

**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: WHY DO WE GET INVOLVED?**  
**MOTIVATION, OPPORTUNITY AND MOBILIZATION**

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## ***I. Citizens and Democracy: Who drives our Government?***

The question “what makes democracy work?” has captivated political scientists for decades. In 1993, Robert Putnam threw a new concept into the ring with his book detailing the development of democratic regional governments in modern-day Italy. “Civic engagement,” he claimed, was a major factor behind both successful economic development and effective governance in the new polities. According to Putnam (1993), civic engagement is characterized by the presence of horizontal patterns of interaction, trust, and norms of cooperation. Newspaper readership, referenda voting, and particularly membership in associations foster the creation and maintenance of these norms and networks, which in turn encourage and facilitate effective democratic governance. Putnam portrays politics as either hierarchically organized and characterized by personal privilege at its worst, or based on “collective deliberation” at its best. The face of governance, Putnam argued, could be altered by the level of engagement of the citizenry.

But can we believe this? What level of civic engagement (or what Putnam also calls “social capital”) is necessary to affect the behavior of political elites, to overcome “uncivic” surroundings, to mitigate the low socioeconomic status of a citizenry? Do parties or the state itself have no role in creating social capital – are they only altered by it? As with any new idea that has potentially far-reaching implications for an entire area of political inquiry, Putnam’s notion of social capital has been greeted by those who study political participation first with enthusiasm, and second with what are legitimate questions about its foundations and applications.

This paper will review only a select few of those questions, with a focus on civic engagement as a unique form of political participation. This review will lead us to a particular weakness in Putnam’s work involving his speculations on the determinants of social capital. While Putnam has considered (in work subsequent to his book) several possible determinants of individuals’ levels of civic engagement, he has failed to ground this discussion in a specific conceptual framework. I will argue that if we are to see civic engagement as a special form of political participation having unique impacts on governance, we need first to establish its coherence as a concept, and second to ascertain whether social capital is in any way the creation of the state itself.

The next section will focus on the relevant literature. Section three will address the issue of social capital as a concept. The fourth section will present some ideas for an empirical test of the determinants of civic capital. The fifth section will conclude, once more taking up the issue of alternative explanations for levels of civic engagement, including both social and political contextual influences.

## ***II. Civic Engagement: Why is it Unique and How Does it Happen?***

Two questions surrounding civic engagement are particularly pertinent to this analysis. First, what is unique about social capital that might lead us to believe it has an affect on governing entities that other forms of political participation do not? Second, has Putnam satisfied us that civic engagement impacts governance, but governing institutions and parties have had no effect on creating social capital? These questions have been nicely addressed by Mondak and Mutz, and by Rosenstone and Hansen and Tarrow, respectively. I will review their arguments, and will propose that before the first question can be answered, we need to better define the concept of civic engagement, including in what instances we can expect it to have the greatest effect. Similarly, before the second question can be addressed, we will require a theoretical foundation for how levels of social capital can be expected to differ among individuals, and we must identify its individual-level determinants.

As noted in section one, Putnam settled on association membership as a key component of civic engagement. Mondak and Mutz state that this stress on membership in associations presumes that some sort of “unique social good” results from that particular form of social interaction (1997: 2). For social

capital to be important as a concept, they argue, there must be important consequences from civic engagement. Mondak and Mutz suggest that voluntary associations may create more dense networks of political discussion, may improve the quality of political debate, or may facilitate the growth of public-spirited attitudes. They then ask, are such benefits the result of civic engagement alone, or could other kinds of “social interaction” have similar effects? The results of their analysis suggest that at best, voluntary associations may exhibit such effects at the margins.

The findings of Mondak and Mutz are in line with concerns voiced by Levi (1996), who finds fault with Putnam for failing to suggest first, by what mechanisms is civic engagement maintained, and second, by what mechanism is civic engagement translated into the promotion of good government? Mondak and Mutz, however, admit that one of the primary difficulties facing the concept of social capital is its “multidimensionality” (1997: 3). My reply to Levi’s concerns hinges on this multidimensionality problem – it may not be that social capital has little effect on good governance, but that we have failed to adequately narrow the concept, both in terms of its components and the range of political life over which we may reasonably believe civic engagement can have an impact.

An additional question of importance concerns the issue of endogeneity. Critical to Putnam’s argument is the idea that civic engagement leads to better government, while parties or the state are not responsible for creating civic engagement. In *Making Democracy Work*, Putnam devotes an entire chapter to discussing the origins of social capital in Northern and Southern Italy. Examining Putnam’s index of social capital during the period 1860-1920, Tarrow poses the question: why are levels strongest in the Po Valley, where popular politics (both socialist and Catholic) became major influences in the nineteenth century? Tarrow’s answer: both parties “rooted themselves in this soil by a deliberate strategy of creating just the kind of secondary associations that make up Putnam’s measures of civic capacity.” And Tarrow goes further to state that during periods when Putnam finds a link between high levels of social capital and regional performance, the electorate had been “deliberately mobilized on the basis of networks of mass organizations and social and recreational associations. . .” (1996: 394). In other words, Tarrow’s contention is that public (and political) culture was being purposefully and systematically structured by political parties and later, by the state itself.

