

The Implications of Transitions in the Voluntary Sector for Civic Engagement: A Case Study of Association Mobilization around the 2000 Presidential Campaign

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This article reviews the prominent historical changes in American associational life (increasingly diffuse organizational attachments, professionalization of the voluntary sector, and the proliferation of “mailing-list” citizen groups), and turns to cross-sectional data on contemporary voluntary associations and their activities during the key campaign events of the 2000 presidential election to evaluate the impact of these changes on associations’ ability to live up to the normative visions of civic engagement. Data on 29 diverse voluntary associations were gathered through unobtrusive observations at association events on location during the two national nominating conventions and the three televised presidential debates, 61 subsequent in-depth interviews with association representatives, literature distributed at association events, and a variety of supplemental sources. This article argues that although this new terrain is marked by significant limitations (as critics have suggested), especially in terms of associations’ ability to provide opportunities for members to develop civic skills, these changes in associational life also offer important opportunities, particularly in terms of contributing to a vital democratic process by promoting public political discourse. Implications for social solidarity are also addressed.

The historical transition in civic life toward diffuse attachments, professionally staffed voluntary associations, and an increase in “mailing-list” citizen groups has led academics and politicians alike to question whether modern voluntary associations are still able to foster social solidarity, enhance the legitimacy of representative democracy, and provide opportunities for participants to develop civic skills. This research utilizes a case study in contemporary American civil society to more fully assess the extent to which these new widespread changes in the voluntary sector impact the ability of associations to provide spaces that facilitate individual growth, attachment to society, and the democratic process. This article reviews the long-term trends in the voluntary sector that scholars have identified and proceeds to examine cross-sectional qualitative data on voluntary associations and their members as they respond to the major events of the 2000 presidential campaign in order to unearth the opportunities and limitations presented by contemporary forms of involvement in public life.

Civic Engagement and Voluntary Associations in the United States

Civic engagement describes the expanse of activities, in which participation in social life with other citizens takes place, involving the pursuit of common

goals related to the betterment of the community (see Brint and Levy (1999) for a more detailed explanation). These goals can range from increasing social interaction, to improving public education, to helping those in need. Civic participation can take the shape of citizens seeking legal change, government support, or economic development, or it may involve citizens working exclusively within the realm of civil society at the cultural and social levels.

It is difficult to understand civic engagement in the United States without being familiar with the role of voluntary associations in American public life. The voluntary sector has been defined by Robert Wuthnow (1991:7) as consisting 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.” Those studying civil society and democracy¹ have long pointed to voluntary associations as important sources of social cohesion, as collectives of citizens exercising their democratic power, and as indispensable counterweights to potential abuses of state power. Empirically speaking, the term “voluntary association” describes many diverse organizations. Trade unions, professional associations, special-interest groups, parent–teacher organizations, fraternal organizations, religious groups/congregations, political parties, social welfare organizations, and informal social groups are all voluntary associations united by dramatically different shared interests.

These diverse associations, in their myriad formal and informal iterations, link individuals to others and serve as venues that channel individual energy and interests. Voluntary associations are a central locus of civic engagement in modern American society, whether individuals participate by “joining” and developing a long-term relationship with an association and/or its members or whether they turn periodically to an association for short-term (or “episodic”) volunteering opportunities. These associations are perhaps best conceptualized as a critical form of infrastructure for civic engagement, as critical conduits that facilitate engagement by connecting individuals to one another and/or to symbolic and organizational structures.

While the desirability of civic engagement and, more specifically, associational involvement are often uninterrogated, a growing body of empirical research demonstrates that civic engagement has varied context-contingent potential outcomes, which may fail to facilitate and may even subvert the normative commitments embedded in the utopian vision (e.g., Eliasoph 1998; Fiorina 1999; Guttman 1998; Lichterman 1999; Meeks 2001; Sobieraj 2002; Sobieraj and White 2004). In light of these important findings, this research places engagement context at the center of the analysis, moving away from hypervigilance of membership numbers toward questions of involvement contexts.

What are the values embedded in the normative vision of civic engagement that circulates through academic writing and public discourse? Schlozman,

Verba, and Brady (1999) tap into these beliefs, arguing that civic engagement is important for three reasons: (1) it allows for individual growth by providing educational experiences (often improving confidence and feelings of efficacy in addition to competence in a variety of skills) and engendering positive feelings about self and community, (2) it fosters stronger and more democratic communities via the development of trust, norms of reciprocity and cooperation, and a better understanding of the positionality of others in the community, and (3) it ensures that the needs of multiple voices are communicated to public officials. In other words, civic engagement is understood as important because it provides opportunities for individuals to develop civic skills, fosters social solidarity, and enhances the legitimacy of representative democracy.

In the sections that follow, I will describe three prominent changes in civic engagement that have been identified in the social science literature, and then use contemporary cross-sectional data on voluntary associations to explore how the changes identified in earlier research manifest themselves. Finally, I will address the ability of this new associational landscape to live up to the normative visions of civic engagement.

