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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION, SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SOCIAL LEARNING IN THE UNITED STATES, 1960-1995

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We are clearly entering a period of very interesting, if not profoundly significant, change in American politics, and the question of citizen participation in shaping this change ought to be a central one. Might a movement for civic renewal and a new citizenship be able to add new vitality to our democratic system, and provide a robust civic "center" around which our parties can realign? Or will that system further decay in a "demosclerosis" (Rauch ,1994) of special interest claims that themselves represent an all too effective form of citizen advocacy? Will we be able to increasingly make "public policy for democracy," as Helen Ingram and Steven Rathgeb Smith's (1993) recent book argues, or will policy remain captured by narrow interests and technocratic solutions—or worse, unravel in the search for cheap and easy solutions? Will populist anger and disaffection help renew our representative institutions—and, indeed, our social welfare institutions—or will it sweep aside much that is valuable to them?

There are many factors that will determine the answer to these questions over the next decade, if this is indeed roughly the correct time frame in which to expect some clearer outlines and indicators. And much is unpredictable, to be sure. But certainly part of the answer will lie in what kinds of citizen participation we can fashion as historical actors, whether this be as ordinary citizens engaged in community problem solving, extension agents helping to facilitate such a process, analysts whose policy designs enhance rather than undermine civic capacities, or politicians who begin to rethink their roles in the face of the limits of their own capacities to solve problems, aggregate interests and fulfill promises.

What I want to do is argue that in taking on this task of fashioning and refurbishing citizen participation, we have reasonably solid foundations upon which to build. While many of the indicators of civic decline are certainly cause for concern, we are far from being a society whose reservoir of social capital is slowly draining away, or whose capacity for participatory innovation has been exhausted. Indeed, the past 30 years have witnessed some very significant social learning and capacity building, even in some arenas where overall measures of social capital reveal decline.

This seeming paradox appears when we examine the development of urban community organizing, for instance. And in some important arenas,

such as the environment, our stocks of social capital—and the kinds of social capital that can be applied to complex public problem solving—have been substantially enhanced over the past three decades. How can we understand these developments? How might we build upon them and use them to further enhance our capacities for civic education and reflective practice?

The work of Robert Putnam (1993a, 1995) and others has recently focused attention on social capital as those features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. Putnam (1995: 67) summarizes elegantly a range of social theorizing that leads us to believe that stocks of social capital enhance capacities for community problem solving:

> In the first place, networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. When economic and political negotiation are embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism are reduced. At the same time, networks of civic engagement embody past success at collaboration, which can serve as a cultural template for future collaboration. Finally, dense networks of interaction probably broaden the participants' senses of self, developing the "I" into the "we," or (in the language of rational choice theorists) enhancing the participants' "tastes" for collective benefits.

As Putnam fully recognizes, however, there are many unanswered questions about the mechanisms through which social capital produces better schools or more effective government, or which types of social capital are needed to help solve which kinds of problems. And there is a host of complex questions about the impact of social policy and the role of administrators, made ever more pressing by a polarized political debate about more state intervention or more markets, that tends to ignore the civic fabric in between.

Let me elaborate in some detail on what I think the contours of social learning and capacity building have been over the past three decades in one of the arenas that I examine in my forthcoming book, namely the environmental arena, and then more briefly in several other arenas, and suggest that there is a more complex — and also more hopeful — story than the one of decline that Putnam tells, or that the political metaphor of "bowling alone" suggests.

Civic and Grassroots Environmentalism

Beginning in the 1980s, more participatory alternatives to top-down environmental regulation and the public lobby model of formal citizen participation, which often enhanced the rigidity of regulation, started to emerge in the United States. Grassroots groups, particularly in the area of toxics, exploded onto the scene, and a variety of other civic approaches spread more quietly through state and local networks of officials, nonprofit groups, corporate environmental affairs offices and federal regulatory agencies (Sirianni and Friedland, 1995; John, 1994). But how are we to understand this as a process of social capital building? I would stress several kinds of things here.

