



Social Science History Association

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Social Science History*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Winter, 1997), pp. 455-479

Published by: [Duke University Press](#) on behalf of the [Social Science History Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1171662>

Accessed: 09/08/2012 15:13

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Theda Skocpol

The Tocqueville Problem

Civic Engagement in American Democracy

Over the past 15 years, my scholarship has been devoted to understanding the patterns, the possibilities, and the impossibilities of politics and social policy in the United States. In this essay, therefore, I have decided to use historical evidence to address current public and scholarly debates about civic engagement in American democracy. As I hope to remind us all, social science historians *can* speak clearly to contemporary public concerns. We may be able to introduce some better evidence and more sophisticated explanations into ongoing debates.

Social Science History 21:4 (winter 1997).

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President Bill Clinton talks about serving as “a bridge to the twenty-first century,” yet it is striking how many pundits are looking for a bridge to the past (along with Bob Dole, Clinton’s Republican opponent in 1996). Nostalgia is remarkably rampant among public commentators today, as they search for some critical juncture in the nation’s history when citizens were civically engaged in healthy ways, when U.S. democracy was flourishing more than it seems to be now. Analysts hope to draw inspiration and lessons for what might be done today to revive our apparently ailing democratic and civic life.

When Was the Golden Age?

Of course different golden ages are being invoked and explored—often depending on the partisan sentiments of those who are looking backward. Although few publicly prominent Americans will admit to being “liberals” anymore, those who do own up to this tendency usually locate the golden era of U.S. democracy in the 1930s and 1940s. Supposedly this is when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt provided bold progressive leadership—and when, as Steven Fraser recently told the *New York Times*, labor unions “represented not just an interest group, but a social movement whose activities promised much to not only its immediate members, but to the whole society” (Greenhouse 1996). From this perspective, the trouble with American democracy today is that Bill Clinton is wishy-washy, while unions are at an organizational nadir. Hope for the future lies in the current reorientation of the AFL-CIO toward organizing drives and the forging of broader alliances with intellectuals and religious leaders.

But nonliberals correctly point out that American civic engagement encompasses much more than organized labor and goes back historically long before the New Deal. Unions have been only one of the ways—and not the major way at that—through which large numbers of Americans have organized themselves in civil society. The reluctance of many on the Left to look beyond the organized working class—or its absence—helps explain why the current debate about civic engagement is dominated by people of conservative or center-right political proclivities. Yet as we are about to see, such nonliberals can have blind spots of their own.

Characteristically, nonliberals look at America’s past *not* through

Marxist-colored glasses but through the eyes of Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat who toured the fledgling United States in the 1830s, gathering observations and ideas that were in due course published in *Democracy in America* (1969 [1835–40]). Tocqueville’s opus has become one of the modern world’s most influential political ethnographies: It is a set of densely descriptive observations by a foreigner that were written for the purpose of influencing political debates in the author’s own country. Quite obviously, Alexis de Tocqueville was doing political ethnography in *Democracy in America*. Alarmed by the simultaneous expansion of democracy and an ever-more-centralized bureaucratic administrative state in postrevolutionary France, Tocqueville used explorations of early Republican America to make the case to his own countrymen that they should encourage voluntary associations as a new buffer against state centralization. Voluntary associations, Tocqueville argued, could serve as a democratic substitute for the purported socially protective role of aristocrats under the Old Regime.

“Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations,” Tocqueville (1969 [1835–40]: 513) reported in a famous, oft-quoted passage. This happy situation was possible, he felt, because extralocal government seemed barely present. “Nothing strikes a European traveler in the United States more,” wrote Tocqueville (*ibid.*: 72), “than the absence of what we would call government or administration. . . . There is nothing centralized or hierarchic in the constitution of American administrative power.” Above the level of thousands of local governments, the early United States seemed to Alexis de Tocqueville to be held together not by any state worthy of the name but by religious sentiments, commerce, egalitarian customs, freely associating citizens, and general laws enforced by lawyers and courts.

Given Tocqueville’s antistatist purposes for writing *Democracy in America*, it is not surprising that over a century and a half later, contemporary critics of the U.S. federal government celebrate the great Frenchman’s stress on voluntary associations, understood in opposition to bureaucratic state power. Still, today’s admirers of Tocqueville disagree about *exactly when* in America’s past the voluntarist wonders of old flourished in the ways most relevant to the present.

Civic-minded conservatives in and around the post-Ronald Reagan Republican Party yearn for the actual early nineteenth century (see Joyce and

Schambra 1996). They believe Americans are quite literally “returning to Tocqueville,” to cite the title of a telling commentary by Michael Barone, formerly of *U.S. News and World Report* and now finding his true home at *The Weekly Standard*. As Barone (1996: 23) explains, “Today’s postindustrial America in important respects more closely resembles the preindustrial America Tocqueville described in *Democracy in America* than the industrial America in which most of us grew up.” We “seem to be returning to a country” that is egalitarian, individualistic, religious, and property-loving, “since ordinary people expect and accumulate significant wealth over their lifetimes. . . . A Tocquevillian America is naturally inclined to policies of decentralization, devolution and markets, just as big-unit industrial America was inclined to centralization, command-and-control and bureaucracy. . . . Industrial America tended to favor the Democrats and postindustrial America tends to favor the Republicans.” A revitalized Tocquevillian America, Barone concludes along with many other 1990s conservatives, must be “lightly governed,” leaving “to voluntary associations of many kinds social functions that elsewhere and at other times have been performed by the state.”

