

TAXING POLITICAL LIFE: Reevaluating the Relationship between Voluntary Association Membership, Political Engagement, and the State

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Previous research has shown that participation in voluntary associations, including those labeled nonpolitical, increases political participation. Using data gathered from 2,517 interviews for the American Citizen Participation Study, we complicate this understanding by exploring the relationship between voluntary association involvement and political activity in a more nuanced manner—separating association involvements according to the level of exposure to political dialogue and information, even within organizations typically considered apolitical. We find that the extent to which association involvement predicts political participation is dependent upon the level of political activity that transpires within these otherwise nonpolitical organizations. In order for participation in voluntary associations to lead to increases in political participation, participants must have exposure to political discourse. It is not the generic act of participation that supports political life but rather the opportunity to engage with politics that serves as an impetus for political activity. In light of this, we offer a critical exploration of existing federal tax policies governing nonprofit organizations.

This research demonstrates that the relationship between nonpolitical voluntary association involvement and political participation is more complex than previous research has indicated. This complexity stems from often overlooked diversity within the voluntary association universe. Although most of these organizations are not formed for political purposes, there is great variation in the extent to which these organizations serve as political spaces. Some of these associations periodically take stands on political issues, while others avoid taking political positions but include political issues on their agendas. Still other organizations have no formal political discussion but serve as spaces where informal political discussions often emerge, and there are some groups that are devoid of any formal or informal political dialogue. While participation in any type of voluntary association initially appears to increase political participation, this surface effect

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obscures the true catalysts for political engagement. We find that the magnitude of the effect of voluntary association involvement on political activity differs depending on the level of political discussion and activity that transpires within the organizations with which respondents affiliate.

We recognize that some organizations that are nonpolitical in mission often still have political elements and find that the more political an organization's culture and activities, the more likely their affiliates are to be involved in political activity outside of the association. Active participation in organizations that take stands on political issues is the most powerful predictor of political participation, followed by participation in organizations that do not take stands on political issues but have them on their agendas and then by organizations that do not take stands on political issues or include them on their agendas but in which members occasionally discuss politics. Active participation in completely nonpolitical organizations has the smallest relationship to political participation. In fact, in stark contrast to prevailing beliefs, we find that once relevant control variables and other measures of voluntary association involvement are taken into account, participation in strictly nonpolitical organizations is not significantly related to political participation. In order for active involvement in voluntary associations to promote political participation, there need to be opportunities for members to participate in political discourse.

Other researchers have argued that nonpolitical associations serve to mobilize political activity as a result of the informal political communications that transpire in these settings (e.g., Verba and Nie 1972; Erickson and Nosanchuk 1990). We concur that these informal political communications can happen even in ostensibly nonpolitical voluntary associations. Rather than concluding that voluntary association participation generally speaking tends to prompt political activity, this research reveals that in many cases these political interactions are not happening, and where they are absent, so is the mobilizing force. In other words, *we find that it is not the generic act of association involvement that supports political life but rather the opportunity to engage with politics, which appears critical*. And thus, we want to foreground the fact that the activities and culture of the associations with which people affiliate is of great importance.

Because we find that the more politically active an organization is, the greater the positive impact on individual political activity independent of the organization, this paper concludes by arguing that federal tax policies that offer disincentives for political activity at the organizational level are of great concern. To the extent that politicians and lay persons express distress about low voter turn-out rates and perceived apathy in the American public, they would be well served to create policies that encourage the formation of, and involvement with, *political* associations.

THE PROMISE OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

Theorists of civil society and democracy have pointed to voluntary associations¹ as sources of social solidarity, as collaborations of citizens maximizing their democratic power, and as indispensable counterweights to potential abuses of state power. Tocqueville is the most enthusiastic and certainly the best-known advocate of associational life in democratic nations. When Tocqueville visited the United States in 1831, he was amazed by the propensity of Americans to form diverse associations. He believed that these associations were valuable because they ameliorated the American tendency toward

excessive individualism and provided a necessary counterweight to state power by allowing citizens to unite and become empowered as a collective to act on their shared interests. “Governments, therefore, should not be the only active powers: associations ought, in democratic nations, to stand in lieu of those powerful private individuals whom the equality of conditions has swept away” (Tocqueville [1835] 1984, p. 201). Voluntary associations, in Tocqueville’s opinion, protected U.S. citizens from two precarious dangers of individualism: lack of social integration and powerlessness.

For Tocqueville voluntary associations are able to counter state power because they form and act on the basis of shared self-interest, rather than on behalf of the state. As a result, these collectives are able to work to shift public opinion.

As soon as several of the inhabitants of the United States have taken up an opinion or a feeling which they wish to promote in the world, they look for mutual assistance; and as soon as they have found each other out, they combine. From that moment they are no longer isolated men, but a power seen from afar, whose actions serve for an example, and whose language is listened to. (Tocqueville [1835] 1984, p. 201)

Therefore, it is not the distinctness of such organizations from the state that makes them powerful; power is derived from the citizen-generated political action, the public voice that this distinctness affords them.

Following Tocqueville, other theorists have emphasized the importance of voluntary associations in civil society, precisely because they present a challenge to state authority. Durkheim and Habermas both value this custodial component of voluntary organizations. Durkheim writes,

If that collective force, the State, is to be the liberator of the individual, it has itself need of some counter-balance; it must be restrained by other collective forces, that is, by those secondary groups . . . it is out of this conflict of social forces that individual liberties are born. (Durkheim 1958, p. 63)

For Durkheim the protective force of voluntarily organizing groups is necessary if the state is to liberate people, rather than dominate them.

Throughout *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* ([1962] 1989), Habermas describes the literary and political societies that formed in England’s coffee houses and the salons of France as concrete examples of public spaces where rational-critical discourse allowed the public of private individuals to debate matters of common concern and subsequently monitor state authority. For Habermas, like Tocqueville and Durkheim before him, these voluntary associations are vital not only because they are sources of social engagement and integration but also because they demand accountability from the state (Habermas [1962] 1989).

THE LANDSCAPE OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Empirically speaking, the term “voluntary association” describes many diverse organizations. Trade unions (e.g., the Teamsters Union), professional associations (e.g., the American Medical Association), special-interest groups (e.g., the National Association of Women), Parent-Teacher Associations, fraternal organizations (e.g., the Elks), religious

groups/congregations, political parties, and informal social groups (e.g., book clubs) are all voluntary associations united by dramatically different shared interests.

Although there are a variety of political organizations,² the vast majority of voluntary associations are not designed expressly to monitor or influence the decision-making processes of the government. The universe of these associations can be subdivided into three distinct types of organizations: social welfare organizations, member-benefit organizations, and charitable organizations.³ While these organizations do not exist primarily for political activities, some do participate in the political arena. This level of engagement is regulated by stipulations enumerated in the federal tax code.

Social welfare organizations (e.g., the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons, the Sierra Club) must be operated solely for the promotion of the common good and general welfare and often have political elements to their work. These organizations often strive to generate social change and civic improvements by shifting public awareness, opinion, and political behavior. Many take stances on public issues or engage in lobbying, but unlike political organizations, they are not designed expressly for political purposes.

