may indeed be taking place in the United States, but that this phenomenon should be seen as another manifestation of American exceptionalism. The same trend cannot, the argument goes, be observed in other Western societies. At least for the moment, we do not have any conclusive evidence that participation levels in general are indeed declining in Western Europe as well as the United States.[45] Only for some specific and rather traditional forms of participation has a general declining trend been documented. In Europe too, for example, political parties and trade unions have lost members in recent decades.[46] With the notable exception of the Scandinavian countries, voter turnout also shows a downward trend in most industrialized countries.[47] It should be remembered, however, that this decline has largely been a departure from the all-time high that was recorded in the 1950s and the 1960s;[48] even so, the trend is significantly downward. Most blatant, perhaps, is the strong evidence for systematic decline of political trust in most European countries, with notable exceptions in Germany and the Netherlands.[49] While in the mid-1990s scholars still expressed doubts about a general decline of political trust,[50] there is more

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[42] Putnam and Goss, 'Introduction', in Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux*, p. 11.

[43] Joep de Hart and Paul Dekker, 'A Tale of Two Cities: Local Patterns of Social Capital', in Hooghe and Stolle, eds, *Generating Social Capital*, pp. 153–70.

[44] Dietlind Stolle and Marc Hooghe, 'Conflicting Approaches to the Study of Social Capital: Competing Explanations for Causes and Effects of Social Capital', *Ethical Perspectives*, 10 (2003), 22–45.

[45] Hooghe, Marc, 'Why Should We Be Bowling Alone? Cross-Sectional Results from a Belgian Survey on Civic Participation', *Voluntas*, 14 (2003), 41–59.

[46] Mair and van Biezen, 'Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980–2000'; Bernhard Ebbinghaus and Jelle Visser, 'When Institutions Matter: Union Growth and Decline in Western Europe, 1950–1995', *European Sociological Review*, 15 (1999), 135–58; Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux*.

[47] Dalton and Wattenberg, eds, *Parties without Partisans*; Mark Gray and Miki Caul, 'Declining Voter Turnout in Advanced Democracies', *Comparative Political Studies*, 33 (2000), 1091–121; Peter Mair, 'In the Aggregate: Mass Electoral Behaviour in Western Europe, 1950–2000', in Hans Keman, ed., *Comparative Democratic Politics* (London: Sage, 2002), pp. 122–41.

[48] Norris, *Democratic Phoenix*.

[49] Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*; Ola Listhaug, 'The Dynamics of Trust in Politicians', in Hans-Dieter Klingemann and Dieter Fuchs, eds, *Citizens and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 261–97; Pippa Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[50] Klingemann and Fuchs, eds, *Citizens and the State*.

certainty by the end of the decade.[51] Overall, European societies are plagued, as the United States is, by political disenchantment, increasing cynicism and political alienation.

With regard to forms of participation that are not expressly political, however, results are far less convincing.[52] The enormous amount of evidence assembled for the *Beliefs in Government* project, for example, did not support the pessimistic conclusions in this respect for West European countries.[53] In line with this evaluation, no evidence has been found of downward trends in non-political membership and civic participation figures, or for that matter generalized trust across European societies.[54] Nor do the various country studies assembled in *Democracies in Flux* offer any support for a clear pattern of decline in non-political associational membership in European countries. Faced with this evidence, even Putnam has recently acknowledged: 'At the most general level, our investigation has found no general and simultaneous decline in social capital throughout the industrial/post-industrial world over the last generation.'[55]

These findings do not imply that there is no reason for concern in West European societies. It is entirely plausible that Europe will be confronted with the same structural process of social change and its consequences as that witnessed in the United States, but with a certain time lag. In the Netherlands, for example, participation has dwindled among younger and well-educated cohorts.[56] Similar observations have been made in Canada; even though voter turnout has been stable for most age cohorts, the youngest generation in Canada clearly lags behind.[57] For the time being, however, we do not have sufficient information to determine whether these younger age groups are simply somewhat slower in picking up a participatory habit (because of extended education, for example), or whether their abstention will continue once they move on to adulthood. Nevertheless, the fact that young people seem to refrain from political activity could be an important finding. Previous studies have shown that those who begin participating in elections immediately upon reaching voting age retain this habit even many years later.[58] Research suggests that the specific character of one's first experienced elections is particularly important for their further electoral involvement.[59] These findings are in line with the well-established mechanism that early life experiences play an important role in shaping adult political behaviour.[60]

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[51] Hans-Dieter Klingemann, 'Mapping Political Support in the 1990s', in Pippa Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens*, pp. 31–56.