The Changing Landscape of Civic Engagement in the United States

Much ado has been made in academic and political circles, in newspaper columns, and in churches, about America's declining civic involvement. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton made an impassioned plea for the rebuilding of community as early as 1985, and Putnam's now famous 1995 article, "Bowling Alone," sparked deep concern about American isolation and individualism.² Recent research on civic engagement, however, has painted a more nuanced picture of civic engagement in the United States. Rather than understanding the vast changes in our participatory landscape as a downward spiral, these new works depict the change as a transformation. Participation still exists, but it has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. Three prominent trends have resulted in a change in the modal forms of nonreligious civic engagement. First, there has been a dramatic rise in mailing-list organizations, many of which are politically focused citizen groups, that do not involve the traditional face-to-face interaction once envisioned by Habermas (Berry 1997, 1999). Second, many activities once undertaken voluntarily by citizens have become increasingly professionalized (Schudson 1998; Skocpol 2003; Wuthnow 1998). Finally, contemporary civic engagement tends to be less oriented toward lifetime memberships and more oriented toward temporary commitments (Skocpol 2003; Wuthnow 1998). These changes indicate that contemporary civic involvement is more removed, more diffuse, and less intensive than civic engagement in the past.

The Decline of Classic American Voluntary Associations and the Rise of Citizen Groups

In the 1950s millions of Americans joined service clubs, veteran's organizations, fraternal associations, and ladies' auxiliary associations to develop social relationships with others in their neighborhoods and to improve their communities. Most associations of this variety recruited members across class lines (though they typically had memberships that were all-male or all-female and had little to no racial diversity), held frequent local meetings (which members regularly attended), elected officers, formed numerous committees, and held periodic assemblies of elected leaders and delegates at regional, state, and often national levels. The activities of these organizations involved social gatherings and service events (including local community and charitable efforts, mutual benefit endeavors, and involvement in national affairs), and they frequently addressed many broad issues in contrast to the narrow focus more typical of contemporary voluntary associations (Skocpol 1999a, 2003). Culturally, these associations placed a high value on patriotism (Skocpol 1999a, 2003) and group loyalty (Wuthnow 1998).

Today, the number of people participating in classic American voluntary associations has diminished tremendously (Hall 1999; Putnam 1995a, 2000; Wuthnow 1998). There has been a significant movement away from these participatory voluntary associations, toward representative associations. The rights-based mobilizations of the 1960s (Skocpol 1999b, 2003), combined with an increasing blurring of family, work, and leisure (Wuthnow 1998), appear to have reoriented civic engagement. At the same time, membership in self-help groups and professional associations has risen significantly (Wuthnow 1998), and a dramatic increase in national citizen groups and their memberships has taken place (Berry 1997, 1999).

Although many diverse organizations use a mailing-list model in which member/contributors are geographically dispersed and do not gather regularly for meetings in the traditional sense (e.g., many voluntary health organizations, vocational groups, and arts associations), politically oriented groups using this model have grown notably in the last 30 years. Jeffrey Berry (1999) defines a citizen group as a political interest group whose axis of association rests on the notion that the organization will represent its members and donors in the political process, rather than on the vocational or professional (or, I would add, the social or charitable) aspirations of its membership. These groups offer very limited membership benefits other than indirect political voice. These are generally single-issue or identity-based groups whose primary objective is lobbying. Membership typically involves paying dues and results in receipt of a newsletter. These are, by and large, mailing-list organizations; they

rarely, if ever, hold mass meetings or involve face-to-face interaction between members.

Calhoun (1991) argues that in modernity we have developed many new ways to form community with others beyond direct social interaction; people increasingly identify themselves as members of large communities connected primarily by common identities (e.g., Republican, Latino) rather than by direct interpersonal relationships with one another. National citizen groups can be understood as creating imagined communities because the organizations do not hold regular meetings, but members share common interests and political aspirations. Newsletters, Web sites, mission statements, logos, T-shirts, and press releases help to construct a sense of belonging and commitment. National citizen groups are now estimated to make up over a quarter of all voluntary associations in the United States (Wuthnow 1998).

The Professionalization of Civic Engagement

Since the 1960s, the scale and severity of the social problems once thought to be ameliorated by the efforts of service organizations (e.g., Moose Lodges, Lions Clubs) have contributed to a belief that expert knowledge gleaned through extensive training and education are necessary to cope with most public issues (e.g., domestic violence, urban planning, racial inequality). The join-in-and-lend-a-hand efforts of the classic American voluntary associations began to appear awkward and ineffective in the face of these challenges. The emphasis on expert knowledge and efficiency coupled with increased availability of federal funding and foundation grants led to a new form of civic involvement that represented complete community service—the nonprofit and/or social movement professional (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Wuthnow 1998). These professionals now provide many services that were once provided by amateurs. Today, professionals staff a variety of voluntary associations from large social service agencies, citizen groups, and labor unions to much smaller organizations working on community issues and regional events.