In addition to social welfare organizations, there are also some member-benefit organizations that qualify for tax exemption (e.g., farm cooperatives, labor unions, and fraternal societies). These collectives are not designed for political purposes, although some do participate in the political arena. These associations promote the interests of a community, an industry, or a profession, specifically for those who participate as members. Activities often include organizing conferences and providing resources for members and negotiating on behalf of their constituents.⁴

Though the United States has many of the above-mentioned types of groups, the overwhelming majority of voluntary associations in the nonprofit universe is defined by the government as "charitable" organizations, including religious, educational, scientific, and literary organizations, among others that are operated exclusively for charitable activities to serve those beyond their own collective. These associations often emphasize direct service and the procurement of immediate needs rather than the satisfaction of long-term goals (Moody 1996; Stubbs 1998).

Tocqueville would likely be an advocate of contemporary nonpolitical associations because they serve to ameliorate the rugged American individualism that concerned him. These associations often give members a sense of community through their interactions with other members. Membership in nonpolitical organizations is also a form of direct civic engagement, an essential component of democracy. However, Tocqueville also admired voluntary associations for their independence from the state and for the political freedom granted by this independence. Thus, in spite of the several positive attributes of nonpolitical organizations, they fall short of the Tocquevillian ideal in two important respects.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that nonprofit associations in the United States today are rarely independent of the state (Salamon and Abramson 1986; Hall 1987; Watt 1991; Giner and Sarasa 1996). This is a new phenomenon that has evolved out of the changing political, economic, and social contexts in which nonprofit organizations operate. Historically, the nonprofit sector was smaller and more clearly defined and was, in fact, an "independent" sector in many respects (Boris 1999).

Today, however, American nonprofit organizations receive a large portion of their financial resources from the federal government. The federal government gives over \$42

billion annually to nonprofit organizations (Mukherjee 1997, p. 23), and it is increasingly common for nonprofit organizations to act more as independent contractors for the state (i.e., filling the role of the state when the state is unable to satisfy public demand) than as an independent sector. President George W. Bush's attempt to support a program of "faith-based initiatives" aimed at involving religious organizations in publicly funded social welfare programs serves as a prime example of such a relationship. Similarly, the Reagan administration framed nonprofit social welfare organizations and charities as efficient alternatives to federally funded welfare programs (Boris 1999).

In addition, United States tax legislation has promoted donations to charitable associations by granting them tax-exempt status and by selectively providing incentives for private and corporate donations to these organizations in the form of tax deductions. These tax benefits did not come without costs; the federal fiscal documenting and reporting requirements that accompanied the tax benefits demand a higher level of managerial standards, altering the professional needs of many nonprofit organizations. In this sense, personnel hired and daily operations of charitable associations are shaped by federal mandates (Hall 1987, p. 20, 24).

Tocqueville valued the independence of voluntary associations in the United States because he felt this autonomy enhanced the opportunity for such organizations to be political, to observe and to critique the use of state power. Therefore, the lack of independence of modern nonpolitical associations is not, in and of itself, enough to collapse the Tocquevillian vision. The key issue is whether or not these dependent associations enhance the democratic process. If nonpolitical association involvement supports political activity, these organizations can be thought to do so.

MOBILIZATION VERSUS DEPOLITICIZATION

What is the empirical relationship between membership in nonpolitical associations and individual participation in more politically oriented endeavors? Many argue that involvement in nonpolitical associations is valuable because it stimulates political participation⁵ in other arenas (Olsen 1972; Verba and Nie 1972; Erickson and Nosanchuk 1990; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Ehrenberg 1999). If this is accurate, then Tocqueville's hope that voluntary associations serve as a counterweight to state power is not hindered by the existence of nonpolitical organizations but rather is bolstered by them, as they serve to prompt involvement in politically minded groups. Tocqueville asserted that an important connection exists between civil and political associations. He believed that familiarity with voluntary unions of any nature would make individuals more willing to work together on behalf of their community and that this desire for the common good and the inclination of people to act in concert would coalesce. The result would be a community willing to take political action (Tocqueville [1835] 1984). Deutsch (1961) and others have argued, from a mobilization perspective, that certain experiences have the effect of breaking old patterns of behavior and make individuals available for new types of behavior. Deutsch used this mobilization hypothesis to refer to modernizing societies, but this perspective has also been used to argue that social participation, even in nonpolitical voluntary associations, empowers people to become politically active.

For example, Olsen (1972) embraced this theoretical framework and provided empirical support for his claim. His research on voter turnout revealed a moderately strong correlation between social participation (of any kind, not exclusively membership in

formal voluntary associations) and voter turnout (Olsen 1972).⁶ Also in 1972, Verba and Nie concluded that people who are active members of apolitical groups, such as recreational clubs, may become politically stimulated through political discussions with other members of the group. This trend has appeared in more recent studies as well. Erickson and Nosanchuk (1990) conducted a case study of a nonpolitical voluntary association, the American Contract Bridge League. The case study concluded that associational activity has a direct positive effect on political activity by bringing participants into contact with politically active friends.

Finally, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady argue that participation in nonpolitical associations provides valuable skills (e.g., organizational and communication skills) and experiences (e.g., social networks and leadership opportunities) that prepare members for future political activity (1995, p. 40). In this sense, they argue that nonpolitical voluntary associations may act as a training ground for political involvement, strengthening democracy. These social scientists, then, would expect participation, even that which is done via completely nonpolitical associations, to enhance political engagement

PROBLEMS WITH EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF MOBILIZATION

Though their findings complement one another, the aforementioned studies do not close the book on questions of mobilization. Olsen (1972) (an important study that is frequently cited to bolster mobilization claims) uses voter turnout in three different elections as the dependent variable. As intended, his study effectively looks at the relationship between social activity and electoral activity, but the importance of Olsen's findings has been overstated. Voter turnout is an important component of the democratic process, but it is certainly not an adequate indicator of broader political engagement and should not be used as such. The focus of this paper is the relationship between nonpolitical voluntary association membership and political activity. Voting in presidential elections is not the type of challenge to state authority that concerned Tocqueville. Voting is crucial to democracy, but it does not qualify a citizen as well informed, or personally concerned, much less a critical supervisor of the state. This weakness is not a flaw in Olsen's research but rather a critique of those who have misused his findings.

Both Verba and Nie (1972) and Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) broaden this focus by using multiple indicators of political participation.⁷ They not only succeed in creating better dependent variables but also incorporate enough flexibility to investigate relationships between individuals' backgrounds and activities and the alternative modes of political engagement that subjects choose or avoid. These approaches more effectively evaluate political participation as described in this research. Both studies conclude that membership in nonpolitical organizations facilitates, in some way, political participation. However, these bodies of research leave some important issues unaddressed.

In *Participation in America*, Verba and Nie find strong evidence that nonpolitical organizational membership is positively associated with political engagement (1972). In fact, they find that individuals who are active in multiple nonpolitical associations are even more likely to be politically active than their peers who are active in only one nonpolitical organization (1972, p. 174–208). However, the data used in this research is over thirty years old, and the historical context in which the data was gathered was the late 1960s, when the United States was arguably in its most politically turbulent era of the twentieth century. For these reasons it is fair to question whether trends found during

this era are representative of participation in the United States in general and the contemporary United States in particular.