[52] Richard Topf, 'Beyond Electoral Participation', in Klingemann and Fuchs, eds, *Citizens and the State*, pp. 52–91; Paul Dekker and Andries van den Broek, 'Civil Society in Comparative Perspective: Involvement in Voluntary Associations in North America and Western Europe', *Voluntas*, 9 (1998), 11–38; Hall, 'Social Capital in Britain'; Robert Putnam, 'Conclusion', in Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux*, pp. 393–415; Marc Hooghe, 'Value Congruence and Convergence within Voluntary Associations', *Political Behavior*, 25 (2003), 151–75.

[53] Klingemann and Fuchs, eds, *Citizens and the State*.

[54] Gabriel *et al.*, *Sozialkapital und Demokratie*.

[55] Putnam, 'Conclusion', in Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux*, p. 410.

[56] Paul Dekker and Joep de Hart, 'Het sociaal kapitaal van de Nederlandse kiezer', in Marc Hooghe, ed., *Sociaal kapitaal en democratie* (Leuven: Acco, 2000), pp. 83–112; Jacques Thomassen, Cees Aarts and Henk van der Kolk, eds, *Politieke veranderingen in Nederland, 1971–1998* (The Hague: SDU, 2000).

[57] André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte, 'Generational Change and the Decline of Political Participation: The Case of Voter Turnout in Canada' (paper presented at the McGill Workshop 'Citizenship on Trial: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Political Socialization of Adolescents', June 2002).

[58] Eric Plutzer, 'Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood', *American Political Science Review*, 96 (2002), 41–56.

[59] Franklin, *The Dynamics of Voter Turnout in Established Democracies since 1945*.

[60] M. Kent Jennings and Laura Stoker, 'Generational Change, Life Cycle Processes and Social Capital' (paper presented at the McGill Workshop 'Citizenship on Trial: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Political Socialization of Adolescents', June 2002).

The 'exceptionalism' argument calls for a comparative longitudinal research project across societies. A major challenge for this kind of research, however, is the almost insurmountable lack of long-term empirical sources. Time-series data are either not directly comparable to each other and/or to the US data sources, or they go back only a few years, leaving researchers unable to formulate any definite conclusions. Although various research efforts are under way to gather comparable and reliable data for a number of European countries (the Civic Involvement and Democracy project (CID), for example, as well as the European Social Survey (ESS)), for the foreseeable future the empirical ground for this debate will remain much weaker in Europe than it is in the United States. However, we have to conclude that this second criticism adds some essential information to the general picture; not all forms of participation seem to be in decline throughout Western democracies. Whereas most democratic countries struggle with a decline in conventional political participation, such as voting, party membership and even political trust, social relations are not threatened to the same extent. This finding limits the generalization of the *Bowling Alone* thesis beyond the United States and at the same time elucidates new insights about the sources of the downward slope. If not all Western democracies exhibit such similar trends, universal Western experiences such as economic wealth cannot solve the puzzle of the decline.

EMERGING SUBSTITUTES?

The third argument against communitarian pessimism does not question the figures and trends described in the erosion literature. These authors acknowledge the fact that traditional participation and integration mechanisms, such as parties and trade unions, may indeed wear out in Western societies. The fundamental line of critique here is that the communitarian authors put forward a one-sided description of social trends as a result of their exclusive focus on the disappearance of traditional mechanisms. Meanwhile, the communitarians are said to be neglectful of emerging participation styles and methods that are rapidly replacing the old ones.[61] The willingness to participate in politics and societal affairs is still as strong as it was a few decades ago, critics argue, but this will no longer translate into membership of traditional political organizations.[62] Rather, citizens today, especially younger generations, prefer participating in non-hierarchical and informal networks, in addition to a variety of life-style related sporadic mobilization efforts. Membership in informal local parental groups, the tendency to consume politically, membership in advocacy networks, the regular signing and forwarding of e-mail petitions, and the spontaneous organization of protests and rallies are just a few examples of this phenomenon.[63] The problem with this argument is that systematic evidence on the new forms of involvement has yet to be collected, and thus studies in this field are often anecdotal in nature (though two studies discussed below do tackle this issue empirically).