This shift in involvement toward professional, rather than unpaid participatory, engagement is not simply a change from unpaid to paid community efforts; the form of engagement itself has changed. Service organizations of the past were structured such that members dabbled in many efforts; participants were typically involved with a variety of committees (e.g., social, charitable, political). In contrast, the energies of nonprofit professionals tend to be narrowly focused as a result of working for highly specialized associations (e.g., National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League), and the extensive intra-organization bureaucratization that has led to task specialization (e.g., fund-raising, public relations, research). Consequently, this mode of contemporary community involvement is often in-depth and focused rather than diffuse. This emergent

form of participation is part and parcel of the shift in structure of many nonprofit organizations away from alternative modes of operation toward resembling proprietary corporations with their emphases on efficiency, production, and profit margin.³

The advent of the nonprofit professional is also significant because of the ways in which the presence of professionals has altered the relationship between organizations and their remaining volunteers. Wuthnow (1998) explains that in the absence of vital service clubs, volunteering is contingent upon the presence of nonprofit organizations through which service can be given. As a result, nonprofit professionals coordinate volunteers and organize projects in which volunteers can participate.⁴ Volunteers are now less frequently involved in the planning process and are increasingly relegated to those activities that are not viewed as requiring expertise. The tactile potency of volunteerism has diminished, because professionals increasingly handle consequential tasks.

The Amazing Shrinking Commitment

The classic American voluntary associations received a lifetime commitment from their members, and the federated structure afforded local members consistent, repeated, face-to-face interactions with one another through meetings, committee work, social gatherings, and participation in sponsored activities. This long-term mode of civic engagement is now decreasingly common. The aforementioned national citizen groups, whose members participate through financial contributions and often never meet one another, represent the other end of the participatory spectrum. Somewhere in the middle, between a lifetime relationship and complete anonymity, lies civic engagement where citizens meet and work together on a temporary basis. According to Wuthnow (1998), this ephemeral engagement has become increasingly popular in the United States.⁵

Wuthnow's civic involvement survey found that over half of Americans engage in some form of volunteer work, but that most of these volunteers are active on an extremely limited basis. Participation is often temporary, centered on completing a specific task (e.g., park cleanup day) or toward achieving a specific goal (e.g., raising consciousness about the plight of a prisoner on death row). Wilson and Musick (1999) found that over 40 percent of volunteers reported their volunteer activity as a one-time event rather than an ongoing commitment. The Wuthnow survey found that the average volunteer devotes two hours per week to volunteering and that this time is typically dispersed among different organizations (1998:51). This is not to imply that two hours per week is inconsequential in terms of community benefit, but rather to highlight the weak ties between the individuals and the organizations they serve in comparison to club members of the 1950s. The relationships between volunteers, between volunteers and clients, and between volunteers and the professionals

who staff voluntary organizations are hence structurally more limited than the relationships between service club members who meet regularly, serve on committees together, and work for a lifetime in the same community.⁶

In summary, the modal forms of contemporary nonreligious civic engagement in the United States reflect changes in individual participation, as well as changes in the shape and texture of many of today's voluntary organizations. The voluntary association landscape is now increasingly populated by mailing-list organizations, many of which are politically oriented citizen groups, by associations run by professional staff rather than citizen volunteers, and by groups with fewer long-term or lifetime affiliates.⁷ The implications of these changes remain unexplored at the empirical level. It is important to assess the degree to which these types of voluntary associations are able to create opportunities for the development of civic skills, to build social solidarity, and to enhance the democratic process. In order to evaluate the tenacity and points of vulnerability of this new associational environment, it is essential to explore civic engagement in action—to witness the practices of organizations and those who are affiliated with them. This research utilizes a case study to examine these newly shaped voluntary associations.

A Crescendo of Civic Life: Presidential Campaigns as a Window to Explicitly Political Forms of Civic Engagement

The search for a case that would permit exploration of contemporary associational life as it is practiced involved a hunt for a vibrant moment of civic activity.⁸ I sought a space and time in which individual interest would be high and voluntary association activity would be piqued. The presidential campaign season provided the perfect arena. Presidential campaigns have five characteristics that imbue these rituals with unusual potential for stimulating association activity: breadth, significance, liminality, dispersion, and publicity.

Breadth refers to the multiplicity of issues that open for debate during a presidential campaign. As many issues formerly deemed private have been increasingly thrust into the public sphere, presidential elections have become an opportunity for raising virtually all matters of common concern. A vast array of topics simultaneously open for debate during election years: education, health care, inequality, the death penalty, foreign policy, reproductive rights, gun control, and others are all discussed in the same forum. The breadth of relevant issues renders the presidential election salient as a period of potential activity for a tremendous number of groups, associations, and individuals.

Second, presidential elections are significant; the winners of these elections are arguably imbued with more power than the victor of any other election in the world. The weight of this process, then, may serve to intensify the desire for many organizations and individuals to become active. The result will have an

impact not only locally, but also nationally and internationally. The outcome is meaningful and renders the process significant.

Third, presidential campaigns offer genuine moments of political opportunity. By empowering new leaders, elections present a political aperture, and voluntary associations can exert influence during this process. Voluntary associations can endorse specific candidates, make campaign contributions, stage protests, and apply pressure to their opponents by publicizing candidate records that displease them. Voluntary associations can even be influential in setting the political agenda by attempting to influence party platforms.⁹

Fourth, presidential campaigns are geographically dispersed, moving politics outside of Washington and into communities across the nation. This physical accessibility provides a unique opportunity for political participation. The nominating conventions and televised presidential and vice presidential debates take place beyond the Washington Beltway, and countless campaign stops are made across the country during the general election. This provides many citizens with an opportunity to see the candidates. In some cases, citizens may meet or speak with them directly, because many candidates dine in local establishments, make themselves available to community groups and classrooms, and some even visit private homes. The campaign brings the candidate in to closer communication with the public than they are likely ever to be again, should they enter the White House (Hart 2000).

