The Narrowing of Civic Life

Professionally run and donor-funded organizations are trampling America's real grass roots. What's the upshot? Our democracy suffers and elites dominate.

BY THEDA SKOCPOL

COMING TOGETHER IN TRADE UNIONS AND FARMers' associations, fraternal chapters and veterans' organizations, women's groups and public-reform crusades, Americans more than a century ago created a raucous democracy in which citizens from all walks of life could be leaders and help to shape community life and public agendas. But U.S. civic life has changed fundamentally in recent decades. Popular membership groups have faded while professionally managed groups have proliferated. Ordinary citizens today have fewer opportunities for active civic participation, and big-money donors have gained new sway. Not coincidentally, public agendas are skewed toward issues and values that matter most to the highly educated and the wealthy.

To understand the changes wrought by this sweeping civic reorganization, it is useful to consider the significant role these membership groups played in American life dating back at least a century. From the 1800s through the mid-1900s, countless churches and voluntary groups of all sizes needed volunteer leaders. Indeed, the country's largest nation-spanning voluntary federations could have as many as 15,000 to 17,000 local chapters, each of which might need at least a dozen officers and committee leaders each year. Looking at the nation's 20 largest voluntary federations alone in 1955, my colleagues and I estimate that some 3 percent to 5 percent of the adult population was serving in leadership roles—and that additional recruits would be needed each year.

Voluntary federations taught people how to run meetings, handle money, keep records, and participate in group discussions. Often, they exposed members to the inner workings of representative democracy—from parliamentary procedures and elections to legislative, judicial, and executive functions. And, importantly, these 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. Political scientists Alan Gerber and Don Green 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.

This exposure to democracy in action wasn't reserved for the elite alone. Many such organizations mixed social classes. There were plenty of opportunities for men and women from blue-collar and lower-level white-collar occupations to participate. And within the world of volunteerism, upward mobility was possible, as local activists got on leadership ladders toward responsibilities at district, state, and national levels.

Like citizens of other advanced-industrial democracies, Americans joined occupationally based groups. But they were more likely to belong to what I call fellowship associations—with members from various occupations who saw themselves as joined together in shared moral undertakings. 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 organizations of military veterans predominated.

All sorts of large membership associations were involved in public affairs. This is obvious for what's now the AFL-CIO and the American Farm Bureau Federation. Beyond these, to give just a few examples, the 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. The American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars sought benefits for veterans and their families. And the Fraternal Order of Eagles championed Social Security and other federal social programs.

BY THE 1960S, THESE OLD-LINE MEMBERSHIP ORGANizations began to decline, to be replaced by professionally managed advocacy groups and institutions. These new groups arose partly in response to a newly activist national government. 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 '60s, the federal government intervened in many

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new realms of social and economic life—and thousands of new associations formed in response. 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. As this happened in many policy areas, moreover, newly formed groups could maneuver more effectively if they hired professional staff members—lawyers who could advocate and litigate on behalf of their unique interests, media-relations experts who could spin the national media, and lobbyists who could press the groups' cases before a growing army of congressional aides and executive-branch officials.

At the same time, new technologies and resources allowed the association-builders to operate from centralized offices in Washington and New York. Back in the 19th century, when Frances Willard was working to build the nationally influential Woman's Christian Temperance Union, she traveled across the country recruiting organizers to found and sustain a nationwide network of local chapters. By contrast, when Marian Wright Edelman was inspired to launch 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 big donations to set up a mailing-list operation.

To be sure, as the Children's Defense Fund illustrates, certain kinds of advocacy groups can enlarge our democracy by speaking on behalf of vulnerable citizens who could not otherwise gain voice. Nevertheless, in an associational universe dominated by business organizations and professionally managed 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 for the public functions of today's public-interest groups, the leaders of these groups have little incentive to engage in mass mobilization and no need to share leadership and organizational 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-money donors. This money chase overlaps with America's growing economic inequality to further marginalize those with few resources. America today is full of civic organizations that look upward in the class structure, holding constant rounds of fund-raisers and always on the lookout for wealthy "angels."

Today's advocacy groups are also less likely than traditional membership federations to entice masses of Americans *indirectly* into democratic politics. In the past, ordinary Americans joined voluntary membership federations not only for political reasons but also in search of sociability, recreation, cultural expression, and social assistance. 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, electoral politics, or community projects. But today's public-interest associations are much more specialized and explicitly devoted to particular causes—like saving the environment, fighting for affirmative action, opposing high taxes, or promoting "good government." People have to know what they think, and have to have some interest in politics and the particular issue, *before* they send a check.

Advocacy groups no longer function as mass-membership organizations, leaving many without a voice.

THREE INTERTWINED TRANSFORMATIONS FUNDAmentally remade American civic life after the mid-1960s. At first, business groups lost ground as a wide array of public-interest groups—environmental associations, abortion-rights and anti-abortion advocates, good-government groups, and so on—proliferated. In the years between 1960 and 1990, the total number of national associations grew from some 6,000 to 23,000; of those, the share comprising business associations shrank from 42 percent to 18 percent, while groups focused on social welfare and public affairs burgeoned from 6 percent to 17 percent. 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.

