

## NEIGHBORHOODS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

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## **Abstract**

Given the emphasis that social scientists have placed on building community, it's surprising that little of this debate has focused on the role of neighborhoods in generating social capital. We presume that neighborhoods have the capacity to strongly nurture a sense of community. Drawing on data gathered for a study of citizen participation in large American cities, we are able to empirically test the proposition that political activity in the neighborhood creates various forms of social capital. At the heart of our investigation are neighborhood associations in cities where they have been given significant authority by the local governments. We investigate the relationship between activity in neighborhood associations and attitudes involving a sense of community, trust in government, and internal political efficacy. Overall, neighborhood associations appear to play a positive role in creating and sustaining social capital.

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## NEIGHBORHOODS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

“Community” has become the holy grail of American civic life. It’s elusive, yet precious. We seem to search for it everywhere, even though every part of our social lives already seems to fall within some community. The city we live in, no matter how large, is a community. Those who share our lifestyle or interests or political passions are part of communities we identify with. We feel connected to the environmental community, the Christian conservative community, the women’s movement, or whatever political sector we identify with. Our churches, clubs, and professional associations are communities with very real bonds among members. Online chat rooms, where we never actually meet our correspondents, are a new form of community. Even our places of employment strive to create comfortable work communities. Community has come to include so much that one might wonder if it still means anything at all. Indeed, numerous commentators have drawn this same conclusion, and have frequently suggested that the term ought to be avoided altogether. (Bell and Newby 1973)

Putting an end to the chicken-franchising of the term is far beyond our powers. What we would like to try to accomplish in this essay is to focus attention on a most basic and enduring form of community: the neighborhoods where we live. Although we may feel connected to different people in many different ways in many different “communities,” neighborhoods represent something unique. Our neighbors -- quite literally the people we physically live near -- are part of our own political and social identity whether we like it or not. Neighborhoods represent roots and family, our most enduring and deeply felt identities. The financial investment in our homes or apartments makes the viability and future of this physical and emotional terrain of supreme importance to our well-being. For those with children (most adults), neighborhoods embody our greatest hopes: that neighborhood schools will help our children flourish

Few would disagree that neighborhoods represent a singularly important community among all the communities with which we identify. Surprisingly, however, the recent outpouring of literature on civil society places no special emphasis on neighborhoods. At best, neighborhoods are conceived of as one element in a nested structure of social relationships that include individuals, families, neighborhoods, communities, cities, and society (Wallis, Crocker,

and Schechter 1998). At the core of the argument about civil society is the belief that the polity benefits when there are a variety of well-functioning mediating structures situated among citizens and between citizens and their government. We are a highly diverse society and it only stands to reason that a rich, dense, and diverse set of mediating structures will work to broaden representation in the political process. Yet when it comes to choosing how they would like to work with others to solve social and political problems, Americans have a decided preference. After extensive discussions with ordinary Americans, Robert Bellah and his colleagues concluded that "Lacking the ability to deal meaningfully with the large-scale organizational and institutional structures that characterize our society, many of those we talked to turned to the small town not only as an ideal but as a solution to our present political difficulties." (1985, 204) We can't all return to small towns but the neighborhoods of our cities come closest to offering the possibilities associated with this romanticized vision of America of a bygone era.

Civil society advocates look at modern life and warn against a decaying infrastructure of mediating organizations. Robert Putnam (1995a, 1995b) has argued that there are very real consequences to a decline in civic engagement. If people are less involved in civic organizations, less social capital is being generated. Social capital, says Putnam, is made up of the features of social life -- networks, norms, and trust -- that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives." (1995b, 664-65) Putnam's primary evidence that social capital is endangered is that popular support for voluntary organizations is on the wane. He documents a long list of organization with declining memberships, a few of which are neighborhood based (like PTAs), but most of which have no basis in neighborhood life (like unions). Others have looked at membership trends in voluntary organizations and have found stability rather than decline (Ladd 1996; Ladd 1999). A small army of scholars has joined the debate over civic engagement, often searching for the most valid measures of civil society and social capital (Cf. Edwards and Foley 1997; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Wallis 1998; to name a few).

## COMMUNITARIANS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

We will not try to sort out the dispute over Putnam's data because whatever the ultimate truth about membership figures, we believe that Putnam's broader argument resonates with most Americans. As Bellah and his colleagues found, Americans yearn for more community -- for a greater sense of connectedness with those around them. Putnam makes a distinction between those associations that have the potential for generating social capital and those that don't. He derides sending a check to a political action committee, for example, because it "does not embody or create social capital." (1995b, 665) But after making this basic distinction, all associational life which offers some potential for individuals to "connect with other people" (1995b, 665), is treated in a unidimensional way. Clearly, he has identified a significant threshold: social capital is generated in greatest quantities through personal interaction. At the same time he ignores the communitarian literature which emphasizes the intensity of interaction as the key. Communitarians draw a different threshold. Social capital will be generated not merely by social interaction, but by commitment and involvement in community life. Being a member of the PTA isn't enough and even going to a PTA meeting and observing what is going on is not enough. Communitarians ask people to become involved and take responsibility for the well-being of their communities.