In addition, sociohistorical changes (e.g., the large-scale entrance of women into the workforce, the lengthening work week, and the development of a mass consumer culture) have taken place since this study was conducted that may have fundamentally altered the relationship between citizens and civic engagement. Wuthnow (1998) reveals several important ways in which participation and individuals' relationships to the organizations with which they affiliate have changed dramatically since midcentury. Putnam (2000), among others, decries continued declines in political participation and volunteerism among generations born after the so-called long civic generation of 1910 to 1940. In contrast, Sax and colleagues (2003) observe growing political and civic engagement among younger generations, after years of waning interest. So, while evidence of a decline in American civic life lies in dispute (Putnam 1995, 2000; Galston 1996; Portes and Landolt 1996; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Skocpol 2003; Rotolo and Wilson 2004), it is difficult to deny that qualitative changes have transpired in social context as well as in the texture and shape of participation (Wuthnow 1998; Skocpol 1999, 2003).

One example of these qualitative changes in participation is the growth in so-called checkbook or armchair participation, in which membership entails little more than paying membership dues and receiving newsletters and other literature from the organization. This type of participation fails to offer interactive opportunities and consequently has fallen under criticism that it may undermine political participation by deemphasizing critical thought and exhausting the finite amount of energy an individual has to devote to democratic endeavors. Putnam (2000) fears this will lead to an even greater decline in social capital, which in turn will further discourage political participation. Similarly Habermas, reminiscent of Horkheimer and Adorno's earlier writings, argues that other inactive, nonpolitical endeavors, specifically the consumption of mass culture, draw the masses away from politics and critical thinking, leaving political engagement to the elites.⁸ Habermas condemns consumer culture as a depoliticizing force,

Whereas the relationship of the public sphere in the world of letters to that in the political realm was once absolutely constitutive for the central identification of "property owner" with "human being" as such, without therefore viewing them as coextensive, there prevails today a tendency toward the absorption of the plebiscitary "political" public sphere by one depoliticized through a preoccupation with consumption of culture. (Habermas [1962] 1989, p. 177)

To the extent that citizens use their free time as spectators of public discourse, through watching staged panel discussions, debates, etc. in the media, or perhaps occasionally reading an organization's newsletter, they are not actively participating in public discourse. For Habermas the expansion of this voyeuristic and nondiscursive use of public space is one of the fundamental transitions that marked the demise of the bourgeois public sphere ([1962] 1989, p. 163).

It is possible that there has been a transition from a situation where nonpolitical associations served as training and recruiting grounds for political organizations to a social climate where competing demands have reduced individual availability for civic participation. Galston and Levine suggest that nonpolitical association is increasingly viewed as an alternative to political participation,

Indeed citizens, particularly the youngest, seem to be shifting their preferred civil involvement from official politics to the voluntary sector. If so, the classic Tocquevillian thesis would have to be modified: local civic life, far from acting as a school for wider political involvement, may increasingly serve as a refuge from (and alternative to) it. (Galston and Levine 1997, p. 26)

They conclude that while associational life is not withering away as Putnam's oft-quoted 1995 article and 2000 book suggest, voluntary associations are increasingly being used in different ways. Galston and Levine suggest that social and charitable participation may be increasing as political activism declines (1997).⁹

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) use more recent data and reach similar, yet less concrete, conclusions than Verba and Nie (1972). The 1995 study finds that there are two ways that nonpolitical associations encourage political action: by building the civic skills of their members and by serving as a source for recruitment (1995, p. 389). However, as we address in the next section, inspection of the raw data suggests that political organizations may well be inadvertently hidden in nonpolitical categories, compromising the reliability of these measures. Further, the analysis by Verba and associates reveals that when predicting overall participation by institutional affiliation and resources, organizational membership is not a statistically significant predictor (1995, p. 339–340).

The findings of Erickson and Nosanchuk (1990) contradict those of Verba, Schlozman, and Brady. Erickson and Nosanchuk found that while bridge club members who had political discussions with other players seemed to demonstrate an increase in political activity, other forms of activity within the organization failed to produce such results. "The most surprising negative result is that organizational activity for the bridge association has no effect on political participation" (1990, p. 211–212). This suggests that even when civic skills, such as organizational experience and leadership, are acquired in nonpolitical voluntary associations, they do not necessarily translate into an increase in political participation.

A more nuanced examination of the diversity that resides within the voluntary association landscape is necessary. It is critical that we explore the ways that organizations within the internally expansive umbrella of associations that are not expressly political might vary in terms of the degree to which they serve as catalysts for political engagement.

In their study of the relationship between nonpolitical and political voluntary associations, Perrin and Weir (2000) use the Verba, Schlozman, and Brady data and point to the variation that exists within the broad category of civic organizations. They find that different types of civic organizations mobilize their members in different ways. Perrin and Weir separate the seventeen nonpolitical organization categories¹⁰ established by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) into four broader categories based on the extent to which they predict political participation of their members and the ways in which this mobilization takes place.¹¹ They create a typology identifying some categories of organizations as "general mobilizers," some as "direct mobilizers," others as "indirect mobilizers," and the last group as "nonmobilizers."

Interestingly, the diverse organization categories found in each of the four types identified by Perrin and Weir (2000) include some categories that seem likely to fall into the nonpolitical realm (e.g., "Literary/Art/Discussion Groups") and other categories that are more likely to include politically active groups (e.g., "Labor Unions"). We initially

interpreted the findings of Perrin and Weir (2000) as an indication that an organization's level of political activity is irrelevant, since those categories most likely to include political and nonpolitical organizations are dispersed among their four ideal types. Upon further reflection, however, we recognized that as a result of their breadth, the Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) organization categories are likely flawed proxies for level of political activity. For example, "organizations mainly interested in issues promoting the rights and welfare of women" could include both the National Organization for Women (a politically active organization) and the Young Women's Christian Association (a nonpolitical organization). This is, of course, not a critique of their research, which wasn't focused on the relationship between organizational political activity and mobilization, but rather is an acknowledgment of a validity issue for our desired secondary analysis.

The objective of the research at hand is to create a more nuanced understanding of the impact of voluntary association involvement. Specifically, we have chosen to explore whether the relationship between voluntary association membership and political participation *depends on the degree of political involvement of voluntary associations* in an effort to consider the impact of nonpolitical association involvement on political activity.

DATA AND METHODS

The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) gathered the data for the American Citizen Participation Study. In 1990, NORC conducted 2,517 in-person interviews for the second of a two-stage survey of the voluntary activity of the American public. Machine-readable data from the in-person interviews and phone interviews conducted in the first stage are stored at the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan.¹² We decided to go to the raw data, which is in storage in the Harvard University Archives, to review the specific names of organizations in each category¹³ as listed on the original surveys in the hope that we could determine whether the seventeen categories were internally consistent enough to use them as proxy indicators for political activity. The review revealed that using the existing categories as indicators of political engagement would present an insurmountable validity problem.

Of greater concern to us, and for other researchers using this data, are the reliability issues that were revealed during the data review. Organizations were often listed under different categories. For example, in the subset of cases whose surveys were reviewed ($n = 788$), membership in Mother's Against Drunk Driving was listed under four different categories: "organizations mainly interested in issues promoting the rights and welfare of women," "organizations active on one particular political issue," "non-partisan or civic organizations interested in the political life of the community," and "organizations that provide social services in such fields as health or service to the needy." In other cases associations were listed under erroneous headings. For example, there was one instance where the Democratic Party was listed as a "non-partisan or civic organization" rather than as an "organization active in supporting candidates in elections such as a party organization."