The benefits to party and political leaders in “mobilizing” citizens for political participation is discussed in detail by Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, see pages 83-88). According to their aptly titled book, *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America*, association membership *in particular* causes people to be targeted by parties. The primary reasons are two: first, organizations are often observed to mobilize their members for explicit causes, and politicians will target groups that are seen to share their concerns. Second, particularly important to political leaders is the “diffusion” effect of contact, through both centrally located leaders and the general membership of groups, who, once contacted, may work to mobilize others, both inside and outside of the organization. Associations, then, can increase the likelihood of successful mobilization by signaling their interest in issues, and can “multiply” the effect of party or leader mobilization by contacting others.

It is quite probable that both parties and political institutions in the United States and other democracies have played an important role in the development of civic engagement among the citizenry; in other words, that social capital is a two-way street. Before we try to address this contextual-level issue, however, it may be wisest to sort out, and rule out, individual-level determinants of social capital within a clearly-defined theoretical framework. In the following section I turn to this task.

### ***III. Social Capital as a Concept: Its Range and Characteristics***

In his well-known essays, *Bowling Alone* (1995a) and *Tuning In, Tuning Out* (1995b), Putnam suggests a variety of potential determinants of civic engagement, narrowly defined as association membership. Although he dismisses the majority of these indicators, Putnam admits that other authors have found significant correlations between such variables and individual levels of civic engagement. My argument is that as long as we are clear about the range over which we expect social capital to have an impact, we need not restrict its definition to voluntary group membership. In addition, if we develop a conceptual framework that guides which indicators we expect to correlate with social capital, we will be justified in our definition of social capital.

The first step, then, is to move from the abstract to the concrete and ask, over what range do we expect social capital to affect governance? As noted earlier, Putnam states that social capital creates dense networks of cooperation and trust that lower transactions costs, increase political sophistication and facilitate effective interaction with government. If all this is true, then our most conservative expectation for social capital should be that such norms and networks (the evidence of civic engagement) have their most direct impact at the *local* government level. I find it less easy to see how social capital translates into more effective governance at the state and national levels, where more direct forms of preference expression may be found in the activities of interest groups whose sole purpose is the communication of these preferences.

Tests of social capital at the state level by Jennings and Haist (1998) and Rice and Sumberg (1997) have started with Putnam's conceptualization of civic engagement, and subsequently created indexes of social capital that include indicators valid at the state level. In the Jennings and Haist analysis, the index included voter turnout in statewide elections, membership in associations, volunteering, and the number of charitable organizations in the state. Rice and Sumberg, in a more liberal interpretation of Putnam, included such indicators as gender equality in the workplace, income distribution, crime rates, student loan defaults and a host of other variables in their index. While the two indexes varied greatly in their composition, they were highly correlated, indicating that the concept of social capital may be adequately captured by a variety of variables, provided researchers make a strong case that such indicators are actually measuring the concept they seek to support.

At the local level, (still following Putnam), if we conceptualize social capital as consisting of "political behavior" and "civic community," we can define civic engagement in terms of four indicators. First, as a measure of political engagement, voting in local elections and referenda voting are behaviors that indicate a high level of interest in local governance. As measures of civic community, subscribing to or regularly reading a newspaper indicates interest in being informed about the community. Volunteering and membership in associations indicate an individual's investment in the well-being of the community.

It is not enough to hypothesize that voting, newspaper readership, and direct forms of community involvement such as volunteering and association membership capture the single concept of social capital. We must ask, what factors contribute to varying levels of social capital? What leads an individual to volunteer at a soup kitchen, or become involved in a political campaign? The model I propose posits that civic engagement, like other forms of participation (social or political), is a function of *motivation* and *opportunity*. Part of motivation may be "inherited," such as one's sense of civic duty; part may be tied up in the concept of efficacy. Opportunity has two components: resources and obstacles, with individuals experiencing different mixes of constraints on participation.

Rosenstone and Hansen (1993: 3) contend that individual-level characteristics fail in explaining *changes* in political involvement, but social capital has been shown to be relatively stable over time (see, for instance, Rice and Arnett, n.d., and Putnam, 1993), and it may be that individual-level factors play a significant part

in determining both individual and aggregate levels of civic engagement. Indeed, Rosenstone and Hansen provide support for this idea in their book. First, related to the idea of “opportunity,” they suggest that individuals who have greater resources are more likely to participate in political life. Wealth makes participation less “costly,” as individuals face fewer trade-offs between civic activity and more pressing concerns. Education provides exposure to the political arena and training in interacting within it, leading to a greater sense of efficacy among individuals (see pages 12-15).