Structured ideologies seem less important as a mobilizing agent in these new forms of protest and participation, and in a number of instances their role is replaced by more

[61] Peter Gundelach, 'Social Transformation and New Forms of Voluntary Associations', *Social Science Information*, 23 (1984), 1049–81.
[62] Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*; Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community*.
[63] Lesley Hustinx and Frans Lammertyn, 'Collective and Reflexive Styles of Volunteering: A Sociological Modernization Perspective', *Voluntas*, 14 (2003), 167–87.

emotional or personal motivations.[64] One could refer here to the protest rallies following the school shooting in Dunblane (Scotland), the violent protests that emerged against paedophiles in Britain, and the silent marches against various incidents of street violence in the Netherlands. These rallies were not organized by established organizations or elite actors, but rather they emerged spontaneously as a kind of emotional reaction in response to perceived threats against society. Nevertheless, they have proven themselves to be politically effective, resulting, for example, in stricter weapon laws in the United Kingdom.

The theoretical or anecdotal discussion of new action and participation repertoires has also been supported by an empirical agenda. A rather famous example of this kind of empirical criticism involves the way Putnam used declining membership figures of the national American PTA (Parents Teachers Association) to support his claim that parental involvement in the education of their children is on the wane. E. C. Ladd, as well as Crawford and Levitt, draw attention to the fact that a large number of local PTA chapters are no longer affiliated with the national umbrella organization, which would explain the downturn of national PTA membership figures.[65] To some extent this can be seen as a simple empirical argument: national membership records of the PTA umbrella organization no longer serve as a valid indicator for the total number of American parents actively involved in the school education of their children. However, we also observe here the emergence of a new and more loosely structured form of involvement. As Ladd demonstrates, a preliminary analysis of various forms of parents' involvement in two selected American states shows that their engagement goes beyond the traditional PTA. Instead, parents become involved in more localized, looser and more fluid parent organizations that are not captured in classic PTA membership statistics. These new groups tend to be more issue-oriented, and they devote less attention to state level or national policy issues.[66]

Although we are confronted with a large diversity in these new participation mechanisms, they have common characteristics with regard to: (1) their structure; (2) the substantive issues they address; (3) the ways in which they mobilize; and (4) the style of involvement by individual members. First, these new forms of participation abandon traditional (that is to say formal and bureaucratic) organizational structures in favour of horizontal and more flexible ones. Loose connections, in other words, are rapidly replacing static bureaucracies.[67] Instead of collaborating in formal umbrella structures, these grassroots associations opt for co-operation in flexible and horizontal networks that are better adapted to the needs of information-driven societies.[68] This kind of network structure can also be found in various global organizations and mobilization efforts, which rely on loose contacts and electronic communication to co-ordinate their actions for reform in trade regimes, labour practices, human rights or environmental quality.[69]

[64] Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper and Francesca Polletta, eds, *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[65] Ladd, *The Ladd Report*, pp. 31–43; Susan Crawford and Peggy Levitt, 'Social Change and Civic Engagement: the Case of the PTA', in Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina, eds, *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1999), pp. 249–96.

[66] Crawford and Levitt, 'Social Change and Civic Engagement', p. 283.

[67] Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[68] Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*.

[69] W. Lance Bennett, 'Branded Political Communication: Lifestyle Politics, Logo Campaigns, and the Rise of Global Citizenship', in Michelle Micheletti, Andreas Føllesdal and Dietlind Stolle, eds, *Politics, Products and Markets* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Press, 2004), pp. 101–26; Margaret Levi and David Olson, 'The Battle in Seattle', *Politics and Society*, 28 (2000), 309–29.