This perspective is perhaps epitomized in Amitai Etzioni's *The Golden Rule* (1996). Etzioni begins to lay out what he sees as the fundamental character of communitarian societies, a character that he sees as necessary for such societies to generate social capital. His argument focuses on a central definition of community, which "... is defined by two characteristics: first, a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (rather than merely one-on-one or chainlike individual relationships), and second, a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity -- in short, to a particular culture." Clearly, in Etzioni's formulation, social capital flows from the actions which are undertaken as an integral outgrowth of these interpersonal relations and shared values.

The emphasis on the role of actions is exemplified by Barber's *Strong Democracy*

(1984). Barber attacks liberalism for sanctioning “thin democracy” -- a form of government that assumes that self-interest is the driving force underlying all political behavior. Liberal democracies take a cynical view of human nature and do not demand that people become active citizens. Rather, individuals are encouraged to believe that voting is sufficient participation and that cooperative forms of political participation are of little importance. “Strong democracies,” on the other hand, are participatory democracies. At the heart of his idealistic plan to revive American democracy, Barber advocates neighborhood assemblies where individuals can meet and deliberate with those who live with them in the same community. “Without talk, there can be no democracy.” (1984, 267). The neighborhood is the place where talk about politics should begin.

Similarly, in Mansbridge’s *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (1980), modern American democracy is derided for its cynicism and for its failure to involve people in the political process. Most people rely on their legislators and interest groups to represent them in the adversarial bargaining between interests. What Mansbridge advocates is face-to-face interaction among citizens so that they can strive toward unitary democracy, where the aim is building consensus rather than making decisions by majority rule. Put people together in the same room and let them find their common humanity and their common purpose. The very basis for a unitary democracy says Mansbridge, is friendship. Friendship provides the bond that facilitates a process of turning divergent views of citizens into unified action.

The eloquence of Barber, Mansbridge, Etzioni, and other communitarians who argue for participatory democracy, is of little value in the real-world of politics unless those ideas can be cast into processes and institutions. If more social capital is to be generated, ways must be found to encourage more face-to-face interaction in the political life of Americans. We argue here, as we have elsewhere, that neighborhoods should be the focus of efforts to create more civic engagement. Following the logic of the communitarians, neighborhoods are places where we should feel comfortable talking about politics, even with those we may disagree with. Our neighborhoods are filled with our friends, and neighborhood-based institutions offer ample opportunities to make new friends. Neighborhoods offer the opportunity for the development of

complex webs of affect-laden interactions, to use Etzioni's terms, and commitment to shared values and identity not easily constructed elsewhere.

For the purposes of promoting civil society, not all neighborhood civic organizations and political institutions are created equal. Few cities have any form of neighborhood government. Neighborhood-based political organizations are almost always voluntary organizations, such as PTAs or crime watch patrols. Neighborhood political groups are difficult to organize and their capacity and vitality can vary greatly within the same community. Grassroots organizations find that it is exceedingly difficult to overcome the collective action problem for any significant length of time.

There are a handful of American cities that have built neighborhood-based participation systems. These city programs were designed by activists and bureaucrats, not communitarian thinkers. Yet communitarian goals are clearly institutionalized in these citywide systems. They promote talk, deliberation, and cooperative action by neighbors working together to solve problems. The assumption behind them is that neighborhood government will build a commitment to shared values which will make citizens more involved, more tolerant of those they disagree with, more trusting of the governmental process, and more educated about public policy. When these practical goals are translated into the discourse of modern social science, such systems are designed to promote "civil society," "civic engagement," and the creation of "social capital."

## **CITIES WITH NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS**

The specific systems we studied at length are in Birmingham, Dayton, Portland (Ore.), and St. Paul.<sup>1</sup> As we explain at length in our book, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy* (1993), these four systems were chosen after a concerted effort to find the best citizen participation programs in the country. Using a two-stage panel survey of citizens in the four cities, a parallel set of surveys of a control group of cities without such participation systems, and elite interviews with city officials and activists, we tried to measure how successful these programs actually are. Since we first reported our results in 1993, we have continued to monitor these four cities' public

involvement programs. Before turning to an evaluation of them, let us briefly describe how they are organized.

What these cities have in common -- and what makes them rare among all American cities -- is that they have developed programs that exist in every single neighborhood. These are citywide programs that serve the affluent, the poor, and the middle-class in the exact same way. The neighborhood associations that are the foundation of these systems have real powers. They are not advisory bodies; they have substantive powers that make them significant players in city politics. For example, each of the neighborhood bodies has some responsibility for zoning decisions in their geographic area. In local politics, authority over zoning is critical as it is instrumental in controlling the pace and type of economic development (Peterson 1981). To turn such a power over to the neighborhood associations is to make a fundamental devolution of power from city hall to community organizations.