Second, related to the concept of “motivation,” Rosenstone and Hansen discuss the “rewards” and “benefits” that accrue to those who participate. This is especially relevant with regard to voluntary group membership. Borrowing from Wilson, they separate benefits into three categories: material, or tangible benefits; solidary (or intangible) benefits, which arise through social interaction; and finally, purposive benefits, or intrinsic rewards derived from the act of participation itself (1993: 16). Clearly, those who are active in voluntary organizations may be motivated by the solidary and purposive benefits created by their interaction with others. Additionally, Rosenstone and Hansen cite Olson’s well-known distinction between “collective” and “selective” rewards (1993:17). As payoffs that accrue only to those who participate directly, the promise of selective rewards may motivate certain individuals to become politically involved.

In section five, I will suggest that contextual influences such as urbanization and party/state institutions may play a role in determining levels of civic engagement, but for now, I will develop the model under the limitation of including only individual-level indicators suggested by Putnam.

#### ***IV. Testing the Concept: Determinants of Civic Engagement***

The model will use individual-level responses to the General Social Survey’s questions regarding voting in local elections, newspaper readership, and association membership. (Unfortunately, the GSS does not gather specific information regarding referenda voting or volunteering). If, as maintained by Putnam, these measures are capturing the same concept: “civic engagement,” they should have similar determinants, although we might reasonably expect some variables to play a more important role in determining group membership, for instance, than newspaper readership. Using questions posed by the GSS, we can examine the determinants of social capital under a theoretical framework incorporating the concepts of “motivation” and “opportunity.”

##### ***Motivation***

Motivation is a function of access, exposure, and efficacy. *Exposure* may be captured by the answers to such questions as whether one’s parents were active in associations or in volunteer organizations, and whether one had volunteer experience as a child. Unfortunately, the GSS does not ask similar questions. However, the survey has asked questions incorporating the idea of “obligation;” it is a reasonable assumption that one’s sense of civic duty is learned from one’s parents and teachers – one is thus “exposed” to ideas of civic obligation. The GSS asks three questions specifically germane to obligations owed one’s community: to volunteer one’s time, to vote in elections, and to keep fully informed about news and public issues.

*Access* to information about the community and local politics, in particular information provided by the newspaper, may be a function of one’s level of education. The GSS contains information on all respondents’ education levels. *Efficacy* may be operationalized by race (whites having historically received more preferential treatment by government than other racial groups), and additionally by a question which asks whether “most public officials . . . are not really interested in the problems of the average man.” Finally, Putnam (1995b) makes a powerful case for television as a competitor for time and energy that may otherwise be directed toward civic affairs; the amount of time spent watching television should depress

motivation. The GSS also asks respondents to report the number of hours per day they spend watching TV.

### ***Opportunity***

Opportunity is a function of stability, flexibility, and resources (or obstacles). Income is one measure of *resources*, as is education, which serves as a proxy for social status. Being married and being a homeowner are indicators of *stability*. The GSS also contains information about the length of time an individual has lived in his or her community, a further indication of stability and attachment. Finally, workweek length, or alternatively, being an hourly or salaried worker are indicators of *flexibility*. While the GSS does not contain this information, it does indicate whether individuals are working full time or are unemployed but looking for work, in which case we would expect them to have less flexibility and fewer resources to devote to civic engagement. Additionally, the survey notes whether individuals are working part time, are retired, in school, or at home. Expectations for the work experience variable are the least clear, as those most active in the workforce may experience greater exposure to opportunities for civic engagement than others.

### ***V. Civic Engagement and Effective Governance: Toward Establishing a Link***

Certainly it is helpful to see civic engagement as a function of an individual's motivation and opportunity to be engaged. But we would be remiss in failing to consider alternative, although not necessarily mutually exclusive, explanations for both individual and aggregate levels of social capital. Putnam himself suggests several possibilities. He mentions the loss of the small community feeling in America that has gone hand-in-hand with urbanization and what he terms "economies of scale," (one example – the replacement of the corner grocer with the grocery superstore). In addition, civic engagement may be a response to the size of the welfare state (Putnam, 1995). Tarrow has suggested that parties and state institutions may be the chicken, and social capital the egg (1996).

Most likely, the relationship between state and citizens is circular and mutually-reinforcing. Two questions posed by the GSS are instructive. The first asks whether most people can be trusted, or whether "you can't be too careful dealing with people." The second asks how much satisfaction the respondent receives from the city or place in which he lives. Both trust and satisfaction (with government in particular) are important to Putnam's Italian study. It is unclear, however, what creates trust and satisfaction – can we be confident it is citizens who are responsible, or does the state create legal structures and implement policy initiatives that foster and support a reliable system that enhances our sense of security and contentment?

Mondak and Mutz's query whether social capital is a unique form of political participation with singular consequences for governance is of course the meaty question for political scientists. Before we attempt to tackle the issue, however, we must first be confident in our definition of social capital, including its determinants and the range over which we expect it to have an effect. Thinking about civic engagement in terms of "why" individuals would choose to be involved, particularly from the perspective of motivation and opportunity, is a good place to begin. The next step would include incorporating contextual-level determinants in the model, especially those indicators capturing the idea of mobilization by political leaders. The discovery that citizens and states mutually impact each other's well-being through civic engagement and efforts at mobilization could be exciting if indeed, such interaction could mean a better society for us all.

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