CHAPTER 9

CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE UNITED STATES

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Democracy in the United States has long been admired by much of the world—and not just for its constitutional liberties and participatory elections. From early in the nation's history, Americans were preeminent organizers and joiners of voluntary associations that shape and supplement the activities of government (Schlesinger 1944). In the 1890s, Lord Bryce (1895, 278) observed that "associations are created, extended, and worked in the United States more…effectively than in any other country." Bryce echoed earlier observations by Alexis de Tocqueville ([1835–40] 1969), who visited the New World in the 1830s; and Bryce also foreshadowed the eventual findings of survey studies such as Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* (1963), which documented the unusual proclivity of Americans for participation in voluntary groups.

Although American voluntary groups have always been celebrated, their characteristics and political effects are not well understood. Understanding of U.S. civic history has been especially hazy—and as a result, scholars have been ill-equipped to grasp the momentous reorganization of U.S. associational life that took place in the late twentieth century. Between the late 1960s and the 1990s, Americans launched more nationally visible voluntary entities than ever before in the nation's history. They thus remained preeminent *civic organizers*. But late twentieth and early twenty-first century Americans simultaneously ceased to be such avid *joiners*—especially because they pulled back from organizing and participating in membership associations that built bridges across places and brought citizens together across lines of class and occupation.

To get a handle on civic reorganization in recent times, it helps to start with a snapshot of classic U.S. civic democracy, glimpsing the deep roots of the sorts of interest groups and voluntary organizations that held sway around 1950. In this chapter I highlight the major civic transformations that unfolded after 1960 and probe their impact on the broader workings of contemporary American democracy.

1. "Classic" American Civil Society

From the point of view of sheer numbers of groups, business associations predominated in the mid-twentieth-century United States. Groups representing businesses or business people constituted about half of all nationally visible associations in 1950 and more than 40 percent in 1960 (Fox 1952; Skocpol 2003, 146–47). Yet if we examine voluntary groups with large individual memberships, we see another side of mid-century civic life. Compared to citizens of Britain and Germany—the two other advanced industrial nations surveyed in Almond and Verba (1963)—mid-century Americans of both genders and all educational levels were more likely to join and hold office in voluntary associations. What is more, Americans were involved in distinctive types of groups. Americans, Britons, and Germans joined occupationally based associations at roughly equal levels (although the British were more often members of labor unions and did not join farm groups), and respondents of all three nationalities were comparably involved in social and charitable groups. But Americans were unusually likely to claim one or more memberships in church-related associations, civic political groups, and fraternal groups—and were also significantly involved in cooperative and military veterans' associations. The fraternal category especially stands out, in that Almond and Verba tallied it *only* for the U.S. case.

In short, as late as the early 1960s, Americans were avid participants in what I call *fellowship associations*—groups emphasizing and expressing solidarity among citizens, or among "brothers" or "sisters" who see themselves as joined together in shared moral undertakings. In 1955, more than two dozen very large membership federations enrolled between one and 12 percent of American adults apiece (Skocpol 2003, 130–31). Rooted in dense networks of state and local chapters that gave them a presence in communities across the nation, major fraternal groups, religious groups, civic associations, and veterans' associations predominated among very large membership associations (apart from the AFL-CIO). Beyond very large groups, smaller nationwide membership federations also flourished in the immediate post World War II era—including elite service groups such as Rotary and the Soroptimists; civic associations such as the League of Women Voters; and dozens of fellowship and cooperative federations with memberships restricted to African Americans or to particular ethnic groups.

Most of the business associations that were so numerous in the 1950s and early 1960s grew up over the course of the twentieth century; and the same was true of professional associations, which were also numerous by mid-century. But massive, popularly rooted fellowship federations had much deeper historical roots. They started to proliferate in the fledgling United States between the American Revolution and the Civil War, and then experienced explosive growth in the late nineteenth century, as civic organizers—some of whom had met during the Civil War struggles—fanned out across the United States, organizing state and local chapters in every nook and cranny of a growing nation. Millions of nineteenth-century Americans joined women's federations, fraternal and veterans' groups, and reform

crusades. By the early twentieth century, the kinds of membership groups that had the most consistent presence, apart from churches, in towns and cities of all sizes were chapters of nation-spanning fellowship federations (Gamm and Putnam 1999, 526–27; Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson 2000, 535–36).