The neighborhood associations are often an official or quasi-official part of city government, but they are relatively autonomous from city hall. Although city hall may pay for a small central office and for a small staff of community organizers or liaison personnel, the neighborhood associations themselves are run by volunteer labor and open meetings are the standard decision-making structure. Each system, however, is organized a little differently:

--Birmingham has 95 neighborhood associations which are grouped into larger communities constituting a second tier of the system. Each of these larger communities selects representatives to sit on a Citizens Advisory Board that plays a central role in city-level decisions. Each neighborhood association distributes a monthly newsletter to all its households, and the neighborhoods collectively have significant responsibilities for deciding how to allocate certain governmental funds. The neighborhood system was instrumental in bring African Americans and whites together in Birmingham, and without doubt helped them to work together toward common goals, frequently proposing to upgrade predominantly African American neighborhoods rather than middle-class white ones.

--Dayton has 82 neighborhoods which are divided administratively into seven Priority Boards. The Priority Boards have responsibility for neighborhood planning and they prepare neighborhood needs statements. Officials from city agencies are responsive to Priority Board requests and appear frequently at regular monthly meetings. Representatives of the Priority Boards sit on citywide committees that allocate budgetary resources. The city brings proposals before the Priority Boards both to solicit ideas and to sell their plans to constituents.

--Portland, Oregon, has more than 90 independent neighborhood associations, and like Birmingham and Dayton, they are organized into a second tier of the citizen participation system (District Coalition Boards). The neighborhoods all participate in an annual neighborhood needs process culminating in a formal statement of priorities for each community. Through the district boards, neighborhoods receive technical assistance and financial support to cover the printing and distribution of communications to each resident. The neighborhood groups also place local residents on city planning and advisory bodies.

--St. Paul's system is built around 17 neighborhood-based District Councils. Each of these neighborhood Councils is a powerful political institution, and collectively they are widely respected by city officials, private developers, and political activists. Representatives from the District Councils are the sole members of the Capital Improvement Budget Committee, a citywide body with substantial influence over capital expenditures. District newspapers and an early notification system that mandates agency outreach to the District Councils are other impressive features of St. Paul's neighborhood involvement structure.

Citizen participation structures like these four are positively rare in American politics. We know of only a handful of other cities that come close to matching these systems in terms of the scope of the programs and the commitment to make them work. They are fairly elaborate programs and even though the costs are not great, the strapped budgets of most cities may make them seem like unaffordable luxuries. Yet it is neither the complexity of the programs nor their cost that is the real impediment to adoption. Rather, these programs are difficult to institute because they are a threat to city hall – particularly to the elected officials of the city. Political

power within a city may not be an exact zero-sum game, but it is certainly fair to assume that if the neighborhoods are given substantive responsibility then the mayor, city councilors, agency heads, and bureaucrats may perceive their jobs somewhat diminished. And even if there were no concern at city hall about a dilution of power, strong neighborhood associations are still seen as a political force capable of sustained combat with an agency or city official.

Instructive is the experience of Los Angeles. In recent years a proposal for a strong citizen participation system along the lines of the four described above has been part of the ongoing debate around government charter reform. This year, however, when a long-awaited charter reform plan was put forward, the citizen participation component was initially constituted as a set of neighborhood advisory bodies rather than associations with clearly delineated authority (Rohrlich 1998).<sup>2</sup> This has been the larger pattern of public involvement programs. When pressured to institute some form of neighborhood involvement system, city officials typically respond with a program designed to fail. Neighborhood advisory bodies can advise all they want, but without formal powers they amount to little. As we will discuss later, for organizations to produce what Putnam calls “bridging social capital,” they must possess some decision-making authority.

The citywide systems in Birmingham, Dayton, Portland, and St. Paul represent mechanisms for channeling citizen views into policy-making processes. We have documented elsewhere what seem to be very impressive governance consequences that derive from the operation of these systems. (Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993). Yet these systems of participation can also be thought of as institutions that ostensibly promote civic engagement and generate social capital. They are certainly built around dialogue and deliberation. Based in the neighborhoods, they should promote friendship and tolerance. Presumably, participants who work with their neighbors to solve community problems should become more trusting of government, one of the forms of social capital emphasized by Putnam. Because the neighborhood associations are tied to other layers of government, participation in them offers individuals the chance to develop ties to other social networks.

Although these programs seem ideally suited to meet the objectives of contemporary communitarian thought, there is, of course, no assurance that they actually achieve their lofty goals. Indeed, their highly ambitious goals invite skepticism. Can neighborhood associations, largely run by volunteers, truly revitalize American democracy and civil society by stimulating participation, move the policymaking process away from its adversarial basis, and build trust in government? Can they provide mechanisms for generating social capital in ways that other organizations or organizational structures cannot or do not? The history of citizen participation programs since the 1960s is a fairly dismal record (Rosenbaum 1978; Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993, 21-45). Are these systems of neighborhood associations really any different? As we attempt to provide our assessment of these questions, we come away with a sense of optimism.