Finally, presidential campaigns bring publicity with them. The national press pool that follows each candidate and the throng of local news personnel that join them at each stop create myriad opportunities to garner publicity. The extensive campaign coverage affords voluntary associations an opportunity to attract publicity that may increase their political effectiveness and symbolic power. In addition to responding to journalists' questions and releasing unsolicited press statements, these associations can stage events designed to capture the attention of the media. Dayan and Katz (1992) explain that the potential to get a message to a national or international audience renders media events vulnerable to "hijacking" by outsiders in search of publicity. Increased press attention may help voluntary organizations reach parties, candidates, and voters, as well as potential members and contributors.

Without question, the campaign environment begs certain types of civic engagement,¹⁰ but in order to assess the ability of contemporary civic engagement to foster personal growth, build social solidarity, and enhance the democratic process, the political focus of the campaign was indispensable. While individual growth and social solidarity may arguably be promoted in any engagement context, an overtly political moment was necessary to provide insight into the ability of contemporary engagement to enhance the legitimacy of representative democracy. Therefore, while civic engagement may be piqued at other moments,

such as natural disasters and major holidays, the role of engagement in the democratic process would likely be less visible. This case was selected precisely because of the unique qualities it possesses and not in spite of them.

Methods

Data were gathered on voluntary associations that organized activities coinciding with preplanned,¹¹ national-level campaign events during the 2000 general election in which one or more of the presidential candidates were present. The key publicized events that met these criteria were the Republican National Convention (held in Philadelphia, PA), the Democratic National Convention (held in Los Angeles, CA), and the three televised presidential debates (held in Boston, MA, Winston-Salem, NC, and St. Louis, MO). I traveled to each of the cities where these events were held to draw my sample of associations.

For each of the campaign events, I researched association activity in the host city by conducting extensive Internet research (looking for association Web sites, calls for participation, relevant listservs, etc.), contacting local community centers, reading local newspapers, talking with people in the press and activist circles, and canvassing the areas surrounding the event location for group activities and/or postings, and compiled a list of organizations with activities planned to coincide with the event period (with parameters I defined as two days prior to the event through two days following event). From this list, I drew a purposive sample of organizations that varied along three different dimensions. First, I sampled associations that varied in terms of their *geographic scope*, choosing national, regional, and local organizations, aware that the process of taking action might have different meanings and outcomes for these groups. Second, I chose organizations that had different *types of activities* planned (e.g., protests, fund-raisers, rallies, voter drives, meetings), recognizing that organizations that plan different types of activities may have different goals and experiences. Finally, I sought diversity in terms of the *axis of association*; in other words, I selected groups whose common concerns varied.

From each organization in the sample, I subsampled one *member/affiliate/participant* and one *core member/organizer/leader* of the organization for an in-depth, semistructured interview (the same interview guide was used for members and core members). Individuals who were instrumental in planning the event(s) organized by the association were considered core members/organizers/leaders. In most cases these were professional staff members, committee chairs, volunteer coordinators, or officers of the association. Individuals who were not involved in the planning of the event(s), but participated or were in attendance were considered members/affiliates/participants. The selection of particular respondents varied from voluntary association to voluntary association. In some cases, I had the luxury of sampling purposively. In others, I had to sample based

on convenience; if only three members were present, I selected the willing and able. In still other cases, I used snowball sampling, asking a participant to steer me to a leader or vice versa.

While both types of participants were able to share their (different) experiences and interpretations, the core members had access to critical information about the symbolic and instrumental strategies and motivations of the organization that the typical members often lacked. This process yielded a total of 61 usable interviews. In three instances, I had the sense that I was not able to get a complete picture from the two initial interviews; in each of these cases, I conducted one or two additional interviews. In another instance, I interviewed a core member, but was never able to interview a typical member. I ultimately decided to include this organization in the sample, because I obtained a substantial amount of information about the organization from other sources.

I combined these personal accounts with a variety of supplemental data. In order to construct a more complete picture of each organization, I conducted unobtrusive observations of events held or attended by the voluntary associations in the sample, whenever such opportunities presented themselves. These observations generated data about intrapublic communication, techniques for external engagement, and community building, which extended beyond the narrative accounts shared by members. In addition, I gathered information from literature distributed at events, Web sites, and listserv discussions to construct a more complete picture of each association. The interviews should be understood as the primary source of data collection, while the other data should be construed as supplemental.

In total, data were gathered on 29 different voluntary associations. Fifteen of these organizations are large national organizations with a sizable number of paid staff members and, in most cases, multiple offices nationally. The remaining 14 organizations are local or statewide in nature, half of which have a small paid staff (generally one or two people, often part time). The organizations in the sample planned a vast array of activities that included civil disobedience and protest, a debate watch party in a movie theater, a full-sized rock concert in an arena, street performances, a forum on the Supreme Court with nationally recognized political figures, a \$250-per-plate fund-raiser, marches, rallies in front of government buildings, leafleting, member meetings, petitioning, and a national voter education drive. The associations in the sample are organized around a variety of issues including the death penalty, gun control, environmental concerns, women's rights, religion, labor issues, campaign finance reform, globalization, voter turnout, senior citizen's issues, school vouchers, and nuclear weapons. The majority of the groups were politically liberal, but several could be characterized as centrist or neutral, and a few politically conservative. In terms of party affiliation, the overwhelming majority considered themselves nonpartisan.