First, and quite simply, in the area of environmental protection, social capital has had to be self-consciously developed. Addressing the complex and relatively new problems of environmental protection could not rely on stocks of social capital as these existed in the 1950s or 1960s. Neither bowling leagues nor church groups addressed these issues. Old conservation groups did so, but the major ones that dominated the scene up until the late 1960s had distinctly technocratic views (Pollack, 1985), and the new ones created by the movements of the 1960s and 1970s had quite limited perspectives and capacities for collaborative problem solving at the community level (Gottlieb, 1993). Given the complexity of problems, the uncertainty of all regulatory tools available in 1970, and the political opportunity structure that favored a turn to courts and congressional committees (Harris and Milkis ,1989), the task of generating new forms of social capital that might address problems effectively was clearly — if only retrospectively — one for extended social learning and capacity building. Measures of the general decline of social capital cannot tell us much about this directly, or help explain the crisis of institutions and governance in the environmental arena. Even more specific measures can be deceiving. The League of Women Voters, for instance, has experienced a 42 percent decline in its membership from 1969, yet has been an important civic innovator in groundwater, solid waste and other areas, and in forging new kinds of community networks in the environmental arena in this very same period (Sirianni and Friedland, 1995; League of Women Voters Education Fund, 1994).

Second, we need to understand the complex ways that new rights to participation within the public lobby regulatory regime have fostered the development of social capital. There are several major ways that this has been occurring.

One is that mandated citizen participation has tended, over time, to generate valuable experience and personal networks among representatives

of various civic and environmental organizations, and between them and corporate environmental affairs officers and agency staff. The participatory water programs of the 1970s, for instance, which were based on a far-reaching mandate of the Clean Water Act of 1972, were disorganized and ineffective in many ways (Cohen, 1979; Godschalk and Stiftel, 1981; Rosenbaum, 1976). But members of local Leagues of Women Voters, state and local chapters of the Sierra Club, and other environmental organizations who took part in them, were often the very same people who, in the 1980s, helped to develop more effective and collaborative local groundwater approaches, state-wide common ground projects, and national estuary programs based on the civic cultivation of a protective ethic with institutional support from EPA (Goslant, 1988; Nelson, 1990).

Another dimension of this is that citizen participation rights have established a much more even balance of power among contending parties and have given environmental organizations the capacity to impose costs on corporate managers. This power balance has been a precondition for developing forms of collaboration based on increased trust within regulatory communities (Ayers and Braithwaite, 1992; Meidinger, 1987; Harris, 1989). The period in which such rights are initially established and broader participation is mobilized tends to be one of heightened conflict and polarization. Yet actors tend to learn that there are less costly and more collaborative ways to proceed, and new social networks give them the opportunity to pursue these based on the development of trust and recognition of legitimate interests. On the national forests, more deliberative cultures and the use of alternative dispute resolution, open decision making and ecosystem management emerged only in the wake of an extended period of conflict, during which citizen participation mandates were put into effect (Wondolleck, 1988; Shannon, 1989; Simon, Shands and Liggett, 1993).

Still, one further way that rights can help generate social capital is seen most clearly perhaps in the Emergency Planning and Community Right-To-Know Act (EPCRA) of 1986. Passed as part of a highly-contested Superfund re-authorization, EPCRA established a Toxics Release Inventory (TRI) of industry output by plant, and thus encouraged not only local involvement, but regional and national support networks to assist citizens in utilizing this geographically-organized database. Aside from enhancing citizen power in legal and regulatory channels, these information rights have enhanced their power in the court of local public opinion, and have thus spurred new norms of voluntary compliance, "good neighbor agreements" and voluntarily established citizen advisory committees to oversee performance (Hadden, 1989; Roy, 1992; Valelly, 1993: Good Neighbor Project, 1994; Cohen, 1995). In a complex regulatory environment, citizen rights to information become a key mechanism for amplifying reputation within social networks.