## **NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS AS SOCIAL CAPITAL**

To understand the role of systems of neighborhood associations in producing social capital, as practiced in the four cities we studied, it is necessary to understand how the neighborhood associations operate in their local context. Contemporary thinking about social capital suggests that to be effective, two distinctly different processes need to operate. These processes, referred to by Putnam as “localized social capital,” and “generalized or bridging social capital,” play different but equally important roles in the creation and maintenance of communities capable of thriving. Localized social capital refers to the results of informal interactions that families and people living in their communities engage in over the course of their daily lives. When people interact with their neighbors, whether at church, PTAs, in bowling leagues, or other venues, the result is that they develop an understanding of what they share in common and perhaps how they differ. These interactions take place in the context of activities or organizations that people selectively “join” in order to enjoy an experience with others who have a shared interest in the substance of the activity or organization. People who participate in PTAs share an interest in schools, students, and learning, while those who participate in bowling leagues share an interest in throwing a ball down a lane at some ordered wooden objects, and so on. However, these interactions and the resulting understanding, by

themselves, may not be sufficient to produce a thriving civil community.

Generalized, or bridging social capital constitutes another important process in civil society. Bridging social capital refers to the connections of groups of people to other groups of people. When one neighborhood association interacts with another, when members of one church interact with members of a synagogue, when parents of children from one school interact with those of children from another school, or when neighbors contact public officials, the result produces an expanded understanding of the community. Moreover, such interactions often provide access to resources for groups that would not otherwise have them. Without bridging processes, people who live in poor inner-city neighborhoods may be engaged with each other but may be unable to create the kinds of economic opportunities the neighborhoods require. Bridging social capital also provides the foundation for the dialogue that is often identified as such an important part of democratic governance. “Democratic talk,” as Barber calls it, or “moral dialogues,” as Etzioni advocates, represent an integral part of bridging social capital. Since “democratic talk” involves discussing central issues of shared values and confronting serious differences, much contemporary thinking suggests that this is an integral part of making society more governable.

We also distinguish between vertical and horizontal bridging social capital. Horizontal social capital involves social groups or organizations interacting with each other essentially as co-equals. When several PTAs join forces for some purpose or activity, this would be an instance of horizontal bridging social capital. When several citizens advocacy groups elect to form a coalition for some purpose, this is horizontal bridging social capital. Vertical bridging social capital, on the other hand, involves relations between or among functionally or geographically differentiated organizations. For example, when members of a neighborhood association interact with officials from a government agency, this would be considered an example of vertical bridging social capital. This distinction is important because vertical social capital is thought to constitute an essential element in mobilizing the widest array of resources toward attaining larger social objectives [Wallis, Crocker, and Schechter 1998, 259], and because we believe that systems of neighborhood associations in the cities we studied produce

both of these types of bridging social capital.

This distinction between localized and bridging social capital finds its importance in the contention that healthy civil society requires both kinds of social capital in a sort of symbiotic relationship. As Wallis, Crocker, and Schechter (1998, 258-59) state it:

The relationship between local and bridging social capital suggests the beginning of a nested structure of social relations. The strength of bridging capital seems to rest on the strength of the local social capital being bridged. In turn, the strength of local social capital rests on the quality and frequency of informal social interactions. The common element binding local and bridging capital is a norm of civic engagement (or civic ethic). Local interactions that focus only on narrowly defined interests and fail to be guided by a broader civic agenda do not effectively bridge to other groups or ultimately achieve civil society.

Thus, civil society requires the engagement of people in organizations that develop and maintain localized and bridging functions. So the central question addressed here is, to what extent do systems of neighborhood associations perform these functions. Is there reason to believe that these systems are better able to perform these functions than collections of neighborhood associations working in the absence of any centralizing framework? Our analysis of these questions starts with an examination of how these systems work in practice.

## **NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS AS LOCALIZED SOCIAL CAPITAL**

People who live in cities that have systems of neighborhood associations are virtually guaranteed to have access to ready forms of localized social capital by virtue of the existence of the neighborhood associations themselves. In each of the four cities we studied, there is a commitment to the maintenance of neighborhood associations across the entire city. Regardless of where someone lives in Portland, there is at least one neighborhood association that operates there. Every resident of St. Paul has a nearby District Council. What goes on in these organizations can look pretty mundane. Yet many of the activities of these associations are precisely part of the process of generating localized social capital. They sponsor social events, neighborhood picnics, block parties, and other activities. But they do much more. They provide forums for residents of a given small geographic area to come together to address existing or

emerging problems. When a vacant house becomes run down and begins to attract criminal activity, the neighborhood associations can, and usually do, work to rectify it. When a business wants to construct a new facility that appears inconsistent with existing uses, the neighborhood association offers a mechanism for collective response. When local problems emerge, there is a standing process for addressing them.