Contemporary political centrists, including many Democrats, are not so sure that Americans should look all the way back to a golden age prior to the industrial era. Centrists tend to situate an updated civic golden age during the Progressive Era of the early 1900s. This period is celebrated for its proliferation of purportedly local voluntary associations, as well as for the innovative “experimentation” with legislative responses to industrialism through local and state governments. Centrists want the United States to have a “new progressive era.” As the organized voice of party conservatives, the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) has called for a return to “the lost tradition of American liberalism” prior to the New Deal. Celebrating the “New Freedom” of Woodrow Wilson, the DLC wants 1990s Democrats to eschew tax-and-spend, New Deal-style “welfare state paternalism” and instead promote “a much larger role for voluntary and community groups in tackling difficult social problems . . . that simply can’t be solved by government bureaucracies.” Revitalized forms of governance, we are told, must “transfer more decisions and control over public resources from Washington to citizens and local institutions” (Siegel and Marshall 1995).

Despite their differences over industrialism and the need for regulation

of market forces, therefore, today's Republican and Democratic conservatives have converged on a vision of minimal national governance and vibrant local voluntary associations. Republicans and conservative Democrats agree that the domestic activities of the federal government must be fully or partially dismantled if we Americans are to recapitulate a civic golden age.

For many media pundits, this near-consensus stretching from right to center is enough to settle the issue. But before Americans plunge forward on a fool's errand, we might want to notice that the best historical social science challenges the claims of conservatives and centrists about when, how, and why democratic civic engagement has flourished in the United States. I can do no more than sketch a few arguments in support of this assertion, yet I hope to convince you that a zero-sum way of thinking that pits "state" against "society"—or the national state against local voluntarism—cannot make sense of American civic engagement at all. State-versus-society thinking cannot lay the basis for wise reasoning about either the nation's civic troubles now or what might be done about them in the future.

Civic Engagement in Tocqueville's America

Let's start by looking back at Tocqueville's time, the early American Republic prior to the Civil War. More than two decades ago, social historian Richard Brown (1974) investigated societal developments in Massachusetts from late colonial through early national times, documenting that a remarkable array of local, regional, state-level, and national voluntary associations had already emerged by the 1820s. For this there were certain sociodemographic preconditions, Brown concludes in his careful quantitative study of towns and rural areas. Towns or at least substantial villages first had to emerge, containing a minimum of 200 to 400 families and at least a scattering of locally resident businesspeople, artisans, and professionals.

But the early growth of American voluntary associations was not merely a by-product of commercialization and urbanization. Before the American Revolution, many towns attained the requisite size without developing many voluntary associations. Yet by the early 1800s, associational growth outstripped commercial and demographic change. Culture and politics had independent effects, Brown emphasizes. The American Revolution, political struggles over the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and deepening popu-

lar participation in elections for state and national as well as local offices all served to spur associational life as America became an independent nation. So did religious and cultural ideals about self-improvement, and growing awareness of extralocal commercial and public affairs through widespread newspaper reading.

Tocqueville was well aware of many of the extralocal influences that Brown's research underlines. It is often noted that *Democracy in America* highlighted religious enthusiasms in the era of the Second Great Awakening. But present-day conservatives often overlook how much it also stressed popular participation in politics. Tocqueville (1969 [1835–40]: 520) marveled at the United States as the “one country in the world which, day in, day out, makes use of an unlimited freedom of political association.” Purely social associations might be more common than overtly political ones, Tocqueville opined (*ibid.*: 521), but Americans' freedom and opportunities to associate politically encouraged a more general “taste for association.” What is more, a free and participatory brand of politics encouraged people to band together across localities. “Politics not only brings many associations into being, it also creates extensive ones,” Tocqueville wrote.

In retrospect, it is obvious that what social historian Mary P. Ryan (1981: chap. 3) has dubbed the pre–Civil War “era of association” from the 1820s to the 1840s coincided with the spread of adult male suffrage and the emergence of competitive, mass-mobilizing parties (Shefter 1994: chap. 3)—first the Jacksonian Democrats, then the Whigs, and finally the Free Soilers and the Republicans.

Democracy in America took note of early American newspapers, too. “Newspapers make associations, and associations make newspapers,” Tocqueville (1969 [1835–40]: 518) wrote. “Thus, of all countries on earth, it is in America that one finds both the most associations and the most newspapers.” But it was precisely at this point, as historian Richard John (1995: 19) has so aptly put it, that Tocqueville's “oft-disparaged gift for observation outpaced his celebrated power of analysis.”