National Citizen Groups in Action

The data reveal that a disjuncture exists between armchair members and the national citizen groups to which they belong, but that these groups still provide a valuable space for political discourse, albeit in ways that depart significantly from the face-to-face membership gatherings that many envision. When the national citizen groups in my sample organized events around the major campaign stops, the leaders of several such organizations invited their members via newsletter, mailing, or listserv posting, but they were otherwise unconcerned with promoting member attendance. In some cases, organizers were unsure if members attended at all. Jake,¹² a core member of Rights Now, an international human rights group, was at a loss when I asked him if he could refer me to a member who attended one of their large campaign-related events:

Ummm . . . I'll send out a staff e-mail. I just have no idea if any of the people who were there [at the party or march] were members, but, I mean, we get the word out, so in all likelihood there were some members who [went]. Let me see where the e-mail gets us. If you don't hear back from me, that's because I couldn't find someone. Okay?

Similarly, Karl, a core member of Envirolink, a national environmental group, was unable to tell me if any members attended their panel of speakers. He explained that the event had been announced to the membership, and suggested that I place an ad in their national newsletter, because he felt confident that at least a couple of members were probably in the audience. Erin, a core member of Business Watch, an organization promoting better corporate practices internationally, described accidental member participation during the Business Watch event in Los Angeles:

Yeah, there were members [present during the event]. We [the staff] had our signs out. It was just at the one point we had our signs out, and this guy came up to us, "Oh, Business Watch, I'm a member." He came and helped us out for a while.

By and large, leaders (most often professional staff) organized and implemented the events held by national citizen groups without concern for member attendance or involvement.

Association activities coordinated with high-profile national events seem an ideal time to attempt to convene geographically dispersed members as well as a strategic time to call upon members in order to maximize an organization's visibility; however, the mailing-list citizen groups in my sample did not utilize these moments to build group cohesion or to draw upon their human resources. This finding legitimizes prevalent concerns about such organizations. However, while national citizen groups did not choose to hold mass meetings to bring their members in contact with one another, face-to-face interaction *was* facilitated by these organizations in two ways. First, association leaders at national

headquarters often called upon local chapters to provide assistance for these special events. In turn, some chapters reached out to local members for support. For example, the National Seniors Organization, which is based in Washington, DC, relied heavily upon its volunteers in the Philadelphia area to help coordinate and staff their event during the week of the Republican National Convention. Similarly, Network for Peace, which is also based in Washington turned to staff and volunteers in the New England area to prepare and implement the organization's presence at the presidential debate in Boston. In other words, utilitarianism prompted national citizen groups to initiate face-to-face interaction and involvement for a portion of their memberships, albeit an exceedingly small one. Second, and far more significantly, virtually all of the national citizen groups in my sample focused on facilitating public dialogue on issues of concern to their membership. Their events were open to the public, focused on voter education, and designed to bring new people into a discussion about issues of concern to their membership. The Freedom and Equality League, a national, multi-issue, progressive advocacy group, organized a panel of high-profile speakers for an information-rich discussion on the impact that the future president would have on the Supreme Court and the potential implications of these appointments for existing laws. This panel was free, open to the public, and it attracted approximately 2,000 people. In addition to hearing the speakers, attendees were strongly encouraged to organize subsequent educational forums in their hometowns. Toward this end, the organization distributed community organizing kits containing practical logistical information and literature to all of those in attendance. Similarly, the aforementioned National Seniors Organization did a cross-country issue awareness tour, stopping in several key campaign locations (including the convention sites, and the Boston debate) to hold public sessions addressing the four political issues that they felt were most important to their membership. Staff and volunteers set up chairs in a public place for passersby, speakers gave presentations, refreshments were provided, the crowd was engaged with interactive games that were issue-oriented, and staff and volunteers from the organization were present to answer questions. In addition, the organization provided relevant literature to those in attendance, and audience members were invited to demonstrate their support of the key issues with their signature. No candidates were endorsed; the goals were to educate the voters and to urge candidates to act on issues of concern to their membership. Similarly, Citizens' Campaign Watch, a well-known national advocacy organization, joined several other national organizations to sponsor large alternative conferences that coincided with the national nominating conventions. These conferences were designed to be inclusive, to allow all interested individuals to participate, in contrast to the Democratic and Republican conventions which did not allow public access.

In most cases, these events were designed and implemented by staff and not directed at their membership. Rather, the associations' events were directed at the general public or a subset of the general public who the organizers considered to be potential constituents. What individuals affiliated with these associations do civically is not the same as what the organizations do civically. While membership itself may not involve face-to-face interaction and the rational-critical discourse that is often thought to accompany this collaboration, these data reveal that national citizen organizations should not be thought of as antithetical to meaningful civic engagement because they facilitated public dialogue over community matters in multiple instances, even if these efforts were not aimed directly at "members." In other words, while they may do little to provide members with new experiences and on-the-"job" training, they worked aggressively to increase the flow of political issue information and to stimulate public discourse around their focal issues.