The neighborhood associations typically produce social capital from proactive localized activities as well. Nearly all of the associations in the cities we studied hold regular elections for officers, and provide the opportunity for residents to become engaged in the governance of that association. Residents who choose to participate can take part in the selection process. In the experiences of the four cities, the opportunities of citizen engagement are plentiful.

Clearly, not everyone participates in their neighborhood associations regardless of whether there is a system of associations in place. Our studies which compared the four cities with systems of neighborhood associations to eight cities with no such systems found that participation rates were essentially the same. Overall, across all the cities we studied, close to 20 percent of the residents participated in community activities at least once over a two year period of time. Clearly, Portland and St. Paul, two cities with systems of neighborhood associations, represent cities with unusually high levels of citizen engagement in community activities. But the levels of community participation there were not significantly greater than we found in Norfolk, VA, Louisville, KY, and Buffalo, NY, cities whose neighborhood associations are not part of a larger system. And Birmingham and Dayton, two cities that have participation systems, had community participation rates that did not significantly differ from Tucson, Omaha, Colorado Springs, El Paso, Savannah, or Wichita, cities which do not have neighborhood systems. This provides at least *prima facie* evidence that creating systems of neighborhood associations does not improve the creation of localized social capital (Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993, 71-98).

But there is one major caveat to this finding. When we analyzed more finely the kinds of participation people engage in by differentiating “weak participation activities,” such as

attending a neighborhood picnic, or involvement in social and service organizations, or simple contacting behavior, from “strong participation activities,” such as working with neighbors to solve a community problem, or attending a meeting of a neighborhood association, we found some clear differences. Residents in cities with systems of neighborhood associations were considerably more likely to engage in “strong participation activities” than residents of the other cities. Thus, the presence of systems of neighborhood associations does not seem to affect whether or not people are engaged. It does, however, affect what kinds of activities they are engaged in. As we will discuss later, this has important implications for the creation of bridging social capital.

## **NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS AS BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL**

One of the distinguishing features of systems of neighborhood associations, compared to free-standing neighborhood associations, is an implied horizontal bridging function. In cities with citywide systems, there is clear linkage between and among the associations that blanket the city. In most cities without some form of citywide system, whether or not there is an active neighborhood association in a given area is somewhat idiosyncratic, due more to the vagaries of the resident population than to the inherent differences in need. Moreover, we would suggest that, as is the case in many cities, the existence of a strong neighborhood association in one area and the total absence in others may well produce negative consequences for civil society. At a minimum, the sense of isolation, inefficacy, jealousy, and lack of responsiveness that frequently accompany the absence of participatory opportunities need to be considered in an overall assessment of the production of social capital. In all of the cases we studied, there is some citywide mechanism in place to facilitate this horizontal bridging function. Neighborhood associations directly relate to each other by virtue of explicit organizational arrangements. Moreover, by virtue of possessing some formal or deferred decision-making authority, neighborhood associations necessarily produce bridging social capital. When neighborhood associations have the authority to make decisions, whether as a result of some formal city charter or *de facto* through the exercise of political influence, residents, citizens groups, and city officials alike take the process activities of these associations seriously.

The organizational arrangements that knit neighborhood associations together consist of some form of “second tier,” or second and third tier, where representatives from neighborhood associations meet to discuss, make decisions about, and resolve city issues. This mildly hierarchical structure provides a formal vertical bridge to city officials, particularly the unelected officials who manage the affairs of the city. In Birmingham, the system of neighborhood associations has three tiers, where the first tier consists of the 95 neighborhood associations. These neighborhood associations are bridged to a second tier which consists of twenty-two formal “communities,” typically composed of three to five neighborhoods. Thus, these communities provide the regular opportunity for multiple neighborhood associations to be horizontally bridged with others. These “communities” serve as the bridge to the third tier, the citywide Citizens Advisory Board. Although formally advisory in nature, this citywide board serves as a means for focusing dialogue among citizens, and between citizens and the city. Indeed, the deliberations of the Citizens Advisory Board are followed closely by administrative officials of the city, ensuring a direct vertical bridging function to city hall.

In Dayton, the arrangements are somewhat less hierarchical. The core of the system is Dayton’s Priority Boards, which perform a variety of horizontal bridging functions through providing myriad constituent services directly to individual residents and to neighborhood associations in their sector of the city. There are no formal links to Dayton’s neighborhood associations, but as a matter of practice, there is a clear symbiotic relationship. The culture of the Priority Boards is very clearly administrative, focusing more on the vertical than horizontal bridging functions. Most board members see their role as making city government agencies do their jobs more effectively. But there is also some duplication in the understanding of roles played by neighborhood associations and the Priority Boards. The city works through the Priority Boards and with neighborhood associations directly, providing multiple paths over the vertical bridge.

The City of St. Paul is divided into 17 District Council areas, where each Council serves as the neighborhood association. Each Council has office space and at least a half-time staffer.