These reliability issues likely stem from two sources. First, the instructions to interviewers indicated that they should abide by the wishes of the respondent if the individual insisted upon a particular categorization. The other source of inconsistency is likely a product of the empirical reality that many organizations are involved in multiple

endeavors and, consequently, mean different things to different members. These varying meanings ought certainly to be respected. The interviewer instructions indicated that when an organization straddled two categories, it should be placed in the first category on the list. This was undoubtedly an effort to improve consistency; however, in the final analysis serious anomalies remain (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, p. 61).

Many of the recorded organization names were vague or incomplete, making it impossible to research the activities of each individual group. In the absence of an ironclad indicator of organizational political involvement, we attempted to create a measure of organizations' political activity that would be more reliable than either depending on the general category in which organizations were placed in the American Citizen Participation Study or relying on any single question (as Verba, Schlozman, and Brady utilized, this is discussed below). Ultimately, we chose to use respondents' descriptions of the types of activities performed by the organizations with which they are affiliated in order to determine whether (and to what degree) a particular organization should be understood as political. In other words, we opted to rely on individual accounts of their experiences in order to assess whether the relationship between voluntary association membership and political participation depends on the degree of political exposure in an effort to consider the impact of voluntary association involvement on political activity in a more precise manner.

MEASURES

Voluntary Association Involvement

In the American Citizen Participation Study respondents were asked whether they were members of seventeen different types of voluntary associations. These included service clubs or fraternal organizations, veteran's organizations, groups affiliated with the respondents' religion, organizations representing the respondents' own particular nationality or ethnic group, organizations for the elderly or senior citizens, organizations interested mainly in issues promoting the rights or welfare of women, labor unions, other organizations associated with the respondent's work, nonpartisan or civic organizations interested in the political life of the community or nation, youth groups, literary/art/discussion or study groups, hobby clubs/sports or country clubs or other groups or clubs for leisure time activities, associations related to where the respondent lives, organizations that provide social services in such fields as health or service to the needy, educational institutions or organizations associated with education, organizations that are active in providing cultural services to the public, and other voluntary associations. Respondents who reported membership in any of these types of associations were also asked if the organization "sometimes take stands on any public issues." Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) defined a political organization as any organization reported as taking a stand on public issues. All other organizations were considered nonpolitical. However, they also asked respondents whether the organizations they were affiliated with sometimes included political discussions on their agendas for meetings and whether people in the meetings sometimes chatted informally about politics or government. We chose to use this information to distinguish between four different categories of organizations (ranging from explicitly political to completely nonpolitical): (a) voluntary associations that take stands on political issues; (b) those that did not take stands on political issues but

sometimes had these on meeting agendas; (c) those that did not take stands or have political issues on their agendas but whose members sometimes had informal discussions of political issues or government; and (d) those that did not take stands on, have on their agendas, or informally discuss political issues.

Levels of Participation in Voluntary Association

We also developed indicators of the amount of participation individuals had devoted to each of the four categories of organizations described above. Respondents were asked whether they had (a) attended a meeting in the last twelve months; (b) served on a committee, given time for special projects, or helped organize meetings in the last twelve months; or (c) served on the board in the last five years. We assigned one point for each of these types of participation and then summed the number of activities they reported participating in for each of the four types of voluntary associations. For instance, if someone attended meetings and served on the board of two organizations that take stands on political issues, their score for level of participation in that type of voluntary association would be four. Respondents who did not report being members of any voluntary association were coded as zero. Respondents who reported being members of organizations but had not attended meetings, served on committees, given time for special projects, or helped organize meetings in the last twelve months and had not served on the board in the last five years were also coded as zero for these measures, so as to distinguish simple membership from true social participation.

Checkbook Participation

We also measured what is commonly referred to as “checkbook participation” in order to compare its relationship with political participation to that of social participation in voluntary associations (i.e., attending meetings, serving on committees and boards). To measure checkbook participation we counted the number of times respondents reported being members of organizations whose meetings they had not attended but to which they had made financial contributions, other than membership dues, in the twelve months preceding the interview.

Political Participation

As noted earlier, political participation has been conceptualized in various ways. Some have focused exclusively on voting, while others have used multiple indicators of political participation. For most analyses we chose to combine eight indicators of political participation, including volunteering for campaigns, contributing money to campaigns, voting in national elections, and contacting elected officials. Our measure also incorporates reported involvement with political protests, marches, and demonstrations, volunteering on local government boards or councils, attending meetings of local government boards or councils, and informal activities carried out with others in the respondents' community or neighborhood aimed at addressing community issues. In essence, we recreated the aggregate measure used by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995)¹⁴ with one change. Their measure of political participation included involvement in voluntary associations that take stands on political issues, which we omitted so that we could compare

the relationship with political participation of involvement in these types of organizations to participating in less politically engaged organizations.¹⁵ While the aggregate measure of political participation is used for most of our analyses, some analyses examine separately each of the eight individual measures of political participation to determine their relationships to voluntary association involvement.

Control Variables

In order to distinguish the relationship between more political versus less political voluntary association involvement and political participation, it is important to control for other variables that may affect political participation and voluntary association involvement. In doing so, we also diminish the possibility that the relationship between voluntary association involvement and political participation is spurious. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) identified several variables with significant effects on political participation, including family income, knowledge of political issues, level of political interest,¹⁶ and level of education (for the respondents as well as their parents). They also determined that certain life experiences had significant effects on political participation. These included having been recruited by others to become politically active, exposure to politics in their families of origin, and involvement in student government and other clubs in high school. Finally, Verba and his colleagues found that the accumulation of civic skills (e.g., writing letters, participating in decision making, organizing meetings, and speaking in public) significantly increased political participation. These variables are included as control variables in our weighted least squares regression models predicting political participation.¹⁷

Our other control variables are demographic characteristics, including race, ethnicity, gender, and age, which have also been found to be related to political participation. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) noted that African Americans and Latinos participated in fewer political activities than did whites. Men were significantly more likely than women to have made campaign contributions, contacted elected officials, and participated in informal activities aimed at addressing community issues (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). As noted previously, Putnam (2000) found declines in political participation in generations born after World War II.

The majority of these control variables are measured in a very straightforward manner. Family income is estimated with the midpoint (in thousands) of the 16 preexisting income categories.¹⁸ We measured knowledge of political issues by creating a scale that ranged from 0 to 8 that sums the number of correct responses to questions which asked respondents to identify their U.S. senators and congressional representative and to answer questions about 5 political issues.¹⁹ We measured political interest by summing responses to questions about respondents' level of interest in local and national political affairs (where 1 = not at all interested, 2 = slightly interested, 3 = somewhat interested, and 4 = very interested). The number of years of education completed is used to assess level of education. Parents' individual years of education completed are combined to create a measure of parents' education.²⁰

To assess political recruitment we created a scale (ranging from 0 to 6) that counts whether someone at work, church, or in a nonpolitical organization had asked the respondent to vote or take certain political actions (each yes response = 1). We measured family-based political exposure by summing frequency of political activity in their

family of origin (3 = frequent, 2 = sometimes, 1 = never) with their mother's and father's level of political activity when respondents were 16 (for both 3 = very active, 2 = somewhat active, 3 = not active at all). Involvement in student government and other clubs in high school are measured summing level of activity in either of these activities (for both 4 = very active, 3 = somewhat active, 2 = not very active, 1 = not active at all). Civic skills are measured with a scale (ranging from 0 to 12) that counts whether respondents had written letters, participated in decision making, organized meetings, or spoken in public as a part of their job, church activities, or involvement in nonpolitical organizations.²¹

Gender is a dummy variable in which male is coded 1 and female is coded 0. Three dummy variables were created for the age categories of 29 or younger, 45 to 59, and 60 or older. The excluded age category is 30 to 44. Dummy variables for Latinos, African Americans, and other people of color were also included. Non-Latino whites was an excluded category.