As the United States industrialized between the 1870s and the 1920s—an era during which business and professional groups and labor unions grew in this country as they did in other industrializing nations—fellowship federations remained a strong presence (though particular organizations came and went). In addition to the Civil War, World Wars I and II promoted the growth of fellowship federations, which worked closely with the federal government to mobilize Americans for wars (Skocpol et al. 2002). In an important sense, the United States continued preindustrial patterns of civic voluntarism through much of the industrial era, adding occupational and class-specific associations to its universe of associations while retaining older cross-class federations.

Fellowship associations usually claimed nonpartisanship, yet were often involved in public affairs. Half to two-thirds of the twenty largest membership associations of the 1950s were directly involved in legislative campaigns or public crusades of one sort or another (Skocpol 2003, 26–28). This is perhaps obvious for the AFL-CIO and the Farm Bureau Federation. But beyond these, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and the General Federation of Women's Clubs were active in a variety of legislative campaigns having to do with educational and family issues, following long traditions in women's civic activism (Skocpol 1992). The Fraternal Order of Eagles championed Social Security and other federal social programs (Davis 1948). And the American Legion drafted and lobbied for the GI Bill of 1944 (Bennett 1996, Skocpol 1997).

2. Contemporary Civic Reorganizations

Three intertwined transformations fundamentally remade American civic life after the mid-1960s. In the first place, business groups gained in absolute numbers, but in the entire universe of groups, they lost ground compared to public interest groups—such as environmental associations, pro-choice and pro-life groups, human rights groups, family values groups, and good government groups. As the total number of national associations rose from about 6,000 in 1960 to about 23,000 in 1990, the share of business associations shrank from 42 percent to 17.5 percent, while groups focused on "social welfare" and "public affairs" burgeoned from 6 percent to 17 percent (Skocpol 2003, 146–47). The balance of organized voices in U.S. public affairs shifted markedly, as new public interest groups spoke for more causes and constituencies than ever before (Berry 1999, Hayes 1986).

Secondly, once-hefty blue-collar trade unions and fellowship federations went into sharp decline (Putnam 2000, 54). Mass memberships shrank, and networks of

chapters grew sparse. Tellingly, however, elite professional societies experienced much less decline than popularly rooted membership organizations (see Skocpol 2004, 749–50).

Finally, voluntary groups founded in the 1970s and 1980s adopted new forms of organization. Some—such as public law groups, think tanks, foundations, and political action committees—are not membership groups at all. Many others are staff-centered associations that have few, if any, chapters, and recruit most supporters individually via the mail or media messages. With a few exceptions—such as the thirty-five-million-member American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)—most contemporary mailing-list groups have followings in the tens to hundreds of thousands, not millions (Smith 1992; Putnam 2000, 450).

Recently proliferating associations have other telling features. Even when they claim substantial numbers of adherents, they rarely have chapters, or they have very sparse networks of subnational affiliates (Berry 1977, 42; Putnam 2000, 51). In addition, many recently founded or expanding groups, such as environmental associations, have become more heavily invested in professional staffing (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 187–89; Shaiko 1999, 12).

To the degree that there is any exception to the civic transformations I have just recounted, it is on the conservative side of U.S. civil society. Professionally managed advocacy groups have proliferated across the board, but present-day conservatives have done more than liberals to renew or reinvent massively large, popularly rooted federations. The National Right to Life Committee, the Christian Coalition, and the National Rifle Association are all extensive chapter-based membership federations that have flourished in recent times; and the Tea Party movement is a very recent addition to this panoply. Inspired by moral and ideological worldviews, conservative populist federations have recruited people across class lines through church networks or sports clubs, linking local units to one another and into the penumbra of the Republican Party (Guth et al. 1995; McCarthy 1987). The one unabashedly liberal membership federation to experience comparable massive growth in recent decades is the National Education Association, a teachers' union.