The Councils have *de facto* authority over virtually all zoning and land use issues for the areas they cover. Horizontal bridging functions are performed by engaging residents in various Council activities, ranging from selection of Council officers and membership on committees, to attending regular Council meetings, to neighborhood picnics and outings. Since the Councils play such an important role in land use issues, an additional horizontal bridging results from interactions between Council participants and developers who wish to propose projects. To a degree not experienced in most other cities, developers understand that before they can get approval from the citywide zoning board, approval must be obtained from the relevant District Council. Additionally, horizontal bridging occurs through the second tier of participation, the Capital Improvement Budget Committee. Officials from each of the District Councils serve on this Committee to make decisions about how the City shall allocate its capital expenditures. Typically, officials from each District Council come to Committee meetings hoping to get funding for a specific project. Very often the result of the meetings is that consensus is reached concerning which neighborhood's projects are more meritorious and which are less.

Vertical bridging functions in St. Paul result mainly from the role that the District Councils play in serving as a communications conduit to city agencies. Residents know that the best way to get the city to respond to constituent services is by working through the local District Council office. District Council staff maintain close channels of communication with city departments, and routinely use these channels on behalf of residents. Moreover, when a significant issue is facing a particular neighborhood, it is commonplace for city agency officials to attend District Council meetings, communicating agency perspectives to residents, and taking residents views back to city hall.

In Portland, the organization of neighborhood participation is far less structured and clear-cut. There are many different overlapping avenues for residents to be engaged in neighborhood and governance activities. There are over 90 neighborhood-based associations which are loosely organized into a second tier of the citizen participation system called District Coalition Boards. But the link between neighborhood associations and the District Coalition Boards is not part of a formal hierarchy. Neighborhood associations frequently operate with a

great deal of independence from the Boards. Horizontal bridging occurs when the neighborhoods participate in their annual neighborhood needs process which yields a formal statement of priorities for each community. Through the district coalitions, neighborhoods receive technical assistance and financial support to cover the printing and distribution of communications to each resident. Vertical bridging occurs through two principle mechanisms. First, neighborhood associations, working through their District Coalition Boards, maintain strong channels of communication with city agencies, particularly the Office of Neighborhood Associations. Second, the neighborhood groups frequently find that they can connect to city agencies by placing neighborhood residents on any of the large number of city planning and advisory bodies, including the citywide Budget Advisory Committees. Because there are so many opportunities for citizens to be engaged in neighborhood and government activities, there is often confusion about what are the most effective ways for residents to be heard.

## **RESULTING SOCIAL CAPITAL**

Discussions of localized and bridging social capital would be incomplete without consideration of the people who populate the cities. There is, of course, considerable debate about whether Americans are less engaged in civic activities today than at times past. But even if this question were answered definitively, there is still the question of whether that civic engagement makes a difference. Even if the diminished trust and sense of community experienced today were the product of reduced civic engagement, it is not clear whether stimulating engagement would reverse this trend. When the National Commission on Civic Renewal put forth its 1998 Final Report, it articulated a clear belief that civic participation constitutes the solution to the decline in social capital in the U.S. The Report notes that “This idea [of civic renewal] – citizens freely working together – is at the heart of the American conception of liberty, through which citizens take responsibility for improving the conditions of their lives. Civic liberty offers citizens the power to act, and its strengthens their convictions that they can make a difference.” (National Commission on Civic Renewal 1998, 9)

Ultimately, the production of social capital is not measured by how many organizations

there are or by how many people participate in these organizations, but rather by how people – individual citizens – relate to each other and to their cities as a result of this participation. Much of the conceptual work on civil society makes great claims about what happens to people when they are engaged in civic activities. The National Commission on Civic Renewal is not alone in making these claims. From building social trust and trust in government, to creating a deep sense of community, to solving social and community problems, to empowering citizens, and many other benefits, civic engagement carries a great burden of expectations. (Wilson 1997; Lean 1995). Yet surprisingly few studies of civil society provide any systematic analysis of the consequences for people who become engaged in civic life. When people participate does it, in fact, affect the way they view and relate to each other, or the way they relate to their government? These form the core questions we sought to address in our city studies. We wanted to know whether people who participate in the systems of neighborhood associations see the world differently than those who do not, whether they reap the kinds of benefits that advocates of civic renewal seek.

The analysis presented here is reported in much more detail in *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*. While the fuller analysis examined a wide range of potential consequences of participation, we focus here on three central variables that represent benefits that are predicted to accrue to citizens as a result of civic engagement. These variables, trust in government, political efficacy, and sense of community, represent three results which are thought to be at the core of what civic renewal is about. If advocates of civic renewal are correct, we should find that participation in the context of systems of neighborhood associations produces greater trust in government, greater personal political efficacy, and enhanced feelings of a sense of community.