FINDINGS

We begin by determining the average number of memberships and average levels of participation in the four types of voluntary associations (Table 1). As described previously, levels of participation in the four types of voluntary associations were measured by assigning one point for each activity performed ([a] attended a meeting in the last twelve months, [b] served on a committee, gave time for special projects, or helped organize meetings in the last twelve months, or [c] served on the board in the last five years) and then summing the number of activities they reported participating in for each of the four types of voluntary associations.

TABLE 1. VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION INVOLVEMENT

	Mean Number of Memberships	Mean Level of Participation
Active Participation		
1. All organizations	0.944 (1.276)	1.853 (2.756)
2. By type of organization		
a) Organizations that take stands on political issues.	0.425 (0.828)	0.852 (1.826)
b) Organizations that did not take stands but have political discussions on meeting agendas.	0.084 (0.313)	0.164 (0.666)
c) Organizations that did not take stands or have political issues on their agendas but have informal discussions of political issues	0.187 (0.507)	0.372 (1.068)
d) Organizations that did not take stands on, have on their agendas, or informally discuss political issues	0.248 (0.547)	0.465 (1.072)
Checkbook Participation	0.784 (1.088)	—

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations. Effective sample size is 2,514 weighted cases. Verba and his colleagues oversampled blacks, Latinos, and political activists. We replicated Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's method of reweighting, described in *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (1995: Appendix A) in order to make the sample representative of the adult population of the United States.

Memberships in organizations in which respondents were active participants are distinguished from those in which individuals were checkbook (inactive) participants. Overall, we found that respondents were more often actively involved members (mean number of memberships = .944) rather than checkbook participants (mean number of memberships = .784). Among the different types of organizations in which individuals were actively involved, the average number of memberships was largest for organizations that take stands on political issues (mean = .425), followed by memberships in completely apolitical organizations (mean = .248), then organizations in which members sometimes have informal discussions of political issues (mean = .187), and finally organizations that have political issues on meeting agendas (mean = .084). The distribution of average levels of participation by type of organization mirrors that of average number of memberships. Respondents' levels of participation were greatest for organizations that take stands on political issues (mean = .852), followed by memberships in apolitical organizations (mean = .465), then organizations in which members sometimes have informal discussions of political issues (mean = .372), and finally organizations that have political issues on meeting agendas (mean = .164).

The remaining analyses focus on examining the relationship between levels of participation in more political versus less political voluntary association involvement and political participation. Since this is a cross-sectional study of political participation and voluntary association involvement, we cannot fully resolve issues of causal order. The discussion of our findings reflects these limitations. A correlation matrix was used to determine whether any of our measures of voluntary association involvement were highly correlated. The correlations between the variables were found to be low ($r < .20$), therefore reducing the risk that multicollinearity could distort the relationship between these variables and our measures of political participation. Table 2 presents the coefficients from weighted least squares (WLS) linear regression analyses. Verba and Nie (1972) found that individuals involved with multiple voluntary associations were more likely to be politically engaged than were those active in only one organization. Our findings indicate that the number of organizations and also the level of activity in these

TABLE 2. UNSTANDARDIZED COEFFICIENTS FROM REGRESSION OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ON VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION INVOLVEMENT

Level of Active Participation in Voluntary Associations that	
1. Take stands on political issues.	0.285 (0.021)**
2. Did not take stands but have political discussions on meeting agendas.	0.259 (0.054)**
3. Did not take stands or have political issues on their agendas but have informal discussions of political issues	0.168 (0.033)**
4. Did not take stands on, have on their agendas, or informally discuss political issues	0.079 (0.033)**
Level of Checkbook Participation	0.227 (0.033)**
Constant	0.729 (.0480)**
Adjusted R ²	0.301

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Effective sample size is 2,517 weighted cases.

*p < .05, **p < .01 (two-tailed tests).

organizations are indeed positively associated with political participation, with one very important caveat. While increased participation in any type of voluntary association is associated with increases in political participation, we found that the magnitude of the relationship differs depending on the level of political activity of the organizations with which respondents are involved. Active participation in organizations that take stands on political issues is the most powerful predictor of political participation, followed by participation in organizations that do not take stands on political issues but have them on their agendas and then organizations that do not take stands on political issues or include them on their agendas but in which members occasionally discuss politics. Active participation in completely nonpolitical organizations has the weakest relationship with political participation. In other words, the less political the association environment, the less likely members are to be involved in politics outside of the organization.

Also noteworthy is the significant positive association between checkbook participation and political participation. This finding raises doubts about the suggestions by past researchers that shifts among Americans from active involvement in voluntary associations to checkbook participation is partly to blame for declining levels of political participation.

To further discern the associations between level of participation in more political versus less political voluntary associations and political participation, we examine these relationships net of the control variables described above. Some control variables, including knowledge of political issues, education, level of political activity in the respondent's family of origin, level of activity in clubs and student government in high school, and mother's and father's education level, did not prove to be significantly related to political participation net of participation in voluntary associations and other control variables. Gender, racial, and ethnic differences in political participation were also explained by the other independent variables. This does not negate the relevance of these racial, ethnic, and gender differences in political participation. Verba, Scholzman, and Brady state, "The absence of direct effects does not reduce the significance of these groups for politics or the political implications of the fact that the government hears more from some people, and some kinds of people, than from others" (1995, p. 442).

For parsimony, only those control variables that had statistically significant effects on political participation were included in the final model (Table 3). The data confirm past findings about the effects of family income, civic skills, political recruitment, and political interest on political participation. All were positively and strongly related to political participation. Those with higher family incomes and more civic skills and political interest and those who had been recruited to participate in politics had higher levels of political participation than other respondents. Age was also significantly related to political participation. Respondents who were twenty-nine years or younger participated in significantly fewer political activities than did respondents who were between the ages of thirty and forty-four.

Importantly, we found that *once the relevant control variables and other measures of voluntary association involvement are taken into account, participation in strictly nonpolitical organizations is not significantly related to political participation*. In addition, we found that of organizations that have political elements, the more explicitly political an organization is, the stronger its ties to political participation in other settings. All other types of voluntary association participation remain statistically significant. Active participation in organizations that take stands on political issues still remains the strongest

TABLE 3. UNSTANDARDIZED COEFFICIENTS FROM REGRESSION OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ON VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION INVOLVEMENT AND CONTROL VARIABLES

Level of Active Participation in Voluntary Associations that	
1. Take stands on political issues.	0.176 (0.022)**
2. Did not take stands but have political discussions on meeting agendas.	0.172 (0.054)**
3. Did not take stands or have political issues on their agendas but have informal discussions of political issues	0.095 (0.035)**
4. Did not take stands on, have on their agendas, or informally discuss political issues	0.015 (0.034)
Level of Checkbook Participation	0.151 (0.037)**
Control Variables	
Family income (in thousands)	0.003 (0.001)**
Civic skills	0.053 (0.018)**
Political recruitment	0.140 (0.035)**
Political interest	0.180 (0.028)**
Age 29 or younger	-0.251 (0.101)**
Age 45 to 59	-0.036 (0.104)
Age 60 or older	-0.186 (0.116)
Constant	-0.359 (0.166)*
Adjusted R ²	0.377

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Effective sample size is 2,517 weighted cases.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed tests).

predictor of political participation. In other words, it appears that it is not generic social involvement that is associated with increased political activity, but rather it is contact with political discussions, agenda items, and organization initiatives that is linked with political action outside of the group.