3. The Roots of Civic Reorganization

Why did America's associational universe change so sharply in the late twentieth century? Some scholars argue that gradual changes in the choices made by masses of Americans are the principal reason for civic shifts (Putnam 2000). This is part of the explanation, but we must also focus on *a juncture of rapid civic reorganization* between the mid-1960s and the early 1990s—a juncture during which elite, well-educated Americans abandoned cross-class membership federations while launching professionally managed organizations. When a fundamental reorganization

occurs as rapidly as it did in late twentieth-century America, a combination of causal forces—not just a single causal factor—is usually at work. In this case, a critical event, the Vietnam War, coincided with converging social, political, and technological trends to spur civic reorganization.

The Vietnam War broke the tradition of cross-class civic solidarity among men. Earlier wars across U.S. history encouraged men to band together in veterans and fraternal groups. But Vietnam was a losing war and especially unpopular with educated elites. In civic life, this war drove a wedge between social strata and generations. The human rights revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s were also pivotal, because they challenged the gender roles and racial divisions that had marked U.S. associational life in previous times (Skocpol 2003, 178–99). Young people and educated Americans became reluctant to join associations with histories of racial exclusion and separation of the genders. In the same era, given the entry of more and more women into the paid labor force and the proliferation of female-led families, women were no longer available as helpmates for men's groups, making it harder for those groups to flourish. Changes in work and family life also hurt groups that needed to coordinate people's availability for recurrent meetings, as most traditional male and female associations had needed to do.

Finally, as old-line membership federations declined, national government activism and new technologies spurred the formation of professionally managed advocacy groups and institutions. We often think of voluntary groups as making demands on government—yet it is also true that government institutions and policies influence group formation. From the late 1950s and the 1960s, the federal government intervened in many new realms of social and economic life—and thousands of new associations formed in response (Skocpol 2007). For example, new advocacy groups speaking for feminists and minorities proliferated, not before, but *after* the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the establishment of federal agencies to enforce affirmative action regulations (Skocpol 2007, 47–49). As this happened in many policy areas, moreover, newly formed groups could maneuver more effectively if they hired professional staffers. Lawyers working for associations or public interest firms could bring cases before federal courts open to class action law suits. Expert staffers could manage relations with the national media, lobby proliferating numbers of Congressional aides, and contact expanding numbers of executive branch officials (Skocpol 2007, 51–52).

New technologies and resources allowed late-twentieth-century association-builders to operate from centralized offices in Washington, D.C. and New York City. Back in the nineteenth century, when Frances Willard worked to build a nationally influential federation, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, she traveled all over the country recruiting organizers to found and sustain a nationwide network of local chapters. By contrast, when Marian Wright Edelman (1987) got the inspiration to found the Children's Defense Fund, she turned to private foundations for grants and then recruited an expert staff of researchers and lobbyists. And the founder of Common Cause, John Gardner, used a few large donations to set up a mailing-list operation (McFarland 1984, Rothenberg 1992).

4. The Impact on American Democracy

Does civic reorganization matter for the health of American democracy? Democracy in the United States has been enlarged, say optimistic social analysts, by social movements and advocacy groups fighting for social rights and fresh understandings of the public interest (Berry 1999; Minkoff 1997; and Schudson 1998). Americans are reinventing community, too (Wuthnow 1994, 1998)—joining flexible small groups and engaging in ad hoc volunteering, while supporting expert advocates who speak for important values on the national stage. Many of these points are reasonable responses to pessimists who declare that contemporary civil society is falling apart. Yet those who look on the upside fail to notice that more voices are not the same thing as increased democratic capacity, and do not see that gains in racial and gender equality have been accompanied by declines in democratic participation and governance.

a. Dwindling Avenues for Participation

Scholars studying political participation have established that a combination of *resources, motivation,* and *mobilization* explains variations in who participates, how, and at what levels (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Individuals from privileged families have advantages of income and education, and also tend to be regularly contacted by civic organizers or election campaigners. What is more, people in managerial and professional careers are likely to gain skills at work that can be transferred to public activities. Nevertheless, such socioeconomic disparities can be partially counteracted if popularly rooted political parties, unions, churches, and associations mobilize and motivate average citizens and spread skills that facilitate participation.