As John (*ibid.*: 1) cleverly points out in his splendid new book *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*, Tocqueville traveled by stagecoach in the “hinterland of Kentucky and Tennessee,” remarking on the “astonishing circulation of letters and newspapers among these savage woods.” The Frenchman's travels might not have been possible

had not many U.S. stagecoach companies been subsidized through Congress so that mail could be carried to small communities and representatives could travel home to remote districts. Tocqueville (1969 [1835–40]: 385, n. 79) calculated that the inhabitants of rural Michigan in 1831 were exposed to much more nonlocal information than average inhabitants in the commercial heart of France in the Department du Nord. Knowing that this situation was made possible by the U.S. postal network, the great political ethnographer nevertheless failed to understand what his observations meant about the early U.S. state. Tocqueville was blinded by his experiences with, and negative passions about, state power in France.

A well-known quip has it that early modern Prussia wasn't so much a state with an army as an army with a state. Similarly, the early United States may have been not so much a country with a post office as a post office that gave popular reality to a fledgling nation. The remarkable size and reach of the U.S. post office gives the lie to any notion that "government" and "administration" were "absent" in early America.

Colonial America had a rudimentary postal system comparable to that in many European countries, where larger cities and towns were loosely tied together, especially along the Atlantic coast. But a few years after the founding of the nation, Congress passed the Post Office Act of 1792, which "admitted newspapers into the mail on unusually favorable terms, . . . prohibited public officers from using their control over the means of communication as a surveillance technique," and "established a set of procedures that facilitated the extraordinarily rapid expansion of the postal network from the Atlantic seaboard into the transappalachian West" (John 1995: 31). "By 1828," Richard John (*ibid.*: 5) points out, "the American postal system had almost twice as many offices as the postal system in Great Britain and over five times as many offices as the postal system in France. This translated into 74 post offices for every 100,000 inhabitants in comparison with 17 for Great Britain and 4 for France."

The postal system was the biggest enterprise of any kind in the pre-industrial United States, and for most citizens it "*was* the central government." In the 1830s and 1840s, the system accounted for more than three-quarters of U.S. federal employees, and most of the 8,764 postal employees in 1831 and the 14,290 in 1841 were "part-time postmasters in villages and towns scattered throughout the countryside." The federal army employed

fewer men, and they were mostly “located at isolated army posts in the transappalachian West” (*ibid.*: 3–6).

Obviously the institutional structure of the U.S. government had everything to do with the spread of the postal network. The legislative system gave senators and—above all—members of the House of Representatives a strong interest in subsidizing communication and transportation links into even the remotest areas of the growing nation. U.S. postal rules allowed for the free exchange of newspapers among editors, allowing small newspapers to pick up copy from bigger ones. Simultaneously, postal rates made mailing newspapers cheap but did not allow eastern seaboard papers to outmarket provincial papers.

Commerce in early America was greatly facilitated by the relative safety, speed, and reach of the federal mail, yet the postal system was even more important for U.S. civil society and democratic politics. Congress could use its frank and the postal system to communicate freely with citizens. In turn, citizens, even those in the remotest hamlets, could readily communicate with one another, monitoring the doings of Congress and state legislatures as well as those of local governments. Voluntary associations soon learned to put out their message in “newspaper” formats to take advantage of the mails.

Emergent political parties in Jacksonian America were intertwined with the federal postal system. Party entrepreneurs were often newspaper editors and postmasters. The first thing the Jacksonian Democrats did after 1828 to help their patronage-oriented party was to hand out many postmaster-ships to Democratic loyalists, furthering a practice of partisan “rotation in office” that would be carried through more circuits when the Whigs and Republicans won the presidency.

One of the first great moral reform movements in America—briefly embodied between 1828 and 1832 in the transregional General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath—was devoted to trying to stop the opening of post offices and transportation of the mails on Sundays. Ironically, this movement depended on the very federal postal system it challenged, for the General Union relied on the mail to spread tens of thousands of pamphlets and petitions to its potential followers. The same was true of other great voluntary crusades in the pre-Civil War era, including temperance movements and the popular drive against slavery that helped to spark the Civil War.

In short, the early American civic vitality that so entranced Alexis de Tocqueville was closely tied up with the representative institutions and centrally directed activity of a very distinctive national state. The U.S. national state was not like the hefty, multipurpose administrative bureaucracy of monarchical or postrevolutionary France. But in some ways the early federal government had even greater administrative efficacy than the French state. The early U.S. postal system both grew out of and furthered a congressional representative system that encompassed virtually all white men. It furthered ever-intensifying communications among citizens, pulling more and more Americans into passionate involvements in regional and national moral crusades and electoral campaigns.

The same would remain true for a long time in U.S. democracy. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, women's magazines circulated through the mail, helping the far-flung efforts of nationwide women's federations (Waller-Zuckerman 1989). Countless other U.S. associations, as well as congressional representatives and party leaders, used the mail as their method for circulating organizationally and civically relevant information. Publicly subsidized and facilitated communication was the lifeblood of American democracy.

Civic Engagement in Industrial America

If 1990s conservatives have followed Alexis de Tocqueville in overlooking the impact of the early U.S. federal government on civic engagement, then 1990s centrists such as those in the Democratic Leadership Council have similarly misunderstood the favorable opportunity structures for popularly rooted associations provided by U.S. governmental arrangements during the industrial era.