Secondly, in general these new initiatives are also less concerned with institutional affairs, such as party politics, which brings them into sharp contrast with more traditional political organizations. Life-style elements are being politicized and although the actors no longer label their action as being expressly 'political', these preoccupations do lead to political mobilization.[70] These new forms of participation clearly break the traditional boundaries between the public and the private sphere; some authors have heralded this transition as the advent of 'subpolitics', where daily life decisions take on a strong political meaning.[71] Micheletti, for example, describes how women in Sweden, largely motivated by private concerns, started to fight food prices and became increasingly involved in political discussions and further political protests.[72] In other words, spheres traditionally perceived as private, such as food consumption, have the potential to become a platform for political mobilization. Eliasoph, by the same token, documents how housewives avoid becoming entangled in large ideological debates about politics or the environment, but instead prefer actions 'close to home', such as those involving consumer behaviour or household waste.[73] Participation in a recycling project can contribute to a feeling of connection with large-scale environmental issues, without requiring any formal memberships or ideological identification.

Thirdly, these new forms of participation tend to mobilize in a very characteristic way. On the one hand, they rely on apparently spontaneous and irregular mobilization. The signing of petitions, or participation in protests and consumer boycotts all seem based on spontaneity, irregularity, easy exit and the possibility of shifting in and shifting out. This is certainly the case with new, more emotion-driven forms of protest and mobilization. In October 1996 some 300,000 people (3 per cent of Belgium's total population) participated in a protest rally against the inertia of their nation's police force in the face of abductions and killings of young children; two years later, the organizing committee was out of business as its membership had all but evaporated.[74]

On the other hand, the rise of various cheque-book organizations implies that passive members will become more important than has been the case in traditional mass-membership organizations. Cheque-book activism does not rely on intensive and regular face-to-face contact between members, and the organizational model of these organizations no longer stresses voluntary participation in local chapters. Cheque-book membership organizations operate mostly on a national scale, with a professional staff relying on print and electronic media to stay in touch with their members.[75] Such memberships, too, allow for easy exit and spontaneous irregular involvement, which renders this type of

[70] W. Lance Bennett, 'The UnCivic Culture: Communication, Identity, and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics', *Political Science and Politics*, 31 (1998), 741–61; Bennett, 'Branded Political Communication: Lifestyle Politics, Logo Campaigns, and the Rise of Global Citizenship'; Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*.

[71] Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics*.

[72] Michelle Micheletti, 'Why More Women? Issues of Gender and Political Consumerism', in Michelle Micheletti, Andreas Føllesdal and Dietlind Stolle, eds, *Politics, Products, and Markets* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Press, 2004), pp. 245–64.

[73] Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*.

[74] Marc Hooghe and Gita Deneckere, 'La Marche Blanche en Belgique (octobre 1996), une mouvement de masse spectaculaire mais éphémère', *Le Mouvement Social*, 202 (2003), 153–64.

[75] Dag Wollebæk and Per Selle, 'The Importance of Passive Membership for Social Capital Formation', in Hooghe and Stolle, eds, *Generating Social Capital*, pp. 67–88.

network much more vulnerable to sudden fluctuations in its membership base and thus its income.[76]

Fourthly and finally, new forms of participation are potentially less collective and group-oriented in character. This is the case even though they might be triggered by larger societal concerns (such as global injustice), organized and supported by advocacy networks and other loose organizations, and also have aggregate consequences (a change of corporate practices, for example). Despite all this the actual act of participation is often individualized in character, whether this involves the decision to forward a selected e-mail as did Jonah Peretti, who subsequently triggered a world-wide response to Nike's footwear production practices,[77] or whether it involves the decision to purchase a certain product for ethical reasons.[78] Such individualized acts do not necessarily lead to group interaction or face-to-face meetings of the kind we typically encounter in unions, voluntary groups, regular council meetings and so forth. Passive memberships in cheque-book organizations are relatively individualized acts as well. This leads to a certain paradox: while this form of protest and participation can be seen as an example of co-ordinated collective action, most participants simply perform this act alone, at home before a computer screen, or in a supermarket.