Along with unions and farm groups, traditional U.S. fellowship federations were organizational mechanisms for widely distributing civic skills and motivation. Back in 1892, Walter B. Hill published a humorous piece in *The Century Magazine* purporting to explain to a foreign friend how the United States could be a country that encouraged every boy to aspire to be President and "every American girl to be the President's wife" when, in fact, there were not that many public offices to go around. The "great American safety valve," wrote Hill (1892, 384), is that "we are a nation of presidents" with an "an enormous supply of official positions" at the local, state, and national level in a "thousand and one societies."

Hill's (1892, 383) observations about "the significance of the non-political office-holding class in our country" identified a crucial aspect of traditional American civic life. Countless churches and voluntary groups of all sizes needed volunteer leaders. Indeed, the largest, nation-spanning voluntary federations could have as many as 15,000–17,000 local chapters, each of which needed twelve to eighteen officers and committee leaders each year. Considering just the twenty largest voluntary federations in 1955, I estimate that some 3 to 5 percent of the adult population was

serving in such leadership roles. As they cycled millions of Americans through official responsibilities, classic voluntary federations taught people how to run meetings, handle moneys, keep records, and participate in group discussions. With fresh recruits to leadership ladders in each, so many officers and activists were required that there were plenty of opportunities for men and women from blue-collar and lower-level white collar occupations. Local activists, furthermore, regularly moved up to responsibilities at district, state, and national levels.

Unions, farmers' groups, and popularly rooted cross-class federations also conveyed politically relevant knowledge and motivation. The constitutions of voluntary federations taught people about parliamentary rules and legislative, judicial, and executive functions. Membership gave them experience with elections and other forms of representative governance, and drove home concrete lessons about the relationship between taxation through dues and the association's ability to deliver collective services. Whether or not they mobilized members for legislative campaigns, all traditional voluntary associations reinforced ideals of good citizenship. They stressed that members in good standing should understand and obey laws, volunteer for military service, engage in public discussions—and, above all, vote. Gerber and Green (2000) show that people are more likely to turn out to vote in response to face-to-face appeals, and America's traditional popular associations routinely provided such appeals.

Consider by contrast the workings of today's professionally run associations. To be sure, as the Children's Defense Fund exemplifies, certain kinds of advocacy groups can enlarge our democracy by speaking on behalf of vulnerable groups that could not otherwise gain voice. Nevertheless, in an associational universe dominated by business groups and professionally managed public interest groups, the mass participatory and educational functions of classic civic America are not reproduced. Because patron grants and computerized mass mailings generate money more readily than modest dues repeatedly collected from millions of members, and because paid experts are more highly valued than volunteer leaders, today's public interest groups have little incentive to engage in mass mobilization and no need to share control with state and local chapters.

In mailing-list organizations, most adherents are seen as consumers who send money to buy a certain brand of public interest representation. Repeat adherents, meanwhile, are viewed as potential big donors (Bosso 1995, 2002; Jordan and Mahoney 1997). Professional advocacy organizations have become more and more money-hungry operations, even as the United States has experienced growing inequalities in wealth and income (as documented in Danziger and Gottschalk 1995; and Mishel, Bernstein, and Boushey 2003). America today is full of civic organizations that look upwards in the class structure—holding constant rounds of fundraisers and always on the lookout for wealthy "angels."

Today's advocacy groups are also less likely than traditional fellowship federations to entice masses of Americans *indirectly* into politics. In the past, ordinary Americans joined voluntary membership federations not for political reasons, but also in search of sociability, recreation, cultural expression, and social assistance

(Skocpol 2003). Recruitment occurred through peer networks, and people usually had a mix of reasons for joining. Men and women could be drawn in, initially, for nonpolitical reasons, yet later end up learning about public issues or picking up skills or contacts that could be relevant to legislative campaigns or electoral politics or community projects. People could also be drawn in locally, yet end up participating in state-wide or national campaigns.