Table 1 presents a list of encompassing voluntary associations in U.S. history. This comes from the preliminary stages of the Civic Engagement Project, a research project I am doing in cooperation with a wonderfully energetic group of sociology and political science students at Harvard University. Some months ago, we set out to identify and investigate all of the voluntary associations across U.S. national history that, at any point, succeeded in enrolling as members 1% or more of the adult population (it could be 1% of women or of men if the group was formally restricted to a single gender). Churches, businesses, and parties are not included on this list, although we

Table 1 Encompassing voluntary associations in U.S. history

Association	Founding–Ending	Local–State–National Federal Structure?
Prenational		
Ancient and Accepted Free Masons	1733–	No
Early National		
Independent Order of Odd Fellows	1819–	Yes
American Temperance Society	1826–57	Yes
General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath	1828–32	No
American Anti-Slavery Society	1833–70	No
Improved Order of Redmen	1834–	Yes
Ancient Order of Hibernians in America	1836–	Yes
Washingtonian Revival	1840–4?	No
Sons of Temperance	1842–1900	Yes
Independent Order of Good Templars	1851–	Yes
Young Men's Christian Association	1851–	No
Junior Order of United American Mechanics	1853–	Yes
National Teachers' Association (National Education Assoc., 1870–)	1857–	Yes
Civil War–World War I		
Knights of Pythias	1864–	Yes
Grand Army of the Republic	1866–1956	Yes
Patrons of Husbandry (The Grange)	1867–	Yes
Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks	1868–	Yes
Ancient Order of United Workmen	1868–	Yes
Knights of Labor	1869–1917	No
National Rifle Association	1871–	Yes
Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine	1872–	No
Woman's Christian Temperance Union	1874–	Yes
Order of the Eastern Star	1876–	Yes
Farmers Alliance	1877–1900	Yes
Royal Arcanum	1877–	Yes
Knights of the Maccabees	1880–	Yes
Christian Endeavor	1881	Yes
Knights of Columbus	1882–	Yes
Modern Woodmen of America	1883–	Yes
Colored Farmers' Alliance	1886	Yes
Loyal Order of Moose	1888–	Yes

Table 1 Continued

Association	Founding–Ending	Local-State–National Federal Structure?
Women’s Missionary Union (Southern Baptist)	1888–	Yes
General Federation of Women’s Clubs	1890–	Yes
Woodmen of the World Life Insurance Society	1890–	Yes
National American Woman Suffrage Association	1890–1920	Yes
American Bowling Congress	1895–	Yes
National Congress of Mothers (PTA from 1924)	1897–	Yes
Fraternal Order of Eagles	1898–	Yes
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States	1899–	Yes
Aid Association for Lutherans	1902–	No
International Brotherhood of Teamsters	1903–	No
Boy Scouts of America	1910–	No
Ku Klux Klan (second)	1915–44	Yes
Women’s International Bowling Congress	1916–	Yes
American Farm Bureau Federation	1919–	Yes
American Legion	1919–	Yes
New Deal–World War II		
Old Age Revolving Pensions (Townsend Movement)	1934–53	Yes
United Automobile Workers	1935–	No
Steel Workers	1936–	No
American Baptist Women Ministries	1951–	No
Contemporary Era		
American Association of Retired Persons	1958–	No
United Methodist Women	1972–	No
National Right to Life Committee	1973–	Yes
Catholic Golden Age	1974–	No
Citizen Action	1979–	No
Mothers against Drunk Driving	1980–	No
Christian Coalition	1989–	Yes

Notes: This master list has been developed from historical and contemporary data. It includes all groups documented so far as enrolling as members 1% or more of the U.S. adult population, at any time between 1790 and the present. If groups are *formally* restricted to men or women, the standard is 1% or more

Table 1 Continued

of adults of that gender. Business, churches, and political parties are not included on this list (although many of the voluntary groups on the list have ties to those other institutions, and the research project is exploring those ties).

Groups on this list are *arrayed in order of the dates of their founding*, even though many of them may not have exceeded the 1% benchmark until much later in their history. A chief purpose of the research project is to document and explain the “life courses” of these groups in relation to larger trends in American culture, politics, society, and economic life.

This master list is preliminary (as of summer 1997) and subject to change as more data comes in. Other groups are still being investigated for possible inclusion on the list.

Groups listed as having federal (national-state-local) structures did not invariably have these structures from the start (or within the first decade of associational existence). Some (such as the Elks and the National Education Association) started with other patterns and subsequently evolved into the federal pattern.

do closely investigate how our encompassing voluntary associations relate to those other institutions.

The purpose of our study is not to explain the causes of bigness as such; obviously one has to study smaller groups, too, to explain why only some become large. The purpose is to *map over time* the changing universe of large U.S. voluntary associations; to explore when and how they have emerged and developed; to compare their organizational structures, memberships, and activities across time; and to see how they have related to religious and market arrangements, to political parties and elections, and to governments at local, state, and national levels. Groups cannot make it onto our list unless they have some broad, more-than-elite membership, so we are developing a window into the changing bases of organized popular involvement in U.S. society and politics.

Ultimately, our research aims to test a series of hypotheses about changes over time, hypotheses derived from resource-mobilization and institutionalist theories in sociology and political science. Our data collection is not yet complete, so we are not yet at the hypothesis-testing stage. At this point, we can only point to patterns suggested by the preliminary master list of encompassing voluntary associations. Table 1 arrays groups according to the date of their founding in the United States. It also gives end dates for associations that no longer survive—but notice that more than four-fifths of the groups ever launched still exist.