Secondly, once-hefty blue-collar trade unions and fellowship federations went into sharp decline. Mass memberships shrank, and networks of chapters grew much sparser. Tellingly, however, elite professional societies experienced much less decline than popularly rooted membership organizations.

Finally, voluntary groups founded in the 1970s and '80s adopted new forms of organization. Some—such as public law groups, think tanks, foundations, and political action committees—are not actually membership groups at all. And many others are staff-centered associations that have few, if any, chapters and recruit most supporters individually via the mail or media messages.

No single cause spurred the great civic reorganization. Instead, the Vietnam War coincided with social, political, and technological trends to undercut older groups and encourage new civic ventures. Unlike earlier wars, which brought millions of American men together in veterans' and fraternal groups, the experience in Vietnam broke the tradition of cross-class civic solidarity. Instead, the war drove a wedge between social strata and generations.

The "rights revolutions" of the 1960s and '70s also transformed civic life. As new ideals of racial and gender integration took hold, young people and educated Americans became reluctant to join associations with histories of racial exclusion and separation of the genders. The mass movement of women into the paid labor force, the increase in female-led families, and related changes in work and family life also presented new obstacles to participation.

APART FROM SHRINKING OPPORTUNITIES FOR participation, changes in civic life have undercut America's capacity to use government for broad socioeconomic redistribution. The weakening of labor unions helps to explain declining voter participation among less privileged citizens and tilts public debates away from policies helpful to the working class. Similarly, the dwindling of once-huge cross-class membership federations has hurt the prospects of policy-making for the majority.

Historically, popular and cross-class voluntary membership federations championed inclusive social programs. My favorite example is the (otherwise conservative) American Legion, which drafted, lobbied for, and helped to implement the GI Bill of 1944, one of the most generous and inclusive federal social programs ever enacted. The American Legion had a nationwide network of chapters that could persuade conservative and liberal congressional representatives alike to support generous veterans' benefits—and it was motivated to take this course both to help veterans and by the hope of attracting millions of new dues-paying members from the ranks of the 16 million Americans who served in the military during World War II.

Ideologically, many traditional voluntary federations trumpeted values of fellowship and community service, so their decline leaves the way clear for alternative modes of public discourse less likely to facilitate broad social programs. Modern advocacy associations are more likely to use "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. In the eloquent phrasing of Karen Paget [see "Citizen Organizing: Many Movements, No Majority," *TAP*, Summer 1990], the proliferation of advocacy groups can add up to "many movements" but "no majority."

Perhaps the most intriguing evidence on the distributive effects of recent civic changes appears in Jeffrey Berry's recent book, *The New Liberalism*. As Berry's longitudinal research shows, professionally run public-interest groups have increasingly made quality-of-life causes such as environmentalism more visible, and they have increasingly prevailed after going head to head with business interests in legislative battles. But Berry also offers some more discouraging data. Recent gains by citizen associations have crowded out advocacy by unions and other groups speaking for the interests and values of blue-collar Americans. Furthermore, Berry shows that liberal-leaning citizen-advocacy groups have become *less* likely over time to ally with traditional liberal groups on behalf of redistributive social programs, instead favoring "issues that appeal to their middle-class supporters."

SO WHAT? DOES CIVIC REORGANIZATION MATTER FOR the health of American democracy? Optimists correctly point out that public agendas have been enlarged by expert advocacy groups fighting for social rights and fresh understandings of the public interest. Yet those who look on the upside fail to notice that more voices are not the same thing as increased democratic capacity. And they do not see that gains in racial and gender equality have been accompanied by erosions of cross-class fellowship and democratic participation and representation.

Scholars have established that a combination of resources, motivation, and mobilization explains who participates in public life, how, and at what levels. Individuals from privileged families have advantages of income and education, gain civic skills at work, and also tend to be regularly contacted by civic organizers and election campaigns. Nevertheless, civic disparities can be partially counteracted if popularly rooted political parties, unions, churches, and associations spread skills and mobilize and motivate average citizens.

The bottom line is that variety and voice have been enhanced in the new American civic universe forged by organizing upsurges from the 1960s to the 1990s. But the gains in voice and public leverage have mainly accrued to the top tiers of U.S. society; Americans who are not wealthy or well educated now have fewer associations representing their values and interests, and fewer opportunities for participation.

The shift from mass-membership federations to professional organizations has profoundly affected the political economy of influence. Not surprisingly, research shows that highly educated, upper-middle-class people are the ones most likely to send checks to public-interest advocacy groups. And the same seems to be true of Internet-based movements, the latest twist in civic innovation.

Given that powerful forces have propelled civic reorganization, what can be done? Clearly, it is neither possible nor desirable to go back to the traditional world of American voluntarism. For all of their effectiveness in mobilizing citizens across class lines, traditional fellowship federations were usually racist and gender-exclusive. What's more, 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—creates a situation in which the most active Americans tend to be higher-educated and privileged people doing things *for* their fellow citizens, rather than *with* them. On the liberal side of the spectrum, especially, there are too few opportunities for large numbers of Americans to work together for broadly shared values and interests. This leaves our public life impoverished and suggests that those organizing to shape the political future must find innovative ways to re-create the best traditions of American civic life while preserving and extending the gains of recent times. ■

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