But today's public interest associations are much more specialized and explicitly devoted to particular causes—like saving the environment, or fighting for affirmative action, or opposing high taxes, or promoting "good government." People have to know what they think and have some interest in national politics and the particular issue *before* they send a check. And the same tends to be true of Internet-based movements, the latest twist in civic innovation. Such electronic movements can move quickly and connect citizens across many localities; but people often need to know they care, before they click on the site. Today's advocacy groups, in short, are not very likely to entice masses of Americans indirectly into democratic politics.

For the reasons just discussed, adherents of contemporary public interest associations are heavily skewed towards the highly educated upper-middle class (Skocpol 2007, 60–61). Of course, well-educated and economically privileged Americans have always been differentially likely to participate in voluntary associations. But there used to be many federations seeking huge numbers of members; and in a country with thin strata of higher-educated and wealthy people, mass associations could thrive only by reaching deeply into the population. Nowadays, we live in a country where the top quarter of the population holds college degrees, because higher education expanded enormously in the late twentieth century (Mare 1995, 163–68; National Center for Educational Statistics 2001, 17). In consequence, groups seeking mailing-list followings in the tens to the hundreds of thousands can focus recruitment on the higher-educated—aiming to attract the very Americans who are most likely to know in advance that they care about public issues. These are the people who appreciate the mass mailings that public interest groups send out. And because higher-educated Americans have experienced sharply rising incomes in recent decades, they are also the folks who can afford to pay for professionally managed advocacy efforts.

b. Upwards-Tilted Public Agendas and Policymaking

Apart from the participatory effects of recent civic transformations, what about their broader impact on agendas of public discussion and public policymaking? Evidence is spotty, but it points towards diminished democracy. Even for the middle class, professionally led associations with virtual constituencies may not deliver as much representational clout as we sometimes imagine. In a conceptually very interesting comparison of pro-life and pro-choice mobilizations in U.S. abortion controversies, McCarthy (1987) first measures public sentiments as

reflected in national opinion surveys. At the time he wrote, such results showed that pro-choice sentiments were considerably stronger in the U.S. public, yet organized mobilization magnified the pro-life impact on public agendas and legislation far beyond what was achieved by the more popular pro-choice efforts. To see why, McCarthy argues, we must notice the gap between social movements that can build on already-existing social institutions and social networks—as the pro-life movement and other contemporary new right movements can—versus "thin infrastructure" movements run by "professional" social movement organizations that use direct-mail techniques. Although McCarthy does not deny that such thin infrastructure organizations can make some headway in translating widespread mass sentiment into publicity and legislative results, he sees them as far less effective, relative to the proportion of citizens who may hold a given position, than movements that can build on already organized, network-rich institutions and associations.

More telling is the impact of recent civic reorganizations on America's capacity to use government for socioeconomically redistributive purposes. The decline of blue-collar trade unions is surely a case in point. Unions mobilize popular constituencies electorally as well as in workplaces to demand an active government role in social redistribution. A recent study investigating variations among nations and across the U.S. states argues that union decline helps to explain shrinking electorates. "Rates of unionization are important determinants of the size of the electorate…and, thus, the extent to which the full citizenry is engaged in collective decisions.…Declines in labor organization.…mean that the electorate will increasingly over-represent higher-status individuals," according to Radcliff and Davis (2000, 140). The result, presuming that elected officials are more responsive to those who vote than those who do not, will be public policies less consistent with the interests of the working class. Furthermore, Radcliff and Davis find that "given that unions also contribute to the maintenance of left party ideology, a declining labor movement implies that left parties may move toward the center. Shrinking union memberships…thus contribute to a further narrowing of the ideological space."