The argument that formal and fixed membership structures are being replaced by more informal interaction repertoires is strongly reflected in the gender literature as well. Scholars working on gender relations have argued that most of the current social capital research is misguided because it looks in the wrong places for sources of social cohesion. By focusing almost exclusively on the decline of formal organizations, the communitarian authors fail to acknowledge the fact that there are many other ways for people to participate and express political and social involvement.[79] These critics would argue that networks and social engagement can be found in daily social interactions,[80] namely at the workplace,[81] in schools and neighbourhoods,[82] or in caring networks such as baby-sitting circles and other informal child-care networks.[83]

Women, in general, tend to prefer more egalitarian networks, which are reflected in some examples of 'feminist organizations'.[84] Lowndes's point in particular urges us to reconsider how informal and small-scale care networks actually contribute to the maintenance of social cohesion within a society. A typical example would be young mothers in the suburbs jointly bringing their children to and picking them up from school. These kinds of arrangements are mostly informal and ad hoc, and they are therefore usually

[76] Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

[77] Jonah Peretti and Michelle Micheletti, 'The Nike Sweatshop Email: Political Consumerism, Internet, and Culture Jamming', in Micheletti, Føllesdal and Stolle, eds, *Politics, Products, and Markets*, pp. 127–44.

[78] Micheletti, Føllesdal and Stolle, eds, *Politics, Products, and Markets*.

[79] Martha Ackelsberg, 'Broadening the Study of Women's Participation', in Susan Carroll, ed., *Women and American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 214–36.

[80] Paul Dekker and Ric Uslaner, eds, *Social Capital and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[81] Diana Mutz and Jeffrey Mondak, 'Democracy at Work: Contributions of the Workplace Toward a Public Sphere' (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 1998).

[82] Kenneth Newton, 'Social Capital and Democracy in Modern Europe', in Jan van Deth *et al.*, eds, *Social Capital and European Democracy* (London: Routledge 1999), pp. 2–24.

[83] Vivien Lowndes, 'Women and Social Capital: A Comment on Hall's "Social Capital in Britain" ', *British Journal of Political Science*, 30 (2000), 533–7.

[84] Myra M. Ferree and Patricia Martin, eds, *Feminist Organizations* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

not registered in survey research on participation. Nevertheless, they are likely to contribute significantly to the maintenance of social cohesion and social interaction and the advancement of quality of life within these suburbs, as well as to the learning of civic skills and generalized values.

To summarize, this third camp of critics urges us to broaden our view of what is relevant political and social participation. The critique maintains that we might have missed recent developments in forms of participation that are not easily observed, counted or measured. These forms of participation are more fluid, sporadic and less organized, and consequently they will be much harder to detect accurately in survey research. In addition, we might have looked in the wrong places all along, because many individuals (and women in particular) have been regularly involved in unobserved social interactions that have wider societal consequences.

'SO WHAT?'

The fourth argument against communitarian pessimism is the most fundamental, and, from a theoretical point of view, also the most interesting. These authors accept the data substantiating the decline thesis, but dispute the normative consequences that have been attributed to it by communitarian scholars. Namely, they claim that a decline in participation and face-to-face interaction does not necessarily have negative effects for social or political stability and democracy overall. Though it is possible that formal participation mechanisms and traditional political organizations were necessary during the development phase of mass democracies, within contemporary societies they have lost much of their relevance. These authors argue that the decline of trust in government and in politics should not be seen as a threat to political stability, but rather as an indication of the fact that these systems have reached adulthood, and have therefore learned to live with the scrutiny of critical citizens.[85] Inglehart summarizes this point of view succinctly in his title: 'Postmodernization erodes respect for authority, but increases support for democracy'.[86]