Checkbook memberships remained a significant predictor of political participation net of our control variables. Putnam argues that these types of memberships fail to promote social capital since members rarely interact. If membership does not entail social participation, the opportunities for rational-critical discourse described by Habermas would seem to be substantially diminished. Still, membership in these organizations may politically engage individuals in ways that have yet to be identified.

Finally, we disaggregated political participation and examined separately the relationship between more political versus less political voluntary associations and each of the eight types of political participation included in our aggregate measure. These included whether or not respondents had volunteered for or contributed money to campaigns, voted in a national election, contacted elected officials, been involved with political protests, marches, and demonstrations, volunteered on or attended meetings of local government boards or councils, and participated in informal activities aimed at addressing community issues. Since each of these measures of political participation were dichotomous, we used logistic regression models to determine whether the relationships between voluntary association participation and each form of political participation were statistically significant, net of the control variables.

Among the control variables respondents' level of interest in local and national political affairs was most often a significant predictor of political participation (Table 4). It was significantly related to seven of the eight types of political participation. Only voting was not significantly related to level of interest in politics. Being recruited by others to become politically active increased the probability that respondents had worked on campaigns, contributed campaign money, voted, and contacted elected officials. Increased civic skills resulted in increased attendance at local board meetings, and not surprisingly, family income was significantly and positively related to contributing campaign money. Regarding age, respondents who were twenty-nine or younger were less likely to have contributed campaign money, and respondents who were sixty or older were less likely to have participated in protest, compared with those who were between the ages of thirty and forty-four. Neither of these findings is remarkable; younger respondents would be less likely than those between the ages of thirty and forty-four to have the economic means to contribute money to campaigns. Respondents who were sixty or older were born prior to 1931 and became adults prior to the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War when political protest and civil disobedience became more commonly accepted forms of political activism.

Table 4 shows that active participation in more explicitly political voluntary associations is significantly related to more types of political participation than is participation in less political voluntary associations. Active participation in organizations that take stands on political issues is a significant predictor of six of the eight different forms of political participation. Only voting and participating in informal activities aimed at addressing community issues are not significantly related to participation in organizations that take stands on political issues. There are statistically significant relationships between participation in organizations that do not take stands on political issues but have them on their agendas and two measures of political participation: contacting local officials and participating in informal activities aimed at addressing community issues. Participation in organizations that do not take stands on political issues or include them on their agendas but in which members occasionally discuss politics is significantly related to only one of the eight types of political participation, participating in informal activities aimed at addressing community issues. *Participation in strictly nonpolitical organizations has no statistically significant relationship to any of the eight forms of political participation that were examined.* Joining is not a panacea for political disengagement; involvements are not generic or interchangeable. They are context specific.

Checkbook membership is a significant predictor of whether respondents contacted local or national officials, participated in informal activities aimed at addressing community issues, and voted. Organizations with large numbers of checkbook participants, such as AARP and Sierra Club, often solicit members to contact local or national officials in order to voice opinions regarding political issues. These activities are often facilitated with form letters prepared by the organizations for members to use to initiate contact with public officials. In fact, contacting public officials is often one of the only expectations of these checkbook members, other than continued financial support. The relationship between checkbook membership and contributing money to campaigns may reflect similarities between these two activities, the latter being a form of checkbook participation within the political arena. It is less clear how checkbook participation in voluntary associations relates to informal activities aimed at addressing community issues. Checkbook participants may be stimulated by knowledge they gain from being members of

organization (e.g., by reading newsletters and other organizational literature) to converse about political issues with other family and friends in their communities. Wyatt, Katz, and Kim (2000) found that most political discussions occurred in the home or at the home of friends or family and that these discussions, while informal, were significantly and positively correlated with increased political activism. They conclude, "Paradoxically, home appears to be an integral part of the public sphere—the very point, in fact, where the public sphere and the family meet to form a life-world more integrated than Habermas [(1962) 1989] conceived" (2000, p. 89). A limitation of these data is that they may not account for some of the complexities of what we have labeled as inactive checkbook participation. Future research should consider ways that so-called checkbook participants may benefit from their membership.

Our findings demonstrate that the relationship between voluntary association involvement and political participation is more complex than past researchers envisioned. It is inaccurate to argue that all association involvement serves to mobilize individuals for political activity. In order for active involvement in voluntary associations to promote political participation, there need to be opportunities for members to engage

TABLE 4. UNSTANDARDIZED LOGIT COEFFICIENTS FROM REGRESSION OF TYPES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ON VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION INVOLVEMENT AND CONTROL VARIABLES

	Worked on a Campaign	Contributed Campaign Money	Voted
Level of Active Participation in Voluntary Associations that			
1. Take stands on political issues.	0.145 (0.057)**	0.188 (0.054)**	0.243 (0.153)
2. Did not take stands but have political discussions on meeting agendas.	0.199 (0.132)	0.145 (0.119)	0.767 (0.502)
3. Did not take stands or have political issues on their agendas but have informal discussions of political issues	0.043 (0.098)	0.123 (0.077)	-0.001 (0.144)
4. Did not take stands on, have on their agendas, or informally discuss political issues	0.052 (0.105)	-0.038 (0.082)	-0.045 (0.155)
Level of Checkbook Participation	0.054 (0.106)	0.343 (0.086)**	-0.037 (0.158)
Control Variables			
Family income (in thousands)	0.004 (0.003)	0.011 (0.003)**	0.004 (0.006)
Civic skills	0.061 (0.055)	0.058 (0.041)	0.072 (0.077)
Political recruitment	0.232 (0.103)*	0.204 (0.080)**	0.401 (0.167)*
Political interest	0.409 (0.121)**	0.313 (0.078)**	0.188 (0.104)
Age 29 or younger	0.065 (0.397)	-0.654 (0.290)*	0.275 (0.386)
Age 45 to 59	-0.004 (0.347)	0.190 (0.238)	0.396 (0.368)
Age 60 or older	0.048 (0.405)	-0.188 (0.289)	0.965 (0.467)*
Constant	-6.023 (0.805)**	-4.393 (0.507)**	-1.258 (0.610)*
Model χ^2	189.152**	529.603**	92.292**

with political information. Even informal interactions involving political discussions increase individuals' level of political participation. However, more formal political activities in voluntary associations (e.g., having political issues on meeting agendas or taking stands on political issues) may promote political participation to an even greater degree. Our findings reinforce those of Erickson and Nosanchuk (1990), who found that organizational experience that included some political discussion led to increased political activity while organizational activity alone failed to increase political participation. While Verba and his colleagues concluded, "Simply being involved with an institution, therefore does not foster participation. What matters for participation is what happens in the institution-acquisition of civic skills" (1995, p. 340), the acquisition and future application of these civic skills appears to vary based on organization culture and initiatives. Our findings demonstrate that if individuals are to apply these skills to political action, the institutions must facilitate engagement with politics, be it informal or formal political discussion, introducing political topics at meetings, or taking stands on political issues.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Others have reached similar conclusions but have not unpacked their significance. When Verba and Nie (1972) note that even recreational clubs can be politically mobilizing,