The dwindling of once-huge cross-class membership federations has also affected representation and public discussion. Ideologically, traditional voluntary federations downplayed partisan causes and trumpeted values of fellowship and community service, so their decline leaves the way clear for alternative modes of public discourse less likely to facilitate social inclusion or partisan compromises. Modern advocacy associations often use "human rights talk" and champion highly specialized identities, issues, and causes. Stressing differences among groups and the activation of strong sentiments shared by relatively homogeneous followings, advocacy group tactics may further artificial polarization and excessive fragmentation in American public life (Fiorina 1999; McCarthy 1987; Skerry 1997). In Paget's (1990) eloquent phrasing, the proliferation of advocacy groups can add up to "many movements" but "no majority." Historically, popular and cross-class voluntary membership federations championed inclusive public social provision—but

contemporary advocacy groups plus business and professional associations are much less likely to do so.

Perhaps the most intriguing evidence on the distributive effects of recent civic changes appears in Berry's 1999 book, *The New Liberalism.* As his longitudinal research shows, professionally run public interest groups made quality of life causes such as environmentalism more visible and often prevailed in head-to-head legislative battles with business interests. But Berry also shows that, at least in the late twentieth century, public interest associations crowded out advocacy by unions and other groups speaking for the interests and values of blue-collar Americans; and liberal advocates rarely allied with traditional liberal groups on behalf of redistributive social programs. "Liberal citizen groups," Berry writes, "have concentrated on issues that appeal to their middle-class supporters.... as the new left grew and grew, the old left was... increasingly isolated" (1999, 55–7).

5. Conclusion

The upshot of recent, epochal changes in American civic democracy is paradoxical: Variety and voice have been enhanced in the new U.S. civic universe forged by the organizing upsurges of the 1960s to the 1990s. But the gains in voice and public leverage have mainly accrued to the top tiers of U.S. society, while Americans who are not wealthy or higher-educated now have fewer associations representing their values and interests and enjoy dwindling opportunities for active participation.

For all of their effectiveness in mobilizing citizens across class lines, traditional U.S. fellowship federations were usually racist and gender-exclusive, and they failed to pursue many causes that are vital for Americans today. Yet the recent proliferation of professionally managed civic organizations—from advocacy groups to nonprofit agencies to internet advocacy groups—creates a situation in which the most active Americans tend to be higher-educated and privileged people, Americans who know what to look for in the public realm, and who often do things *for* their fellow citizens rather than *with* them. On the liberal side of the partisan spectrum, especially, there are too few opportunities for large numbers of Americans to work together for broadly shared values and interests. This leaves U.S. public life impoverished, and suggests that those organizing to shape the political future must continue to look for innovative ways to recreate the best traditions of American civic life, while preserving and extending the gains of recent times.

For their own partisan purposes from the heyday of the Christian Coalition in the 1980s and 1990s to the outburst of the Tea Party movement from 2008, contemporary U.S. conservatives have created new combinations of centralized and local action. They have revived or newly built associational networks that link local energies with national lobbying, and that successfully engage a wide variety of Americans in civic and political action. Liberals have been slower to innovate in comparable

ways, but there have been new efforts in the environmental and labor movements to combine national advocacy with community-building. What is more, from the 2004 through the 2008 electoral cycles, liberals did much innovative mobilization within the U.S. federal system, culminating in a remarkable engagement of young people and minorities in the 2008 presidential campaign of Democrat Barack Obama, whose organization creatively combined central discipline, the use of new information technologies, and local, face-to-face volunteerism.

But involvements and enthusiasms dwindled after Obama assumed the presidency and lobbyists in Washington, D.C. appeared to take charge once again. Electoral organizing alone is not enough to close civic engagement gaps in American civic and political life. Nor is any kind of politically partisan organizing likely to recreate the ongoing local and national ties that bound together so many millions of Americans of all walks of life from the early-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century. Despite promising recent experiments, the future of democratic civic engagement in the United States is at best partly cloudy—and will remain so as long as inequalities of education and resources are so vast, and as long as there are so many incentives for elites to pull levers from above without inviting the sustained involvement of millions of fellow citizens.

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