The data indeed show that younger age cohorts, which Putnam views as the partial 'culprit' for the overall decline of civic participation, are also most strongly attached to democratic values. Especially in Inglehart's work, the decline of traditional political integration is conceptualized as part of a global and structural transformation of value patterns in Western societies; there has been, he claims, a move away from survival values like obedience and trust in hierarchies and towards more self-expressive and post-materialist values such as tolerance, freedom and individual fulfilment. Support for freedom of expression, in addition to tolerance for ethnic or sexual minorities is found to be stronger and more widespread among the younger age cohorts, and not the members of the 'long civic generation'. Therefore, the rising critical attitude of more recent cohorts towards the political system should not be seen as a threat to the stability of democratic regimes. In sum, in Inglehart's view, younger cohorts understandably develop distrust in traditional political and hierarchical institutions. However, their deep belief in democracy,

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[85] Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*; Chris Welzel, Ronald Inglehart and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, 'The Theory of Human Development', *European Journal of Political Research*, 42 (2003), 341–80; Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens*; Norris, *Democratic Phoenix*.

[86] Ronald Inglehart, 'Postmodernization Erodes Respect for Authority, but Increases Support for Democracy', in Pippa Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 236–56.

as well as their political actions (such as protest actions and new modes of organizations) makes those generations democratic in a new way.

With the claim that traditional groups and organizations are obsolete and should make room for new citizenship concepts, Inglehart has opened a Pandora's box of research on social and political engagement and social capital. The implicit assumption of most political scientists is that democracies rely on routine and mass participation of the population. If citizens turn away from political parties, or refrain from participating in elections, it is typically assumed that something is deeply wrong with the democratic character of that society. Within Inglehart's postmodernization framework, however, these forms of participation take on a traditional and even atavistic character, and therefore become meaningless indicators for democratic health. If participation becomes a more reflexive act, the youngest and most highly-educated cohorts can decide not to join political parties, without necessarily indicating their alienation from the political system.

The value pattern described by Inglehart therefore is perfectly compatible with what Schudson has labelled the 'monitoring citizen'.[87] This concept of citizenship suggests that most people will not be involved in politics as a day-to-day routine. Rather they monitor the political system from a distance, relying heavily on the information provided by the mass media. The act of monitoring does not threaten the feeling of political efficacy, as citizens do and will participate and exert pressure on governments or other political actors if and when the need arises. Conventional forms of political participation therefore lose their routine character, but this does not imply that citizens lose their ability to influence political decision making. In this view, declining levels of participation should not cause any concern about the future viability of democratic systems, as they are merely reflecting a transition from routine participation to a more reflexive and monitoring form of political involvement.

A SOCIAL CAPITAL RESEARCH AGENDA

What are the implications of these four counter-positions to the *Bowling Alone* thesis? Do we arrive at any definite answers if we accumulate their insights? Ironically, at first sight the various arguments seem to contradict each other; some critics vehemently question the evidence pointing to a decline, whereas others accept it but perceive different consequences. As yet, hard-nosed empirical evidence is scarce and many causal relationships are still left unexplored. Each of these four avenues of criticism opens a research agenda that should demonstrate how we can get closer to a definite answer about whether social capital and civic engagement are declining or just transforming, and about the consequences of this evolution.

The first argument, which patently denies that a decline is in fact taking place, calls for the continuation and replication of already existing time-series. Following research by Theda Skocpol,[88] we might also think about ways to incorporate historical evidence in the debate in order to establish a clear picture of the actual civic behaviour of previous generations. While for most survey-oriented political scientists the world seems to have been created in 1948, at the advent of the National Elections Studies, historical material allows us to build longer time-series. In this way, the changes we have witnessed during

[87] Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).

[88] Theda Skocpol, 'How Americans Became Civic', in Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina, eds, *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1999), pp. 27–80; Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*.

the past four decades can be put into historical perspective. The 1960s were indeed an era of unprecedented civic activism that involved neighbourhood engagement and member-ships of various political and non-political associations, which might imply that the current decline stands for a return to 'normal' levels of participation.