Third, social capital building in the environmental arena can and has been promoted by administrative action. Of course, one could argue that administrative action has not lived up to its potential — a view I would certainly share — or that it has also destroyed some kinds of social capital — a possibility that I would accept in principle, but am more skeptical of measuring empirically.

There are a variety of ways that administrators have helped develop social capital. One way is through grants that support local capacity building and broader network formation. EPA grants to support local management conferences within the National Estuaries Program, to aid civic environmental groups such as Save the Bay in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, to establish the independent RTK-Net, and to foster network building within emergent place-driven and sustainable development approaches, are all examples of this. Such administrative strategies within EPA can serve its own need for broad public legitimacy, as well as help generate local public support for taxes and bond issues to improve sewage and treatment facilities and the like (Goslant, 1988).

The Office of Environmental Justice at EPA has developed a small grants program to develop community groups' capacities to problem-solve on toxics and to help generate volunteer efforts from other community institutions, such as churches and local businesses. And with formal rights to participate in setting agency policy established through the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, activist leaders have come to recognize a "new paradigm" (Bullard, 1994) within the agency that fosters empowerment, trust building and problem solving (Gaylord, 1994; Knox 1994; Smith, 1994).

The policy design of Superfund profoundly impairs more deliberative and collaborative responses to toxics, to be sure (Landy, Roberts and Thomas, 1990; Mazmanian and Morell, 1992), and thus complicates the capacity-building effects of administrative support to local groups. But policy-oriented learning over the past decade has now established a relatively solid knowledge base, if not political calculus, for a more consistently civic approach (Hird, 1994; Sirianni and Friedland, 1995; Rabe, 1994).

Administrators have also taken an active role in developing new norms and networks. The Design for the Environment Program at EPA facilitates collaboration within trade associations, and among employers, workers and environmental groups, to establish voluntary toxic reduction priorities for their industries, generate the information needed to develop new production techniques that are cost effective, test and refine these, and disseminate results through national and regional networks. It explicitly seeks to

mobilize assets within voluntary associations and to cultivate norms of civic responsibility (Topper, 1994; CPN Environment Case Studies, 1995).

These kinds of programs also provide incentives for national environmental organizations to place greater emphasis on civic and local learning approaches (Roy, 1992). Forest rangers have helped citizen groups get organized, and have facilitated informal network building among varied forest-use constituencies, in some cases building the basis for a local civic culture on forests in the Northwest that has had much deeper historical roots in the Northeast (Shannon, 1989). Middle-level civil servants in the Army Corps of Engineers have removed themselves as a party in some disputes to play a facilitative role in consensus building and providing technical advice among varied constituencies (Delli Priscoli, 1988; Langton, 1994). Civil servants have also taken initiative to establish broad networks to foster citizen participation and exchange "best practices," such as the Interagency Council for Citizen Participation in the 1970s and the International Association of Public Participation Practitioners in the 1980s and 1990s, and staff from environmental agencies have played a key role in these (Delli Priscoli, 1994).

Fourth, the development of the capacities of state and local regulatory agencies over the course of the 1970s, under great pressure from Washington, and the policy vacuum at the federal level in the early 1980s, permitted "shadow learning communities" (John, 1994) among regulators, nonprofits and businesses to innovate with new civic environmental approaches. Many of the state and local reforms did not have a major civic component, but many others did. They built upon and further reinforced networks of practitioners from civic and environmental organizations at the state and local levels.

Fifth, and not least important, the environmental movements of the period have been a vast reservoir for generating social capital. I do not simply mean dues-paying memberships in large environmental and other public interest organizations, which, of course, have grown enormously since the 1960s and have focused largely on lobbying and litigation. Nor do I mean participation in grassroots protest organizations as such, which has also grown substantially. Rather, I mean the activist social networks that have focused on problem solving and developed new forms of local collaboration and civic education.