An Array of Professionals

Central to the normative vision of civic engagement is the notion that associations provide opportunities for individual growth and the development of social ties, that joining benefits self as well as society. Critics of the professionalization of the voluntary sector depict a managed associational world administered to, rather than authored by, citizens. I did not find a vacuous world of top-down civic relationships; the interaction between paid staff and members in this sample varied greatly. Certainly, for several organizations, paid staff set the agenda and volunteers came forward to help. Millie, a member of Citizens' Campaign Watch, serves as an example:

I've volunteered for other organizations and volunteers rarely—I don't know of any other organization where volunteers have the same status as they do in Citizens' Campaign Watch. . . . It's very unique. You don't find that any place else. And as I say, it's largely due to the fact that most organizations don't know what to do with volunteers. They don't give them meaningful work and they don't value them really.

[But Citizens' Campaign Watch does provide meaningful work?]

Oh yeah. Very much so. And we have a briefing every Tuesday . . . our president is there and he conducts the briefing. And if not, lobbyists or the vice president will conduct the briefing. And it's for us, the volunteers. And they will let us know what's happening, legislatively, and within the organization.

[Who would you say sets the agenda for Citizens' Campaign Watch? The staff or the membership?]

Oh, the staff. And also they will consult with the governing board. And on certain kinds of things they have to make sure that the governing board is in agreement.

Millie participated in one of Citizens' Campaign Watch's alternative conferences as an attendee, but was not involved in the planning of the program.

Though she fulfills the responsibilities assigned to her by professional volunteer coordinators, rather than serving in a leadership role herself, Millie feels that her work is meaningful and that she is a well-integrated part of the organization. Millie's experience illustrates the limited role that volunteers may serve in an era of nonprofit professionals, yet at the same time, reveals that this top-down structure is not necessarily alienating.

For some organizations, the difference between paid staff and members is much less well defined. Inequality Forever, a group organized around curbing the influence of the elite in politics, has a very small paid staff, and staff and members shared the substantive work of the organization during the campaign events. The paid staff often served as leaders and facilitators, but the members were fully engaged in many of the choices and some took leadership roles. Brian, a member, explains his involvement with one event:

I kind of basically stepped forward and said that I would plan that particular meeting. So I spoke to [a performer]—he has a following in New York. . . . I wrote this speech about, it was a silly, it kind of took the tropes of how if you go to like an African-American Pentecostal Church, they have this very inspiring kind of community-oriented type of thing, a lot of that kind of language, but basically making it about the very wealthy, which is kind of silly. That was the kind of turning it on its head. Then I wrote this speech and then I e-mailed it to [the performer] and he said he would meet us there that morning. Then I picked a spot. I did speak to police that were on the scene, I said, "Where can we set up? We've got about 40 people, including media. Where is a good spot?" They told us where they thought would be okay.

Brian had a great degree of latitude and his involvement was substantive. He used his creativity and social connections in addition to his organizational and leadership skills to engineer the event, in spite of his nonprofessional status in the presence of professionals.

A range of relationships exists between professional staff and organization members in this context. A third, much less common, model involved professionally run organizations treating members as clients, who have hired staff to act on priorities established at the grassroots level. This was true of EnviroLink, whose activities and agenda are member driven. These diverse models indicate that professionalization and the related push for efficiency has not involved an across-the-board deskilling or disempowering of nonprofessionals involved with voluntary organizations. In other words, it would be inaccurate to assume that the presence of professionals equates to the absence of opportunities for lay members to participate in meaningful ways or the potential to develop the skills and networks that are so central to the ideal implied by civic engagement. Indeed, the use of professionals by these associations may create/sustain an organizational structure that facilitates continuity, efficiency, and coordination such that affiliates have an infrastructure upon which to draw when they seek to do so.

It is necessary to acknowledge the internal diversity that exists among associations with paid staff. I was told more than once that someone couldn't answer my questions because "I'm just a volunteer," yet I also repeatedly encountered lay people deeply involved in the work of the associations with which they chose to affiliate, even when professionals were also involved. For every professionally managed association with disconnected warm bodies there were other associations whose operations would be brought to a halt without the valued contributions of lay people.

This diversity is also mirrored in the associations' capacity to promote the development of social ties. In organizations where participants described a more palpable status hierarchy between professionals and nonprofessionals, the opportunities for social ties tended to correspond to the opportunities that nonprofessionals had to work with others with a similar relationship to the association. In other words, when associations created contexts for those who considered themselves to be "just volunteers" to work with other volunteers, social connections often formed (Millie, cited earlier, serves as an example). Where nonprofessionals in these contexts were isolated (e.g., staffing a table alone) or were working exclusively with staff, status hierarchies rendered such ties less likely to form. In contrast, in organizations where the distinction between professionals and nonprofessionals was less pronounced, participants often described a sense of camaraderie and the development of relationships with both other lay people and those working for the association in a professional capacity.