Contacted Local or National Official	Protested	Volunteered on Local Council	Attended Local Board Meeting	Informal Activities
0.225 (0.056)**	0.200 (0.067)**	0.166 (0.072)*	0.172 (0.057)**	0.086 (0.049)
0.239 (0.121)*	0.117 (0.173)	0.136 (0.180)	0.157 (0.125)	0.296 (0.112)**
0.125 (0.073)	0.080 (0.121)	0.183 (0.120)	0.030 (0.089)	0.170 (0.074)*
0.061 (0.071)	0.066 (0.136)	0.227 (0.130)	0.047 (0.088)	0.055 (0.081)
0.273 (0.080)**	0.101 (0.133)	-0.064 (0.172)	0.097 (0.090)	0.211 (0.083)*
0.001 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.005)	0.003 (0.005)	0.004 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)
0.069 (0.037)	0.006 (0.069)	0.069 (0.080)	0.115 (0.046)*	0.048 (0.042)
0.161 (0.074)*	0.182 (0.122)	0.111 (0.160)	0.059 (0.093)	0.080 (0.084)
0.235 (0.064)**	0.310 (0.141)*	0.408 (0.194)*	0.327 (0.092)**	0.233 (0.080)**
-0.108 (0.223)	0.503 (0.400)	0.037 (0.629)	-0.632 (0.337)	-0.526 (0.290)
-0.057 (0.222)	-0.271 (0.436)	-0.359 (0.568)	-0.489 (0.292)	-0.291 (0.259)
-0.086 (0.250)	-1.625 (0.752)*	0.239 (0.575)	-0.225 (0.329)	-0.576 (0.305)
-2.9158 (0.401)**	-5.332 (0.911)**	-7.082 (1.289)**	-4.542 (0.596)**	-3.375 (0.499)**
402.654**	110.590**	96.576**	249.187**	201.499**

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Effective sample size is 2,517 weighted cases.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed tests).

they explain this as a byproduct of political discussions. Similarly, Erickson and Nosanchuk (1990) concluded that the bridge club was politicizing because it brought members in touch with people who were politically active and talking about politics. We agree, but rather than concluding that these informal political communications can happen even in ostensibly nonpolitical voluntary associations and consequently serve to mobilize people politically, we want to underscore the fact that in many cases these political interactions are *not* happening. In other words, it is not simply generic association involvement that supports political life but rather the exposure to and involvement in political dialogue that appears critical. This finding lends credence to calls made by some deliberative theorists (e.g., Fishkin 1995; Converse 1996) for programs that promote face-to-face political discourse as a means to enhance the legitimacy and authenticity of the democratic process. Further, other empirical evidence suggests that participation in such dialogue does increase political sophistication (Gastil and Dillard 1999), which political psychologists agree plays an important role in political behavior. In light of Eliasoph's (1998) ethnographic finding that voluntary association culture is increasingly one in which political dialogue is deemed *inappropriate* by those involved who choose to save their political conversations for more intimate settings, we can no longer continue to assert that voluntary association involvement in and of itself serves to mobilize those involved for political participation. The activities and culture of the associations with which people affiliate are of great importance.

Because this is true, existing federal tax policies governing voluntary associations are worthy of a critical reexamination. While the majority of participatory debates center on the individual characteristics that promote or inhibit association involvement, recent work has increasingly acknowledged the role that broader social and political characteristics play in promoting or deterring participation (e.g., Levy 1999; Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson 2000; Clarke 2001; Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001). As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of nonprofit organizations fall under the auspices of section 501 (c)(3) of the federal tax code. This 501 (c)(3) tax status offers two substantial benefits in addition to tax exemption: (1) donors to organizations with this preferred status may use their contributions as an income tax deduction (encouraging contributions), and (2) these organizations are directly eligible for foundation grants.²² In exchange for these tax advantages, charitable organizations are prohibited from engaging in any campaigning and face severe restrictions on lobbying and grassroots efforts. In contrast, according to section 501 (c)(4) of the Internal Revenue Code, under which politically active nonprofit organizations fall, as long as social welfare organizations are *primarily* engaged in tax-exempt activities, and do not use federal funds for political activities, they may legally engage in lobbying and grassroots activity.

In practice, the federal government ultimately offers financial incentives for political inactivity (Moody 1996). As a result, the largest subset of voluntary associations is, for all intents and purposes, encouraged to be politically dormant. While these organizations make many positive contributions to society and to their members, they are legally restricted from being politically active in a meaningful way. The findings of the research at hand suggest that these disincentives for political activity at the organizational level have great significance. Not only does this potentially alter the objectives and activities of organizations that might otherwise choose to be somewhat more politically active, those citizens involved with such organizations lose the opportunity to engage in political discourse, which might have prompted them to become active in other, more political, arenas.

In other words, not only do these tax policies impact the shape of the associational terrain, their impact is also felt by individual citizens and ultimately by the political system.

In sum, the majority of nonpolitical associations (those falling into the 501 [c][3] category), as differentiated from the broader category of voluntary associations, are legally unable to fulfill one of the most critical roles envisioned by Tocqueville. Through their quest for financial support and special tax status from the federal government, most charitable associations become allies of the state rather than attentive critics. The balance of what we have termed nonpolitical organizations (for example, organizations that fall into the 501 [c][4] category) may legally engage in political endeavors, but only to the extent that they remain secondary activities.

To the extent that politicians express concern with low voter turnout rates and perceived apathy in the American public, they would be well served to create policies that encourage the formation of, and involvement with,²³ *political* associations. The more politically active an organization is, the greater the positive impact on individual political activity independent of the organization. In other words, while we have programs such as VISTA, AmeriCorps, and Colin Powell's volunteer program, "America's Promise," which seek to foster an interest in community service and a philanthropic orientation in their participants (in the case of VISTA and AmeriCorps through stipends and forgiveness of student loans), we might also seek to support programs that encourage organizations that provide opportunity for political discussion and activity.

Tocqueville envisioned an independent pool of voluntary associations that could counter the power of the state and provide a voice for the citizenry. However, the structure of the tax codes illustrates that this influence flows in two directions. The state encourages the proliferation of nonpolitical organizations over those that actively attempt to influence the political system. Our findings demonstrate that these policies have important ramifications.

Voluntary association activity does not generically foster political participation. Instead we see that the diverse terrain of voluntary associations offers different benefits to society. Organizations that fall into the 501 (c)(3) category, which must refrain from any campaigning and face severe restrictions on other political activities, dramatically outnumber those nonprofit organizations that have more political leeway. Our findings indicate that in addition to stifling the activities of the organizations themselves, these tax policies also impact individual political involvement *outside* of the organizations.