**1. Sense of Community:** The creation and maintenance of a relatively high sense of community among city residents is often seen as a central building block of a connected, productive, and stable polity. (Eckstein 1966; Fowler 1991) Our effort to assess the relationship between civic engagement and sense of community was conducted by asking a random sample of about 1,000 residents in each city the following question, as taken from studies by Wandersman (1987):

Some people say they feel like they have a sense of community with others in their neighborhood. Others don't feel that way. How about you? Would you say that you feel a strong sense of community with others in your

neighborhood, very little sense of community, or something in between?

In order to examine the relationship between participation and sense of community, we divided the residents we interviewed according to the most prevalent type of organization they participated in. We distinguished between participants in neighborhood associations, single-issue groups, neighborhood crime watch groups, social or service organizations, and non-participants. As shown below, the pattern is fairly clear.

*Table 1*

Percent indicating they feel a “strong sense of community”      Type of Organization in which respondent was active

Socio-economic status of respondent	None	Service or Social group	Crime watch	Issue group	Neighborhood Association	Sample size	Chi-Square
Low	27.1	37.8	49.3	41.3	57.3	2,490	92.41**
Middle	30.5	34.2	45.9	31.4	53.8	2,347	56.35**
High	26.1	38.8	41.9	37.4	51.3	1,282	46.88**

\*\* significant beyond the .01 level.

These results reveal a fairly clear tendency for participants in neighborhood associations to more likely feel a strong sense of community than participants in other kinds of local organizations. Although participation in all four types of organizations is associated with a strong sense of community compared to non-participation, participation in neighborhood associations do better than the other three.

Of course, there is the possibility that these results do not reflect the effects of participation at all. Indeed, these organizations might attract residents who already possess a relatively strong sense of community. To address this possibility, we conducted a two-wave panel design survey in each city, where we re-interviewed each respondent approximately two years after the first interview. This allows us to identify residents who had not participated in their neighborhood associations at the time of the first interview but who had begun participating by the time of the second interview. In this way, we can have somewhat more confidence that the inferences we make reflect a particular direction of causation.

Table 2

Change in “Sense of Community”

Status of Participation in Neighborhood associations over time	Lost	Same	Gained	Sample size	Mean Value of Sense of Community*
Continued non-participation	25.8	53.9	20.2	2,012	2.07
Stopped participating	25.7	58.4	16.0	257	2.30
Began participating	20.5	54.2	25.3	249	2.37
Continued participating	17.6	65.1	17.3	272	2.55

\* The scale runs from 1 indicating “very little sense of community,” to 3 “a strong sense of community;” 2 represents “something in between.”

Here it becomes clearer that participation in neighborhood associations plays a significant role in helping to create a strong sense of community. Some respondents gained a sense of community regardless of their relation to their neighborhood associations, but the largest gains in a sense of community were reported by those who began participating in their neighborhood associations. Only people who continued participating in their neighborhood associations reported less loss of sense of community than new participants. Moreover, those who lost sense of community were those who never participated, or who stopped participating.

**2. Trust in Local Government:** Another of the central building blocks to creating a productive, strong, and stable polity is the extent to which citizens trust their government. Clearly, advocates of civic engagement see the potential impact on trust in government as a core value in need of restoration. The issue of trust, however is a complex one, worthy of far more conceptual discussion than space permits here. Indeed, measuring the amount of trust that citizens have in their government can be a complicated task (Abramson and Finifter 1981; Feldman 1983). Because of the powerful confounding effect of peoples’ distrust of the government in Washington, and because we harbor no illusions about the ability of participation in neighborhood associations to be able to directly overcome this distrust, our effort here focuses on trust in local government vis a vis trust in the national government. In other words, we try to isolate the portion of respondents who have greater trust in local government than the national

government. We do this by asking respondents:

Would you say the government in Washington is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?

We also asked this question where "...the government in Washington" was changed to the government in the respondent's city ("...the government in Birmingham," etc.). By using the results of these two questions together, we can distinguish those respondents whose trust in local government is greater than their trust in the national government. To what extent is this view associated with participation in neighborhood associations?

*Table 3*

Percent saying local government can be trusted more than the government in Washington to look out for the good of all the people

Type of Organization in which respondent was active

Socio-economic status of respondent	None	Service or Social group	Crime watch	Issue group	Neighborhood Association	Sample size	Chi-Square
Low	26.6	28.8	22.6	38.4	32.3	2,088	25.46**
Middle	29.6	35.1	32.4	35.0	39.5	1,956	11.88
High	31.0	36.9	34.4	37.8	38.0	1,030	6.85

\*\* significant beyond the .01 level.

Here the pattern of association is much less clear-cut. Participation in neighborhood associations is certainly associated with greater trust in local government, but participation in issue groups turns out to be almost as important. Both of these types of participation, however, appear to be more important than the other two forms of participation.

