

Entry on “Trends in Social Capital”, prepared for Karen Christensen and David Levinson (eds) (2003) *Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to the Virtual World*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

While the most substantial research on trends in social capital has been carried out in relation to the United States, increasing evidence is emerging for other developed nations. With the exception of Scandinavia and Japan, there seems to be a common pattern of declining trust, political participation, and organizational activity across industrialized democracies during the 1980s and 1990s.

During the twentieth century, social capital steadily rose in the US, peaking around 1960. In other nations, it is difficult to be as precise, but we have some evidence that the pattern in several other developed nations lags behind the US by approximately two decades.

Researchers tend not to attribute changes in social capital to a single factor. Those which have been highlighted include:

- rising commuting time;
- the entry of women into the paid workforce;
- increased time spent watching television;
- the passing of the “long civic generation” (those born between 1910 and 1940);
- rising inequality; and
- greater ethnic and racial heterogeneity.

United States

America has undergone two major social capital cycles in its history. After a boom in associational life during the 1830s (famously documented by Alexis de Tocqueville), urbanization and industrialization placed strains on civic life. But from 1880 to 1910, the Progressive Era saw a dramatic upsurge in social capital, as new organizations, clubs, and newspapers came into being. Social capital remained strong during the Depression, and the World War II era saw another rise in civic activity.

Yet from the late-1950s onwards, these trends began to change. In 1960, 62.8% of the eligible population turned out to choose between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Yet in the Presidential election of 2000, only 51.0% voted. Over the past twenty-five years, the fraction of Americans who say they follow current affairs has dropped by one-fifth. As political parties become more professionalized, the fraction of the population who work on campaigns, write letters to their political representatives, or attend political rallies has slipped backwards.

Large participatory civic groups, such as Lions Clubs and the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), have also suffered over this period. For example, in the early-1960s almost half of all families with children under 18 were PTA members. By the 1980s, this had fallen to around one in five. The general trend of falling organizations involvement is reinforced by time diary evidence, which shows that the average American invested 3.7 hours per month in organizational life in 1965, but only 2.9 in 1975, and 2.3 in 1985 and 1995.

Another form of social capital that declined over the last four decades of the twenty-first century was attendance at churches or other places of worship. Depending on whether one uses church records or surveys, involvement in religious activities is down by 25-50 percent. This is particularly significant for African-American communities, since black churches have acted as crucibles for activism, both during and after the civil rights struggle.

Finally, social capital can be measured by the fraction of people who trust one another. Generalized trust acts as a form of social glue, fostering participation in politics, and facilitating bridging across ethnic, racial and class lines. Yet the proportion of Americans who agree with the statement “Most people can be trusted” fell from 55 percent in 1960 to around 35 percent in the late-1990s.

At the same time, however, it is important to consider new forms of social engagement. A new form of engagement that arose in the 1990s was computer-mediated interaction, such as email and Internet chat groups. Yet it is far from clear that these technologies should be considered to foster trust and reciprocity in the same manner as traditional forms of engagement. If the Internet is more akin to a new type of telephone, then it could potentially act to boost social capital. But if it instead comes to resemble a new type of television, the Internet may have the effect of further sapping civic energy.

According to Robert Putnam, the decline in social capital over the period 1965-2000 can be explained by four main factors. First, higher rates of car ownership, suburban sprawl, and traffic congestion have combined to push the average daily commute to 24 minutes per day, while at the same time, the number of shopping and personal trips undertaken by car has increased. Americans are also more likely to drive on their own today than ten or twenty years ago. Putnam argues that this set of factors accounted for around 10 percent of the drop.

Secondly, the past few decades have seen greater pressures placed on two-career families, as women moved into the paid workforce. Clearly this has provided substantial economic and social benefits, but it also had the effect of reducing civic engagement. In the 1950s and 1960s, women outside the paid workforce were among America’s best “social capitalists”; active in a variety of school, community and social groupings. Putnam attributes around 10 percent of the drop in social capital to this factor.

Thirdly, television viewing has risen markedly – from around 4 hours per day in the 1950s to nearly 8 hours per day in the 1990s. The effect of TV is not only through sapping leisure time, but also in increasing viewers’ passivity. Television viewing is highly correlated with lower rates of volunteering, attending club meetings, and informal socializing. Putnam posits that television viewing was responsible for another 25 percent of the fall in social capital.

Fourthly, the period from the 1960s to today saw the passing of the “long civic generation” – those born between 1910 and 1940 – whose formative experiences were the

New Deal and World War II. Indeed, much of the change in social capital appears not to be a change in behavior by particular individuals, but a “cohort effect” as the long civic generation pass away, to be replaced by the less civically-minded Generations X and Y. Putnam argues that this factor accounts for around half of the total decline in social capital.