The sheer chronological listing of encompassing associations gives the lie to an often-taken-for-granted image of the early United States as an agglom-

erate of mostly inward-looking local communities. Supposedly this is how things were prior to the rise of “modern,” centralized, bureaucratic organizations. But as these data show, not only were most of the encompassing voluntary associations in U.S. history founded before 1900, but over a fifth of those we have identified so far were launched before the Civil War, that oft-cited dividing point between “premodern” and “industrializing” America. Even if we leave aside political parties and churches, very large numbers of Americans were clearly working together through translocal associations from very early in our history.

A second pattern leaps out of the chronologically arrayed data. Foundings of big associations are remarkably spread out over the entire life of the nation, yet there is some degree of clustering of foundings in the 1820s to the 1850s, from the 1850s through the 1890s, in the middle to late 1910s, and in the 1930s and early 1940s. These junctures are, above all, moments of intense electoral participation and competition—particularly during the nineteenth century, when the mobilization of eligible (white male) voters was at an all-time high during the most competitive phases of the second (1828–56) and third (1876–96) U.S. party systems. The nationalizing impact of passions surrounding America’s greatest war, the Civil War, is also obvious in these data. Studies of a fuller array of voluntary associations (e.g., Gamm and Putnam 1996) have found more general spurts of local group foundings in these same nineteenth-century periods.

In the twentieth century, lesser high points of associational founding seem to occur at nationally focused moments around World War I, World War II, and the Great Depression. These were times when federal government activity and influence were relatively great. Contrary to the story that conservatives often tell (Joyce and Schambra 1996), foundings of encompassing associations seem to have been stimulated in these periods, not squelched. The non-zero-sum nature of U.S. governmental and associational expansion becomes even more apparent when we consider that many of the big voluntary associations founded in the second half of the nineteenth century survived and prospered well into the twentieth century. (Some did shrink during the 1930s, when many people could not afford dues; and of those some recovered by the 1950s, while others went into permanent decline.)

Our preliminary research on membership trends shows that many large

U.S. voluntary associations achieved membership peaks in the 1960s or 1970s. Very much in tandem with the growth of state and national governmental functions and decision making, many U.S. associations launched in the nineteenth century recruited more and more new members. Even before memberships swelled, moreover, encompassing voluntary associations spread out across all 48–50 states and planted local units in most communities of any import. During the late nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century we see the same phenomenon that prevailed back at the start of the American nation: There has been a push toward geographic spread, emulation, and inclusion, bringing more and less urban places into the same networks of organization. U.S. governance from the Civil War through the 1950s did not “crowd out” civil society. On the contrary, U.S. governance stimulated and facilitated associationalism, and rewarded it as well.

A good many translocal associations ended up flourishing in direct relationship to involvements with extra-local government. As we learn from Elisabeth Clemens’s brilliant new book, *The People’s Lobby* (1997), widespread associations sought to influence legislation and administration from the late nineteenth century onward. As the patronage-oriented, highly competitive, mass-mobilizing political parties of U.S. nineteenth-century democracy weakened after the 1890s, locally rooted yet translocally organized associations sought to carve out new direct relationships with legislatures and with new administrative agencies. Clemens argues that such popular lobbies made greatest initial headway in the western states, where patronage parties were weaker. Yet many associations also built nationwide networks.

Associations became good at simultaneously influencing and reflecting popular opinion in localities and at lobbying legislators and government administrators at local, state, and national levels. Their “comparative advantage” lay in influencing—and reflecting—public opinion across many communities and states. During eras when newspapers and magazines and face-to-face meetings still mattered a lot, widespread, locally rooted associations could influence legislators and administrators because they could claim to communicate with (or speak for) so many constituents at once. Hansen (1991) spells out a rational-choice institutionalist explanation for such links between Congress and associations, using the instance of the American Farm Bureau Federation between 1919 and the 1970s.

Translocal voluntary associations were intimately implicated in the en-

actment and expansion of modern America's most generous national social programs. Far from public social provision and voluntarism being opposed to one another, as today's conservatives so loudly claim, they have actually flourished in full symbiosis. Examples are easy to list. The Grand Army of the Republic spread in the wake of the initial expansion of state and national benefits for Union veterans of the Civil War. Subsequently, the GAR both helped to administer those benefits and lobbied for more and better ones (McConnell 1992; Skocpol 1992: chap. 2). A less-well-known example is the Fraternal Order of Eagles (FOE), which championed the enactment of state and federal old-age pensions in the 1920s and early 1930s. So active was the FOE that the Grand Eagle himself received one of the official pens when Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act of 1935. Finally, the great women's federations of the early twentieth century—especially the National Congress of Mothers and the General Federation of Women's Clubs—were the champions of local, state, and federal regulations, services, and benefits for mothers and children (Skocpol 1992: part 3). Most of these policies would never have been enacted without the special ability of women's federations to coordinate morally focused public campaigns across communities and states. The women's federations themselves experienced great growth and geographical expansion at the same time as their legislative crusades. They also benefited from their ability to forge partnerships with government administrators, such as those in the Children's Bureau.