The second argument leaves us with a difficult task: outside the United States, few long-term and reliable time-series are available. True, voter turnout, party and union memberships are well documented, but most informal forms of social interaction are not. However, from the first and second critiques it is clear that not all social capital indicators evolve simultaneously, and maybe not even in the same direction. The available evidence, therefore, should not be used to espouse a universal model of longitudinal social and political involvement. Clearly, developments of political trust do not directly translate into insights in time-patterns of generalized trust. Similarly, the fact that social interaction patterns seem to change in the United States should not be used for predictions of this evolution in other Western societies. Various research efforts are now under way in Western Europe to establish social capital benchmark studies, but long-term results, by their very nature, emerge only slowly. In the meantime, national longitudinal surveys and local over-time comparisons, as well as unexplored data sources, can be exploited for the analysis of national or even regional trends.

A possible solution to arrive at research results more quickly might be found in the cross-national analysis of younger generations compared to their older counterparts. So far, generational analysis has hinted at the fact that in Europe too, younger generations refrain from certain types of traditional participation, but this evidence remains to be confirmed throughout a variety of cultures. Comparing generations with respect to frequency and type of involvement is a good first step; if strong differences are observed in this respect between young and older age cohorts at a similar age, this might mean that we are witnessing a process of generational replacement with regard to patterns of civic engagement. It is possible to undertake such analyses even in the absence of long time-series data. Multi-generational designs in combination with studies that surveyed young generations decades ago are the best data sources for this important test.[89]

The third counter-hypothesis to the decline thesis calls for the development of new survey questions and instruments that adequately measure the occurrence and the magnitude of new forms of political and social participation. Politicized life-style elements, such as forms of political consumerism, political or ethical dress codes and online political chat-rooms, should be taken into account in this kind of research. A number of case studies demonstrate that these new participation forms are indeed making an appearance, but this approach does not inform us about their overall prevalence, or about the extent to which these findings can be generalized. As Offe and Fuchs observe: 'There is a remarkable lack of data on the less formal types of associative activity.'[90]

Clearly, taking the third counter-argument seriously implies the necessity of moving from case studies towards the use of cross-national survey data, a step which has not been

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[89] To some extent, this leads to a new problem. If young age groups prove to be less involved than their counterparts were a few decades ago, this does not necessarily mean they will remain less engaged throughout their life cycle. Because of extended education, and a higher average age for first marriage and parenthood, we have to take the possibility into account that young people simply start *later* with their engagement careers. We would call this phenomenon *delayed life-cycle effects*.

[90] Claus Offe and Susanne Fuchs, 'A Decline of Social Capital? The German Case', in Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux*, pp. 189–243, p. 243.

taken thus far.[91] Inevitably, these new forms of citizens' involvement will be difficult to measure because of their fluid, spontaneous and unstructured character.[92] The development of new survey instruments is again an essential prerequisite towards determining what these new forms of participation mean in an individual's life, and whether or not they take on a political character. How can we distinguish privately motivated acts without wider societal consequences from acts that are intended to have, or may have, a political meaning? To what extent can private motivation serve as a mobilizing force for public or societal acts? These kinds of questions will have to be addressed in any future survey research on political involvement that takes life-style politics into consideration.

Let us clarify this point with an example. Over the past decades a flourishing commercially-organized gay subculture has emerged in metropolitan areas such as San Francisco, London and Amsterdam. Gay and lesbian magazines, shops and travel agencies are an important constitutive element of this culture. However, while some authors consider these commercial ventures as a public and even politically inspired manifestation of gay and lesbian identity, for others it is just a form of individual consumer preference, without any political consequences.[93] To determine whether such forms of interaction can still be seen as manifestations of civic engagement, it is essential to know both the intention and the motivations of the actor involved. For example, booking an occasional trip with a gay travel agency because it costs less could not be defined as political participation, whereas deliberately doing so to support the gay and lesbian movements could be considered as a political act which has wider societal consequences.[94] In sum, the motivation and regularity of the new political acts should be included in our attempts to measure these forms of involvement.

While the previous three counter-arguments presented against the decline thesis confronted us with the need for better and richer survey and other data, the fourth challenge goes a step further. It is by now well established that younger and better-educated age cohorts indeed adhere to a more postmodern value pattern; they are more critical with regard to authority and institutions, but they strongly support democratic values.[95] Therefore it seems safe to conclude that traditional associations and participatory mechanisms are not irreplaceable with regard to their socialization function; democratic value patterns can be established and maintained, even without formal memberships with voluntary associations or political parties. In other words, one of the worries of communitarians can be soothed, in that the internal function of voluntary associations and other types of organizations can be replaced by other socialization agents.