I know of no quantitative measures of this more delimited category, though the evidence from innumerable case studies and local reports points clearly towards the conclusion that the past 25 years have seen a very substantial increase in these kinds of community-based efforts. From my

review of cases, as well as the careers of civic practitioners in the environmental arena, several kinds of dynamics stand out:

a) local protest organizations often shift emphasis towards building broader networks that can sustain collaborative and voluntary solutions while maintaining a power base for conflict, if need be. The dynamic here is quite similar to one that has been evident in the field of community organizing, as we shall see below, and it is reinforced when officials and adversaries show a willingness to engage in community dispute resolution, open decision-making and the like. An increasing number of citizen environmental guides and dispute resolution techniques build upon the lessons of these kinds of experiences (Crowfoot and Wondolleck, 1990, Bidol, Bardwell and Manring, 1986; Suskind and Cruikshank, 1987), and;

b) individual activists, whether they remain with these organizations or not, see their own shift in style to collaborative and trust-building methods as developmental progress, both personally and politically, and a form of learning that is consonant with the values that underlay their initial involvement in the movement and their deeper commitment to participatory democracy. This is often accompanied by their settling into specific communities of place after an earlier period of greater transience.

To summarize my argument so far: the very complexity and newness of the problems, the relative weight of top-down regulatory tools and political-legal opportunities at the beginning of the new social regulation, and the very modest capacity to translate existing stocks of social capital from the 1950s and 1960s into environmental problem solving, confronted the United States with a challenge that would inevitably have required an extended period of participatory social learning and capacity building. The mechanisms through which this has occurred over the past quarter of a century have been varied and complex, and in some ways even paradoxical and contradictory. And much remains to be done to develop social capital and civic innovation further, not least in the area of policy design. The measures of this learning and capacity building are rough, to be sure[1]. But on the basis of what we know in several areas—the number and diversity of civic environmental innovations, the extent of local involvement in them, and the policy-oriented learning associated with them—the year 1995 represents a very substantial advance over the year 1970, when the National Environmental Protection Act went into effect. We still face the task of understanding the relationship of this to other measures of the erosion of social capital. But there seems little doubt that we have a much more robust foundation upon which to build in the environmental arena that we did 25 years ago.

The Broader Contours and Challenges

The story in other arenas is different than this, to be sure. Take urban community organizing and community development. The flight of the black middle class from urban ghettos once economic opportunities improved and housing discrimination barriers were lowered, had the effect of thinning out cross-class networks and community assets. Capital flight, post-industrial development and federal housing policy contributed to further isolation and concentration of the urban poor (Wilson ,1987). Yet, in the arena of community organizing and community development, there has also been very substantial learning and capacity building over the past 30 years. In early 1964, the OEO community action program had not yet been devised, and only a few experiments in the Ford Foundation's "gray areas" program existed. Alinsky organizing projects were alive and well in only a handful of cities, and their philosophy and techniques were crude by today's standards in the Industrial Areas Foundation. Very few community development corporations existed, and support from city governments for community-based development was virtually nil. Neighborhood participation in local government was channeled through party ward bosses.

Today, by contrast, there are several thousand community development corporations across the country, and as many as 6,000 other community organizations. Congregation-based organizing that derives from Alinsky has many durable and influential projects, refined leadership development and capacities for collaboration with government and business, four major networks and is growing steadily. And other modifications of the Alinsky model have substantial membership, influence and training capacities. There are far more multi-racial community organizations and community development projects than ever before. Extensive national support networks exist for community-based development, as well as a good number of state- and city-wide networks. Many cities have expanded their capacities for community development and recruited innovative leaders of community organizations to staff housing, planning and other agencies. And some cities have developed formal systems of neighborhood associations where citizen participation is robust (Berry, Portney and Thomson, 1993). The capacity of community-based organizations to engage in complex public-private partnerships, and the availability of workable models for this, are far greater than in the 1960s and have been increasing steadily. As Paul Brophy (1993: 223) argues, "Far more capacity exists at the neighborhood level to effect change than ever before."