From a resource-mobilization perspective, we can hypothesize that encompassing U.S. voluntary associations could often turn federal government initiatives and resources to their benefit—whether to get a start, to expand, or to give themselves new leases on life. For example, New Deal laws and administrative interventions were vital aids for nascent U.S. industrial unions (Finegold and Skocpol 1995: chap. 5). Once launched, moreover, unions took advantage of federal interventions in the economy during World War II to expand their memberships and their rights to bargain with employers.

Organized labor was hardly exceptional. The American Farm Bureau Federation took advantage of possibilities for administering Department of Agriculture extension programs and New Deal farm subsidies, using them to facilitate its own organizational expansion into new regions (Hansen 1991). Another telling case of leveraging federal resources was the American Legion (Jones 1946; Pencak 1989). After getting started as an offshoot of the World

War I American Expeditionary Force, the legion staved off the sort of generational decline that has been the eventual fate of other U.S. veterans' associations by admitting young World War II veterans in 1942. The legion simultaneously championed the GI Bill of 1944 on their behalf. Millions of new vets soon flooded into the group, allowing the American Legion to revive itself as a vital local civic presence in thousands of communities across the land, even as its national clout with Congress and the Veterans' Administration, and its influence with dozens of state legislatures, was similarly renewed for the postwar decades.

A final point about state-society symbiosis in the United States is indicated in Table 1. My research group wondered how many encompassing U.S. voluntary associations would turn out to have organizational structures that paralleled the three-tiered structure of U.S. federalism: that is, a structure built around local groups, state branches, and national centers. We will be exploring a fuller range of organizational features in due course. But a preliminary answer to the federal question makes it apparent that, with only a few exceptions, most translocal U.S. associations founded prior to the most recent decades have had a federal structure. (The exceptions are usually groups, including unions, that are based in populations concentrated by economic function or in metropolitan areas.)

Voluntary groups have adopted federal arrangements, in part, to facilitate simultaneous interactions with local communities and with state and national governments. Networks of national, state, and local units allow associations to mediate between local people and political parties and legislators. Federated associations can keep an eye on—or lobby about—relevant legislation. Of course, while some U.S. voluntary groups have been actively involved in electoral politics, others have tried to create a systematic alternative to formal politics. Historically, both the Women's Christian Temperance Union (Bordin 1981) and the National Congress of Mothers (National Congress of Parents and Teachers 1947) were deliberately structured to parallel parties and the elected government, while standing apart from them. This was thought to allow women to develop an influential, yet separate, style of "purified" reform politics during the decades before all U.S. females won the right to vote. In practice, too, parallel organization gave women extraordinary leverage in setting legislative agendas across the country.

Practical advantages apart, however, for most of American history feder-

alism has simply served as a prestigious model. Much as sociological institutional theorists (Powell and DiMaggio 1991) might hypothesize, federalism served as a kind of template of legitimate and effective organizational form for any big association. The history of U.S. fraternal suggests this interpretation. The Masons were brought to America from England in colonial times, and they have retained local and grand lodges in an array of orders, structured much as they were in Europe. But the next English fraternal to be transplanted was the Odd Fellows, founded here after the American Revolution with a more popular constituency than the Masons (Clawson 1989: 118–23). The Odd Fellows quickly adopted a three-tiered structure imitating U.S. federalism (Stevens 1899: 246–62). And most fraternal associations founded in the United States since the Odd Fellows have also developed federal arrangements (Gist 1940).

Some associations, like the Knights of Columbus, started out with a non-federal structure and then went through a reorganization in which leaders deliberately advocated change to the national-state-local pattern (Kauffman 1992). There have been many instances in U.S. history—even among tiny groups, much too small to make my research group’s list—where the urge to have three levels has been almost ludicrously excessive. Thus the Czechoslovak Society of America, an early Czech benefit society, started out with a couple of urban clubs and then moved at once to set up state branches and a national headquarters, well before many more local units could be stimulated (Martinek 1955). For much of American history, in fact, extralocal “levels” of voluntary federations were founded prior to most local groups. Foundings of local units fanned out “sideways,” with encouragement and support from state and national leaders, until the “normal” template of a complete U.S. voluntary association was fully filled in.

Lessons for Today

Enough of the past, fascinating though it may be. What does all of the foregoing say about today’s debates about civic engagement in American democracy?

One conclusion is already obvious. Contemporary calls for a return to civic voluntarism come in the context of conservative crusades to dismantle an allegedly huge and overweening federal government. Many of

those making such arguments presume that there was some golden era in America's past when local civic voluntarism solved the country's problems apart from—actually instead of—extralocal government and politics. They also assert that the expansion of federal government activities in the early to mid-twentieth century crowded out grassroots political participation and civic voluntarism in the United States (Joyce and Schambra 1996). But as I have shown, these are myths about the past that do not hold up to elementary empirical scrutiny.