**3. Political Efficacy:** Empowering people to take control of their governance is a third important building block. Empowerment can mean many different things, but for many it means giving people the personal confidence and skills necessary to be effective in the process of governing. To political scientists, this notion of being empowered closely resembles the concept of acquiring political efficacy. Researchers have distinguished two types of political efficacy – internal efficacy, which focuses on an individual’s sense that he or she is capable of understanding politics and influencing the political process; and external efficacy, which represents an individual’s belief that the government will be responsive to his or her attempts to influence it ( Balch 1974; Craig and Maggiotto,1982; Abramson, 1983, 135-189). Although these two types of political efficacy represent two sides of the same coin, for the purposes of this analysis, we focus on internal efficacy because it relates more directly to the issue of whether individuals think they have the abilities to influence government. To measure a person’s internal efficacy, we use the standard National Election Study’s survey research question:

Sometimes government and politics seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.

We asked respondents to agree or disagree with this statement using a five-point Likert scale. If participation in neighborhood associations empowers people, we would expect that they will be more likely than participants in other kinds of organizations to disagree with this statement.

To examine this issue, we arrayed respondents on a scale of participation from 0 to 5 representing not only whether they participated in their neighborhood associations, but also how frequently. Respondents who received scale scores of 3, 4, or 5 all reporting participating in their neighborhood associations, at least once a year but less than once a month, about once a month, or more than once a month, respectively. Respondents with 0 on the scale reported participating in no local organizations of any sort. And respondents with 1 or 2 on the scale reporting participating in types of organizations other than the neighborhood associations themselves.

*Table 4*

Percent disagreeing with the statement “politics and government are too complicated...”

Respondent’s Score on the Participation Scale

Socio-economic status of the respondent	0	1	2	3	4	5	Pearson's r
Low	24.0	25.7	30.0	44.2	41.2	38.4	0.118**
Middle	36.4	42.2	45.4	52.7	53.1	67.1	0.155**
High	47.1	58.0	62.3	67.3	63.1	78.7	0.174**

\* significant beyond the .01 level.

Here it seems fairly clear that internal political efficacy is associated with participation in neighborhood associations. Respondents in the top three categories of the participation scale are substantially more likely to disagree about government and politics being too complicated at each socio-economic status level. Thus it seems clear that neighborhood association participants feel much more efficacious about their ability to understand politics and government. Of course, these results may reflect a direction of causation opposite of that suggested here. It could be that those who participate in neighborhood associations do so in part because they feel more efficacious, i.e. efficacy causes participation rather than the other way around. Our analysis reported elsewhere has attempted to sort out such an implied reciprocal causation model, and the results strongly suggest that participation does, in fact, help to create internal political efficacy (Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993, 269).

Limitations on space precludes us from fully analyzing another broad issue involving neighborhoods and social capital, namely race relations within and between neighborhoods. We explore this elsewhere (Portney and Berry 1997), but its important to note here that neighborhood associations also seem to play a positive role in mobilizing minority communities. Minorities participate at high rates in neighborhood associations, and neighborhood association participation is in turn linked to a greater sense of community than participation in other types of political organizations. From our field work and interviews in the cities, we concluded that the neighborhood association systems facilitated interaction between predominantly minority, predominantly white, and mixed neighborhoods. Over the years, the neighborhood associations appear to have played a significant role in reducing conflict and antagonism along racial lines.

## CONCLUSION

We have sought to shed some light on the extent to which civic engagement at the neighborhood level, in the context of systems of neighborhood associations, is capable of producing social capital. We have argued that citywide systems of neighborhood participation provide unique opportunities for producing localized and bridging social capital. They engage residents in ways that are more robust than most alternatives, providing clear horizontal and vertical bridging capital. Moreover, we asked what we think is the tougher question: is the production of social capital at the organizational level associated with individual-level benefits to civil society. We provide evidence from Birmingham, Dayton, Portland, and St. Paul strongly suggesting that systems of neighborhood associations do, in fact, translate into citizen-level benefits of increased sense of community, heightened trust in local government, and greater internal political efficacy. The implication is that, if building social capital is a worthy goal, then creating citywide systems of neighborhood associations, as proposed in Los Angeles, can serve as an important and effective way to accomplish this. What is perhaps less clear, and fodder for future research, is the individual-level consequences of different types of social capital. Are organizations and opportunities for localized and bridging social capital equally capable of contributing to the production of individual-level benefits? Or is it as we suspect, that people experience the greatest benefits when they are engaged in activities which contain a variety of types of social capital?

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## ENDNOTES

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1. We also studied a fifth city, San Antonio, as it offered an alternative attempt to build citizen participation into city policymaking (Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993). In San Antonio, COPS, a citizen action group is organized in the Hispanic neighborhoods of the city. COPS has no official role in the city though it exerts some influence on policymaking. In comparison to the city-sponsored programs, COPS= performance is disappointing across a range of evaluative criteria. Here we focus the four city-backed programs that include all neighborhoods within their boundaries.

2. Subsequently, the Los Angeles charter reform proposal called for the creation of a Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which would be given authority for structuring a system of neighborhood associations that could potentially have greater authority than the neighborhood advisory boards originally proposed.