Civic innovation in other arenas is also progressing in many forms. Civic journalism experiments have begun to redefine the relation of news media to public debate and community problem solving in an increasing number

of news organizations (Schaffer and Miller, 1995; CPN Civic Journalism Case Studies, 1995). Health decisions groups and community health partnerships have continued to refine their practices, and in cases such as Oregon, have demonstrated a capacity to shape statewide policy making and reform. Electronic networking projects show an increasing focus on public problem solving and social capital building (Friedland forthcoming). Common Ground and community dispute resolution projects have developed ways of collaborating across difficult value divides, such as abortion, and have built networks and training capacities to diffuse these approaches.

The point is not to paint a rosy picture. Indeed, in many areas, overall conditions have deteriorated and the complexity of problems seems to be outrunning the capacities of our regulatory, social welfare and political institutions to solve them. But this is also what is driving civic innovation.

As we move forward in trying to enrich the social capital perspective, several things need to be emphasized. First, the period from the 1960s to the present has clearly been a complex one regarding the development and depletion of social capital. If indicators of net gains and losses are quite revealing, it is important to focus as well on the specific arenas in which civic capacity has been built over an extended period of time, and on the mechanisms through which this has occurred. After all, this is the most promising foundation upon which we are likely to be able to build in the coming years, even if we clearly need to further refine our capacity-building approaches, invent new ones and develop much better policy supports.

The "participatory revolution" of the 1960s has had complex and often paradoxical impacts on participation itself (Dionne, 1991: Huntington, 1980). But it also signalled the beginning of an extended period of social learning and capacity building that has been quite impressive.

Viewed from the perspective of the development and refinement of new civic models, support networks, practitioner skills, legal opportunities and —at least in some areas such as the environment—quantitative increases in civic participation—the glass is half full. Viewed from the perspective of the complexity of problems to be solved, net indicators of overall depletion of social capital, and the capacity of our other institutions (parties, interest groups, media, legislatures, etc.) to reinvent themselves in such a way as to foster collaborative problem solving and deliberative democratic approaches, the glass seems half empty, and perhaps draining quickly.

How we choose to view this is partly a question of scholarly analysis, where we will continue to debate the relative importance of different factors and policy alternatives. But it is also partly a question of the choice of

political metaphor. It is hoped that the metaphor of "bowling alone" does not eclipse the metaphor of citizens "working together," which seems equally important as a discursive resource that can enhance capacities to learn and act.

Secondly, in thinking about social capital development and depletion, it is important that increasing attention be paid to the specific characteristics of problem areas, what makes them increasingly complex and challenging, and what specific kinds of social capital stocks might be drawn upon in addressing them.

As the cases of civic environmentalism and community development show, it cannot be assumed that pre-existing stocks of social capital could have served as an adequate foundation for building capacities in new and more complex problem arenas, even if some of them might have been more effectively preserved and utilized. This is also the case in areas such as health and aging and others as well.

Thus, as we think about general measures, and even some policy options with potentially broad impacts (community service, working time alternatives), we need to continually bring these down to the level of problem specificity.

The "tale of decline" based on general measures can romanticize the degree to which previously existing stocks of social capital might have been applied to our increasingly complex problems, and obscure the specific challenges that we face.

Thirdly, to build the kinds of social capital that can permit us to more effectively address highly complex social problems with an increasingly complex array of social actors will require greater capacities for participatory learning and assessment within many institutional arenas. Much learning has occurred over the past three decades, but developing capacities for reflective civic practice needs to become further refined, systematic and widespread. Improved scholarly assessment tools are important, but much more emphasis should be on developing collaborative learning communities within organizations and policy arenas themselves, including state agencies, legislatures, interest groups, media, and civic organizations (Sirianni, Boyte, Delli Priscoli and Barber, 1994; Sirianni, Friedland and Schuler, 1994).