Fluidity I: Coalition Formation

Wuthnow (1998) describes a world in which individuals commit to short-term endeavors, rather than forming tight, enduring, time-intensive relationships with a particular organization. While Wuthnow does not address fluidity at the level of the association, I found that amidst the enthusiasm and urgency created by the campaign context, the task-oriented relationships he identifies at the individual level were paralleled in the behaviors of the organizations. In many instances, existing organizations formed temporary coalitions as a response to the campaign events. For example, in Winston-Salem, a coalition of associations organized a concert that was held to encourage voter registration and turnout among young adults. A wide spectrum of civic organizations including a national social group for young people, a national advocacy group active in promoting smaller government, a well-known national charity for children, and college Democrat and Republican clubs, set up tables in the arena where the concert was held. In Boston, existing groups interested in coordinating a response to the presidential debate also formed a coalition. Harry, a core member of a labor union for professionals explained:

We [union representatives] began meeting regularly with Students for Change and we both jointly called a meeting of organizations interested in organizing around the debate . . . that brought in about 16 groups. . . . The [new] larger umbrella organization was the Democratic Debate Alliance.

Temporary coalitions formed between national citizen groups as well as between local and regional groups. Rights Now joined Christians for Families, a regional organization promoting universal human dignity, and several other organizations to coordinate an enormous rally and march in Los Angeles to support immigrant rights and protest sweatshop labor.

The prominent focus described by respondents across the associational spectrum on reaching the public via the news media rendered strategy critical. Forming coalitions served to increase the number of attendees at a given event, the financial resources that could improve the quality of the presentations, and the amount of human capital available to create and implement compelling activities. These three factors, turnout, funding, and talent, were valued across all of the different categories of organizations in my sample. Organization leaders often felt that they were best served by joining together with other groups in order to maximize their impact. Zach, a participant in Stand-Up St. Louis, a direct action group, explains:

all these protests [at the presidential debate sites] are small groups working together. They're not individuals working together, it's [like] small groups working together, and that's what makes us so strong, and it also makes it so national. Because you can get small groups from all over to converge, come together and form a big group. . . .

In spite of their divergent goals and organizational structures, Zach's remarks are similar to those made by Karl, a core member of Envirolink, when he explained the benefits of coalition formation:

More people. More hands to attack the work. The different backgrounds that people bring to the table. Different groups have been involved in different projects along the way, they can bring that experience and that knowledge and a huge benefit is—Well, as you can't win anything just on your own, so by bringing together disparate groups of people, you are going to be a lot more effective.

With so many associations targeting the campaign events as moments for activity, core members explained that it was pragmatic to form coalitions with organizations working on similar issues, so that the impact would not be diluted. For example, one large anti-death penalty event was understood to be more effective than three or four smaller disparate events. These coalitions mirror the fleeting commitments individuals have with the associations with which they are involved. The associations work together to accomplish a specific task and then part ways, much like episodic forms of volunteering.

I highlight coalition formation to illustrate the responsiveness and flexibility of these associations, rather than to imply that coalition formation is free from

problems. Without question, entering into a coalition can bring with it as many challenges as it alleviates, such as: struggling to develop mutually agreeable goals and tactics, reaching agreement over equitable and appropriate use of human and financial resources, and working to find methods of decision making and styles of leadership that are workable for those involved. A colorful example emerged, when United for Change, a Philadelphia coalition, almost failed to move forward after representatives from member organizations were unable to agree upon a name in spite of several meetings devoted to the process. Whether such struggles are ultimately divisive or unifying is a matter of debate, but regardless it is important to recognize that the ephemerality that seems to be a hallmark of contemporary forms of associational life imparts an alacrity and openness that has the potential to be constructive.

Fluidity II: Associations with “Participants” Rather than “Members”

Organizations also seemed to mirror the tendency for individuals to have more removed, less enduring engagements by maintaining blurry boundaries. For many associations, the distinction between association insiders and outsiders was often vague or of little significance. Individuals related to the organizations with which they associated in a variety of ways; some considered themselves members in the traditional sense, while others considered themselves participants or supporters.

While a given organization may have designed a rally, march, voter drive, or speaker’s forum, those who attended were often not association “members,” but rather were association affiliates, supporters, or interested parties. In several instances, even those who participated in the labor of organizing the event did not consider themselves to be a “member” of the association. They described their relationship to the associations in less concrete terms, frequently considering themselves “participants,” rather than “members,” of the organizations with which they were involved. Brian, earlier quoted about his leadership within Inequality Forever, explained:

Membership requirements are kind of loose. . . . I’d say we’re participants. It’s pretty loose. It’s designed to be kind of a grassroots thing.

Brian had traveled from out of state with the other participants and organizers, actively worked with the group on location for five days, and was instrumental in the planning of one of the organization’s key events, yet he still did not consider “member” to be an appropriate term to describe his relationship to the organization. It became clear during the course of our interview that for Brian, “grassroots” indicates that anyone is welcome; whereas membership necessarily implies that a category of nonmember exists. Loren, a young man involved with a civil disobedience group, also came a great distance to participate, and thought

of his relationship to the coordinating organization as temporary and nonconcrete, in spite of a formal preregistration process (and accompanying fee):

I'm not exactly a member. . . . What happened was, you know, I got involved in activism here in Tampa through my friends and there is a similar organization in Tampa. . . . I heard about the upcoming events in Philly [Philadelphia] and then that's when I started checking out the Web site. . . . I registered to come over and participate in the demonstrations with them.