From early on in America's national history, the structure and activities of the federal government, along with translocal and competitive forms of popular political mobilization, created an "opportunity structure" that nourished, encouraged, and rewarded voluntary associations. Many voluntary groups have been organized locally (or, anyway, within districts or states). Yet a significant proportion of voluntary efforts—and probably a *very* significant proportion of the most persistent efforts—have also been trans-state or national in scope (Skocpol and Ganz 1996; Hoffman 1994). Local efforts have not just bubbled upward. Translocal organizations have always helped to stimulate lots of local activities. They send out organizers or offer models on which people can draw. Local groups of Americans have not just looked inward to their own affairs. They have repeatedly taken encouragement from the opportunity to join together with like-minded others in crusades, associations, and parties that could make a difference—even at the level of the entire nation.

Maybe the problem today is that many Americans, quite rightly, no longer feel that they can effectively band together to get things done either through or in relationship to government. The problem may not be a big, bureaucratic federal government—after all, the U.S. national government still has proportionately less revenue-raising capacity and administrative heft than virtually any other advanced national state. The issue may be recent shifts in society and styles of politics that make it less inviting for Americans to participate efficaciously in civic life—and certainly harder for them to form broad alliances.

What could the relevant recent changes be? Some have suggested (Putnam 1995) that Americans are, first and foremost, pulling back from local groups or informal socializing, becoming couch potatoes who sit at home alone watching TV. Debates continue to rage about the degree to which

sheer social connectedness, and local or personal civic voluntarism, really *are* declining in the contemporary United States. I am not persuaded one way or another by the data and analyses that have appeared so far. I share the skepticism of my sister in West Virginia, who when I told her on the phone about the important work of a certain colleague and friend at Harvard, exclaimed: “Nobody down here is bowling alone! Just visit a bowling alley and look.” Indeed, leagues may be down per capita, but perhaps family and friends are bowling together in new ways. This may be a metaphor for a lot of what is happening either informally or locally or both.

Still, the master list in Table 1 suggests a real break in patterns of trans-local U.S. voluntary associationalism in the most recent decades. From other data (Berry 1984; Walker 1991), we know that there was an explosion of formation of grassroots groups and national advocacy groups between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s. During the same period, professional and trade associations have also proliferated, turning Washington into an “imperial” capital, to use the memorable phrase of Kevin Phillips (1994: chap. 2).

Unlike earlier associational upsurges in U.S. history, such recent expansions do not appear to be correlated with either the emergence of new transnational voluntary federations or the revitalization of older ones. Many of the 30 to 40 encompassing voluntary federations that were flourishing in mid-twentieth-century America have gone into absolute as well as relative membership decline since the 1960s and 1970s. Most of the recently founded encompassing voluntary associations are structured like thousands of smaller ones: They are staff-led, mailing-list associations—without local or state group affiliates, without three-tiered federal structures.

Tellingly, the exceptions to the statement I just made have been on the right-wing side of the partisan spectrum: the National Right to Life Committee and the Christian Coalition have reproduced the old federal patterns in new ways, even in our era of computer-formulated direct mailing lists. These groups are active in relation to local and state as well as national government. Another long-standing but recently ideologically redirected federal group, the National Rifle Association, also fits this right-wing exception. Still others, like Promise Keepers, may appear on our master list soon.

But in the center and the left (such as it is) of the U.S. associational spectrum, virtually no great federations have either appeared or gained a clear-cut new lease on life. Instead, the pattern is a profusion of staff-led, nar-

rowly focused advocacy groups representing relatively particular sociocultural identities or advocating positions on narrow, hot-button policy issues. Unless they are purely local, such groups are usually headquartered in New York City or Washington, and their professional staffs are oriented to the minutiae of legislation and litigation. They communicate with masses of Americans only through mailings. (Exceptions to this include the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, and perhaps also the environmental movement as a whole, which includes both staff-led advocacy and lobbying organizations and associations with local clubs, such as the Sierra Club.)

The queen of all contemporary mailing list associations is, of course, the 36-million-member American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). The AARP does not have state branches, and only a tiny proportion of its individual members are active in local affiliates (Morris 1996). Because, shockingly enough, I have recently been recruited to the AARP, I can testify that you “join” when you receive a letter in the mail at age 49. The letter is computer-printed, and it offers you a lot of commercial discounts and a magazine subscription in return for sending in merely eight dollars a year.

Why are so many staff-led, mailing-list associations (most of them small, but a few, like the AARP, very big) flourishing in American civic life today? We know that more than sheer technological determinism is involved. The rise of new computer-driven communication and fund-raising techniques matters a lot. But right-wing federations, and now organized labor, too, are showing that these techniques can be melded with grassroots organizations.

Other possibilities can only be mentioned as I wrap up this essay. Class and gender transformations surely matter. Most large U.S. voluntary associations (founded or growing) from the 1800s through the 1950s were cross-class, single-gender affairs. In most of these associations, business and professional people joined together with white-collar folks and perhaps with more privileged farmers or craft or industrial workers. Yet it was predominantly men or women, not both together, who formed most of these cross-class, as well as cross-regional, associations. Until recently, but no longer, segregated male and female roles offered broad, encompassing identities through which hundreds of thousands or millions of Americans could band together across regional and class lines (Clawson 1989).