Dora Costa and Matthew Kahn present a somewhat different picture. They separate the fall in social capital into two parts – inside the home and outside the home. Costa and Kahn contend that the decline of social capital inside the home may be explained primarily by rising labor force participation by women.

Social capital outside the home, they argue, has fallen primarily because of rising community heterogeneity. They find that two types of heterogeneity are important – income inequality and ethnic heterogeneity. These are highly correlated with one another, since those places in America with the least equal distribution of income also tend to be those with the most diverse ethnic and racial mix. Moreover, both have risen over the period 1965-2000. In their analysis, Costa and Kahn argue that income inequality is the more important of the two factors.

Britain

In general, social capital in Britain appears to have declined over recent years, though there are some indications that the peak may have been closer to 1980. Church membership fell from 28 percent in 1980 to 22 percent in 1990. Voter turnout in the 1997 and 2001 general elections was below average. And interpersonal trust has dropped from 55 percent in 1960 to around 35 percent in 2000, with the largest falls being among the working class. The only key area in which social capital appears stable is in membership of voluntary organizations, which (with the exception of trade unions) have generally kept pace with population.

France

Like Britain, France has witnessed a drop in membership of unions, political parties, and churches, which has been accompanied by a crisis of legitimacy in the institutions of the French state. However, membership in sporting, cultural and humanitarian organizations has remained stable or even risen, perhaps because rates of educational attainment continued to improve over this period. In common with other countries that have attracted significant numbers of immigrants, France has found itself grappling with the challenge of building bridging social capital, particularly across racial lines.

Germany

In general terms, social capital in West Germany has increased over the period since World War II (though from an unusually low base). But over recent decades, the fraction of the population active in unions, political parties, and churches has fallen, and young people appear to be less interested in the political system. In East Germany, the collapse

of state-sponsored civic associations after 1989, coupled with high rates of unemployment, has left a vacuum which new organizations are yet to fill. There is evidence that in both parts of Germany, those who are poorer or less educated tend to be less active in civic life.

Spain

As in other developed nations, involvement in political parties, unions, and the church has fallen in Spain. But it has been argued that these trends should be less worrying, given the strength of informal networks in that country. Many of Spain's key civic associations were forged in the latter part of the Franco era, and were critical in facilitating a smooth transition from authoritarianism to democracy. At the same time, rates of informal socializing remain high, with rising numbers of festivals, and a flourishing street life.

Australia

Since the 1960s, membership of unions, political parties, and churches have declined in Australia. Trust in politicians has also fallen, with one in five Australians saying that politicians had high levels of ethics and honesty in the 1970s, and only one in ten agreeing by 2000. Some evidence also suggests that rates of interpersonal trust have fallen from the 1980s to the 1990s. Volunteering levels seem to have remained stable during the past two decades, but there are substantial differences in volunteering rates across occupations.

Sweden

Across nations, Swedes rank highly on measures such as trust, organizational activity, and voter turnout. Sweden also differs from many other industrial democracies in that it does not appear to have suffered the same sort of collapse in civic engagement. Involvement in sporting clubs and charities, as well as rates of informal socializing, are by most measures higher in the 1990s than in the 1980s. Moreover, around 40 percent of Swedes participate in "study circles", up from just 15 percent in 1960.

Japan

Civic engagement in Japan has been essentially stable since World War II, and the past two decades have seen even a slight rise in social trust and trust in political institutions. The fraction of Japanese involved in neighborhood groups has also remained constant, despite rising rates of urbanization. Cross-nationally, while Japanese rates of trust of intimates is very high, experimental and survey evidence suggests that Japanese people are less trusting of those outside their own social circles than Americans or Europeans.

OECD trends

Collating figures from the countries that make up the OECD, some distinct trends emerge. The fraction of the electorate who are members of a political party has slipped from 13 percent to 5 percent. Excluding Scandinavia, voter turnout has fallen by around 9 percent from the late-1950s to the mid-1990s, while union membership has dropped by approximately 10 percent. And in Europe, church attendance has dropped precipitously since the early-1970s.

From what we know about social capital in the industrialized democracies, it appears that (with the exception of Scandinavia and Japan) social capital declined over the latter part of the twentieth century, with the trends in most countries lagging the US by around two decades. Yet the picture in each country is nuanced, and as further research emerges, we will be able to develop a more sophisticated picture of the state of social capital across nations.

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