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NOTES

1. The voluntary sector as defined by Robert Wuthnow, "consists of activities that are indeed voluntary in the dual sense of being free of coercion and being free of the economic constraints of profitability and the distribution of profits" (1991, p. 7). We use the terms "voluntary association"

and “voluntary organization” interchangeably to refer to formal or informal groups of people engaged in such activities.

2. Political activity refers to those activities by private citizens or organizations that are directed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel or the decisions made by these individuals. Political organizations include organizations active in the election process (e.g., campaign organizations), nonpartisan organizations interested in the political life of the community or nation (e.g., the League of Women Voters), organizations active on one particular issue (e.g., gun control, abortion), and organizations that support general liberal or conservative causes (e.g., People for the American Way).

3. Charitable here, as in the U.S. tax code, is broadly defined such that philanthropic, educational, and scientific, literary, and religious organizations all fall under its auspices.

4. As with social welfare organizations, veteran’s associations (which are classified as 501 [c][6] organizations) and business leagues (which are classified as 501 [c][19] organizations) may also engage in political activity, as long as they are *primarily* active in tax-exempt activities.

5. For clarification, political participation has many forms (voting, contacting elected officials, working on a campaign, joining political organizations, etc.), but the efforts of political participation are always intended to impact the government either through attempting to effect change or by attempting to secure the status quo (Verba and Nie 1972, p. 41).

6. Naturally, association does not imply causation. Olsen explains that the individuals in his sample were engaged in social participation prior to the election of interest. On this basis he makes a case for a causal relationship.

7. Verba and Nie use many variables (e.g., persuading others how to vote, actively working for a party or candidate, contributing money to a party or candidate, voting, working in community organizations, contacting officials) to construct four broad composite indicators of different types of political activity (1972, p. 58). Similarly, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) take into account multiple forms of political engagement.

8. See Horkheimer and Adorno (1947), *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

9. There is some empirical evidence to support such claims, particularly for younger Americans. For example, see the report from the 2001 Wingspread Summit on Student Civic Engagement (Long 2001).

10. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) established the following seventeen categories for nonpolitical organizations: service clubs or fraternal organizations, veteran’s organizations, groups affiliated with the respondent’s religion, organizations representing the respondent’s particular nationality or ethnic group, organizations for the elderly or senior citizens, organizations interested mainly in issues promoting the rights or welfare of women, labor unions, other organizations associated with the respondent’s work, nonpartisan or civic organizations interested in the political life of the community or nation, youth groups, literary/art/discussion or study groups, hobby clubs/sports or country clubs or other groups or clubs for leisure time activities, associations related to where the respondent lives, organizations that provide social services in such fields as health or service to the needy, educational institutions or organizations associated with education, organizations that are active in providing cultural services to the public, and other.

11. Perrin and Weir (2000) added church/synagogue membership to their analysis as well as the seventeen categories established by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995).

12. A detailed description of the research design can be found in *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (1995, app. a).

13. The names of the organizations were recorded but have not been coded, so they are not included in the data file available from ICPSR.

14. Their measure of political participation is described in *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (1995, p. 544). Eight separate types of political participation were measured through the following questions: (1) volunteering for campaigns: “Since January 1988, the start of the last national election year, have you worked as a volunteer . . . for a candidate running

for national, state, or local office”; contributing money to campaigns: “Since January 1988, did you contribute money—to an individual candidate, a party group, a political action committee, or any other organization that supported candidates?”; voting in national elections: “Thinking back to the national election in November 1988, when the presidential candidates were Michael Dukakis, the Democrat, and George Bush, the Republican, did you happen to vote in that election?”; contacting elected officials: “In the past twelve months, have you initiated any contacts with a federal elected official or someone on the staff of such as official. . . . What about a non-elected official in a federal government agency? . . . What about an elected official on the state or local level. . . . And what about a non-elected official in a state or local government agency or board?”; involvement with political protests: “In the past two years . . . have you taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration on some national or local issue (other than a strike against your employer)?”; volunteering on local government boards or councils: “In the past two years . . . have you served in a voluntary capacity . . . on any official local government board or council that deals with community problems and issues . . . ?”; attending meetings of local government boards or councils: “Have you attended a meeting of such an official local government board or council in the past twelve months?”; and informal activities aimed at addressing community issues: “In the past twelve months have you gotten together informally with or worked with others in your community or neighborhood to try to deal with some community issue or problem?” All except contacting elected officials were coded as follows: 1 = yes, 0 = no. Coding for contacting elected officials was as follows: 1 = yes to any, 0 = no to all. The aggregate measure of political participation used in most of our analyses consists of the sum of these scores.

15. In separate analysis (not shown) we used Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s (1995) measure to determine the effects on political participation of involvement in the three remaining types of voluntary associations and other independent variables. We found that the variables with significant effects on political participation were the same as those found to be statistically significant using our measure.

16. Knowledge of political issues and level of political interest are used as control variables in an attempt to capture differing levels of political sophistication. The concept of political sophistication has been defined in a variety of ways by those studying political behavior, generally referring to the level of political knowledge, experience, and interest a given individual possesses, in addition to their ability to process political information. For more information the classic piece by Converse (1964) is a good place to begin. For additional information see Conover and Feldman (1984), Lodge and Hamill (1986), Luskin (1987, 1990), and Zaller (1992).

17. Verba and his colleagues also found that respondents’ vocabulary skills had a significant effect on their political participation. They measured vocabulary skills asking respondents to identify the correct synonym for ten words and then counting the number of correct responses. We found that vocabulary skills and education were fairly highly correlated ($r = .526$). To avoid problems with multicollinearity, we excluded vocabulary skills from regression models.

18. The original response categories were (a) under \$5,000; (b) \$5,000–9,999; (c) \$10,000–14,999; (d) \$15,000–19,999; (e) \$20,000–24,999; (f) \$25,000–29,999; (g) \$30,000–34,999; (h) \$35,000–39,999; (i) \$40,000–49,999; (j) \$50,000–59,999; (k) \$60,000–74,999; (l) \$75,000–99,999; (m) \$100,000–124,999; (n) \$125,000–149,999; (o) \$150,000–199,999; (p) \$200,000 and over.

19. The questions for these political issues were as follow: (1) “We are interested in how much people know about American government. On average over the past few years, did the federal government spend more money on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) or Social Security?” (2) “Does the Fifth Amendment to the American Constitution mainly guarantee citizens protection against forced confessions, or mainly guarantee freedom of speech?” (3) “Who was mainly behind the increased use of primary election in the United States to choose candidates: party ‘bosses’ who can use them to control nominations, or reformers who want the voters to choose party candidates themselves?” (4) “When people talk about ‘civil liberties,’ do they usually mean the right to vote and run for office, or freedom of speech, press and assembly?” (5)

“Which is the major difference between democracies and dictatorships: that democratic governments allow private property, or that democratic governments allow citizens to choose their representatives freely?”

20. When only one parent's years of education was reported, it was doubled.

21. Most of our measures for control variables were modeled after those developed by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, app. b).

22. At least one recent study (Magnus 2001) addresses the barrier that this presents to non-profit organizations outside of the 501 (c)(3) category in search of funding.

23. Remember, in addition to organizations reaping benefits by electing to be charitable rather than political, potential members also benefit by selecting to be involved with 501 (c)(3) organizations rather than 501 (c)(4) organizations because they are able to deduct their contributions to charitable groups.

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