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[91] However, see Jørgen Goul Andersen and Mette Tobiasen, *Politisk forbrug og politiske forbrugere. Globalisering og politik i hverdagslivet* (Aarhus: Magtudredningen, 2001); Jørgen Goul Andersen and Mette Tobiasen, 'Who are These Political Consumers Anyway? Survey Evidence from Denmark', in Micheletti, Føllesdal and Stolle, eds, *Politics, Products, and Markets*, pp. 203–22; Dietlind Stolle, Marc Hooghe and Michelle Micheletti, 'Political Consumerism – A New Phenomenon of Political Participation? An Exploratory Study in Canada, Belgium and Sweden' (paper presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions in Edinburgh, 2003).

[92] Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2002), p. 19.

[93] Barry Adam, Jan Willem Duyvendak and André Krouwel, eds, *The Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

[94] However, we should also add here that so-called private motivations might influence voting or the participation in political campaigns, etc. The discussion shows that conventional public–private divides might no longer be important markers for political engagement.

[95] Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*.

There are fewer indications, however, that a functional equivalent might exist for the external function of intermediary associations. The fourth argument, therefore, leads us to suggest further research at the macro level, and a re-invigoration of the old governability debate.[96] Young age cohorts might be 'critical citizens',[97] yet the question has not been addressed as to whether democratic political systems are able to function when faced with large numbers of such citizens. Political systems depend on routine and diffuse forms of support, and we cannot be certain whether the better-informed citizens of today and tomorrow will actually provide this kind of support. Furthermore, traditional intermediary organizations like trade unions or political parties, which are losing members in most Western societies, have historically been highly effective instruments both in aggregating interests of voters and members, and in introducing these interests into the political decision-making process.[98] Whether new forms of participation preferred by younger age cohorts are just as effective in fulfilling this instrumental function has yet to be examined in depth. Although various examples of new forms of political and social involvement demonstrate their success, it is still open for debate as to whether these new action repertoires enable citizens to influence political decision making efficiently. Political systems might fall below the threshold of 'democracy', if the collective pressures of citizens on decision making are exerted only sporadically and without a stable organizational force. One of the main problems in this respect is that within parliamentary democracies, decision making is inevitably a long-term process, one that respects extensive procedural and consultative mechanisms. If mobilization campaigns become short-lived events, their impact could be dampened before any real changes are brought about. How are long-term institutionalized decision-making processes affected given the absence of an ingrained organizational structure that aggregates citizens' opinion? That question has not even been addressed by most authors who write about postmodernization.

A radical solution to this question would be to propose that citizens do not have to interact with the political system *per se*; rather, national states are gradually losing power to multinational organizations and economic actors. New forms of political participation such as global movements, e-mail networks or acts of political consumerism enable citizens to put pressure directly on international organizations or multinational corporations.[99] In other words, while voting in local or national elections is not an effective strategy to adopt when the aim is to influence decisions on world trade or child labour, participating in protests actions at meetings of the World Trade Organization or in consumer boycotts might be a much more effective way to force change in a globalized world.[100] Such a radical solution, however, implies not just that the traditional participation repertoire has become obsolete, but that the importance of the state itself has diminished. Although it is clear that the influence of supranational and economic actors has increased over time, many domestic decisions regarding social policy, education, social services and security are still taken in national and regional parliaments. In sum, the challenge for this fourth attack on the decline argument is to demonstrate that critical citizens are sufficiently connected to the political system, despite the fact that politics itself has become a moving target.

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[96] Michael Crozier, Samuel Huntington and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

[97] Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens*.

[98] Frank Baumgartner and Beth Leech, *Basic Interests* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[99] Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002); Margaret Levi and April Linton, 'Fair Trade: A Cup at a Time?' *Politics and Society*, 31 (2003), 407–32.

[100] Micheletti, Føllesdal and Stolle, eds, *Politics, Products, and Markets*.