In twentieth-century America, male military veterans and higher-

educated women have been leaders of encompassing associations—in large part, I would argue, because both veterans and educated women were spread out geographically. From early in this century, college-educated U.S. men tended to live and work in metropolitan centers. But not higher-educated women. They went everywhere to teach school, then got married and had to stop teaching. Yet they often remained in local communities across all the states. Well-educated women became mainstays of local and state as well as national voluntary life.

Such societal conditions, those propitious for encompassing voluntary federations, have changed a lot in recent U.S. history. Higher-educated women now have nationally oriented careers, and they crowd into the same cosmopolitan centers as professional or managerial men. By the 1960s the United States developed a very large professional-managerial upper middle class, full of men (and now women, too) who see themselves as specialized experts, not as “trustees of community” (Brint 1994). Elites like this are arguably more oriented to giving money to staff-led national advocacy organizations than they are to climbing the local-state-national leadership ladders of traditional encompassing voluntary associations.

But changing conditions affecting voluntary associations in the United States go beyond class and gender. Conservatives and centrists may be just a little bit right that something about the national government has changed. *Not* that the U.S. federal branch got a lot bigger overall—especially not as a taxer and social spender, given the tax cuts and tight federal budgets since the 1970s. But federal regulatory activity did expand. Congressional staffs grew, and congressional committees became more numerous and decentralized, offering many more sites of possible influence over legislation or administrative implementation. Seizing such opportunities, staff-level advocacy and lobbying groups took much of the action away from more cumbersome popularly based voluntary federations. All the more so, given that congressional representatives were increasingly seeking reelection with the aid of pollsters and media consultants and television advertisements, eschewing the reliance they had formerly placed on voluntary federations as lifelines to voters in their districts.

Mass politics in America has changed in the last several decades, just as Washington has. The excellent scholarship of political scientists such as Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) and Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995)

shows that U.S. politics since the 1960s has become electorally demobilized and increasingly money-driven. As Aldrich (1995) has recently argued, American political parties now provide financial and consultant “services” to candidates, rather than mediating relations between politicians and citizens, as they did from the 1830s through the 1950s. Except on the right wing of the Republican Party, voters these days are rarely contacted directly by party or group workers. Americans are most likely to be asked to give money. Politicians may not care much about them at all if they aren’t relatively well-off or members of targeted “swing” groups or voters (Ganz 1994). This has happened in electoral politics at the same time that all of our mailboxes have become full of targeted, computer-generated mailings from single-issue advocacy groups—groups that seek out the narrowest possible causes that will allow them to raise money from paper “memberships” (Paget 1990).

All in all, the very model of what counts as effective organization in U.S. politics and civic life has changed very sharply since the 1960s. Except perhaps on the right, no longer do leaders and citizens think of building, or working through, nationwide federations that link face-to-face groups into state and national networks. If a new cause arises, people think of opening a national office, raising funds through direct mail, and hiring a media consultant. Ordinary citizens, in turn, are likely to feel themselves to be merely the manipulated objects of such efforts. They do not feel like participating citizens or grassroots leaders active in broad efforts. And they are right!

Let me end where I began, with Alexis de Tocqueville. Were Tocqueville to rise from the dead and return to the late-twentieth-century United States for another visit, he would be just as worried about the national trends I have just mentioned as about possible declines in purely local or small-group associationalism. After all, one of Tocqueville’s insights in *Democracy in America*—even if it is an insight rarely mentioned by his conservative revivers—was that vital democratic participation served as a kind of “school” where Americans learned how to build social and civic associations of all sorts, especially translocal ones. Tocqueville may have been ideologically blind to the ways in which the early U.S. national state created a framework that encouraged widespread voluntary associations. But he was well aware of the stimulating effect of vigorous popular political participation on social engagement.

Tocqueville would surely take very seriously the preliminary data I have

shared with you today, data that suggest a recent watershed in the extent and nature of encompassing voluntary associationalism. Tocqueville would immediately notice the class and gender shifts I have mentioned. He would worry that electoral participation has fallen off, political parties have lost contact with actual citizens, and elections have come more and more under the management of highly paid, sometimes Dick Morris–like pollsters and consultants and media people who manipulate images on television.

Not only would Tocqueville think these changes mattered a great deal. He would surely be surprised that today's conservatives are using his *Democracy in America* to justify a depoliticized and romantic localism as an improbable remedy for the larger ills of national politics. Indeed, were Alexis de Tocqueville to make a return visit, he might even decide to drop in at the Heritage Foundation and the Democratic Leadership Council to suggest that those groups broaden their agendas of concern about the roots and fate of civic engagement in American democracy.

Alas, barring a miracle, Alexis de Tocqueville will not reappear to deliver this message. So perhaps we social science historians will just have to do it for him!

Note

Theda Skocpol delivered an earlier version of this article at the 12 October 1996 president's address to the annual meeting of the Social Science History Association, Hotel Monteleone, New Orleans, LA. Skocpol is professor of government and sociology at Harvard University. Her research centers on U.S. politics, civil society, and public policy making. The best-known of Skocpol's eleven books include *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (1979); *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (1992); *Social Policy in the United States: Future Possibilities in Historical Perspective* (1995); and *Boomerang: Clinton's Health Security Effort and the Turn against Government in U.S. Politics* (1996).

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