If the problems associated with the elderly and health (including the financing of these) are to be addressed creatively in the coming years, for instance, then organizations like AARP will have to learn how to further build the civic capacities of its 33 million members, and direct these

increasingly toward self-help, intergenerational community projects, and health-values dialogue at the policy level and within specified health institutions, such as managed care, and less toward merely lobbying as a special interest group for benefits and entitlements. It does not seem possible to come to grips with the long-term problems of an aging society, chronic illness and high-tech medical culture, rising expectations about the quality of life, and issues of equity among the generations, unless interest groups such as AARP develop much more robust civic capacities, and are challenged to do so by our political leaders.

If legislatures, for their part, are to develop effective policies with enhanced public legitimacy in areas with divided constituencies and difficult trade-offs, then they will increasingly have to learn how to complement their own deliberative and representative functions with an array of community dialogue, visioning and dispute-resolution practices, as has happened in the Oregon health plan and an increasing number of environmental policy dialogues. In many ways, perhaps, the very role of political leaders will have to change, since representative institutions alone, under massive and cross-cutting pulls by special interest groups, seem less capable of solving complex problems, and political parties manifest long-term decline and a decreased capacity to aggregate interests (Silbey, 1994).

In short, what I am arguing is that we need to develop robust and complementary projects for case-based civic education that can enhance reflective practice among many kinds of civic actors: local citizen and community groups, civil servants in regulatory and social welfare agencies, elected representatives at local, state and national levels, advocacy groups that may lobby for the special interests of their members, journalists who frame the way we see problems, professionals who apply their expertise to fix them, and public policy analysts who develop the policy designs that can enhance our civic capacities, or, as is more typical, deplete them. The movement for a "new citizenship" or "national renewal" (American Civic Forum, 1994; Gardner, 1994; Broder, 1994) has begun to do this. The Civic Practices Network (on the World Wide Web at http://cpn.journalism.wisc.edu/cpn) as well as the Alliance for National Renewal and other projects, bring together partners from many civic organizations, as well as some from government, to develop and broadly share the kinds of stories, case studies, evaluation and training tools that can serve as a much more solid foundation for learning and innovation. Similar projects exist within particular areas.

If there is one lesson that I would leave for all public policy educators, it would be this: we all have a responsibility to develop the case-based and practice-based tools for a broad civic education through which our citizens

can develop the capacities for collaborating to solve the increasingly complex and obdurate problems of the 21st century. We cannot hope to develop the robust foundation for a "public policy for democracy" that enhances civic capacities rather than depleting them, unless we assume these responsibilities. We cannot hope to educate policy makers and challenge the appeal of simplistic solutions from the right or the left, unless we have much richer educational tools for community problem-solving and deliberative democratic dialogue. Policy educators are hardly the only ones that have this responsibility, or who can contribute to our fund of practical tools, of course. Civic and community groups themselves, foundation program officers who fund them, and civil servants who collaborate with them can also contribute enormously to a common and high visibility project that uncovers best practices, educates through rich case studies, and helps create citizens capable of reflective civic practice in all of our institutions and in whatever professional role they may play.

We have learned a great deal about citizen participation over the past three decades. We have built important capacities, refined our practices and learned many lessons in both failure and success. But the problems of our political, social welfare and regulatory institutions today require much more sustained and common focus to build upon this legacy, and to ensure that many more of our citizens and our leaders can learn to become effective civic practitioners capable of renewing our institutions from the inside out.

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[1] John (1994) utilizes two indexes: the Renew American Environmental Success Index and the Green Index. I have reviewed case studies in specific policy areas that give an indication of policy-oriented learning, and have interviewed civic practitioners within a number of different networks. I do not know of an existing quantititative measure of local environmental problem solving, as distinct from protest, however, or the dynamic between these over time.

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