In investigating the origins of the perceptions of Brian and Loren and others echoing these vagaries, I found that these impressions were not idiosyncratic to the individuals I interviewed, but that the material distributed by the associations, the Web sites, and the language used by the core leaders I interviewed created this openness. In other words, these blurry boundaries were not created by the individuals; many organizations did not construct "member" as a status.

In some cases membership was not disputed, it was simply irrelevant. Members of different organizations with shared interests worked together with little concern over, or in some cases even knowledge of, which individuals were affiliated with which organizations. For example, Elise, a member of Network for Peace, a national antinuclear weapons group explains:

I work with other groups, like the Peace and Justice Brigade . . . and a lot of the members there are also members of Network for Peace. We kind of overlap a lot. You just find the people that you need to work with. For me it doesn't matter so much what group you belong to at some level. You know, you go with whatever critical mass that you have.

The boundaries of many groups are best understood as permeable and less salient than one might expect. Though it challenges current understandings of voluntary association involvement, group openness was important for many associations in the sample.

These accounts reveal a great deal about the texture of contemporary associational life, because they highlight the fact that blurry boundaries and loose organizational affiliations do not necessarily equate to voluntary associations that are no longer civically active and/or no longer providing meaningful opportunities for their affiliates.¹³ In terms of the former, I have already described the broad array of civic activities that were coordinated by the associations I studied. And in terms of the latter, in many cases, the absence of rigid insider/outsider distinctions created an openness that encouraged participation more broadly speaking. The fluid structure of these contemporary associations provided Loren, referenced above, and others like him, a venue through which to voice their concerns, to be active, and to meet like-minded individuals, which may not have existed in the classic American voluntary associations with their rigid conceptions of insiders and outsiders.

My unit of analysis is the organization, but these data reveal important information for those studying individual involvement as well. The ways that

politically active people define their relationships to the groups with which they associate is critical for understanding civic engagement. Much of the research on America's declining civic involvement has been based on quantitative measures assessing the number of formal memberships individuals hold in very particular types of organizations (Putnam 1995a; Skocpol 1999a, 2003; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). As a result of this privileging of formal membership in a few particular types of voluntary organizations, a good deal of meaningful participation has likely been missed by social scientists attempting to measure association involvement.¹⁴ As early as 1999, Ladd made this suggestion to Putnam, arguing that joining still happens, but that people are joining different groups (e.g., soccer leagues rather than bowling leagues, independent parent groups rather than the Parent-Teacher Association). Similarly, Rotolo and Wilson (2004) highlight this by demonstrating that while women's volunteer involvement does differ generationally, the difference is not that younger women volunteer less often, but rather that they are involved in different types of activities (e.g., favoring political activism and community action over service clubs).

Qualitative researchers may also be influenced by circulating understandings of participation that are overly narrow. Even though I sought to understand associational life in the campaign environment in the words of those I encountered, it took time to recognize that I had been excluding people from the subsample because I had been subconsciously wedded to the language and definitions that I personally utilized to conceptualize civic engagement. Looking back through early field notes, there are instances where I likely made inaccurate conclusions about the people I approached. For example,

As I cross the street, a line of [mostly female] protesters link arms and sit down in front of oncoming traffic . . . police begin to form a circle around them . . . I ask one woman what group organized the sit-in. She says, "we are just concerned citizens," she says, "I can't talk to you right now. We are only talking to each other." (August 1, 2000)

I accepted the assertion that they were "just concerned citizens" (i.e., individuals), in spite of the evidence to the contrary. In hindsight, I recognize that the statement, "we are just concerned citizens," in the context of illegal activity, was a group strategy in and of itself. Further, this roadblock was one of six that transpired at the same time in a well-coordinated civil disobedience effort. The organization that facilitated these blockades is part of my sample, and I found individuals to interview with little trouble, but my initial limited view of association involvement kept me from recognizing some active participation during my first days in the field.

The voluntary associations in my sample have affiliates with whom they engage in diverse ways, defining their participation loosely and occasionally choosing not to define it at all. Importantly, nonconcretized involvement should

not imply that individuals' connections to the organizations (and others in them) are necessarily fleeting. On the contrary, this nonconcretized participation often appeared in instances where time commitments and face-to-face interaction were often extensive and intensive.

In contrast, the labor unions and many of the national citizen groups did have concrete notions of membership. People at events coordinated by these organizations were able to answer definitively, and without disclaimer, when asked whether or not they were members of the organization in question. In addition, respondents often clarified that they were not *only* members, but also *active* members, distinguishing themselves from armchair or checkbook participants. Sid, a member of the National Seniors Organization, and Liza, a member of a trade labor union, provide illustration:

when I retired from the industry I decided to be a volunteer at the regional level for Massachusetts . . . and now I'm a volunteer in New Hampshire. . . . I am a volunteer besides just being a member. . . . (Sid)

If you work at a union shop, you are union. You don't have to be really active. I am a shop leader, but I wanted to be involved. I like it, I'm very prouion. (Liza)

Interestingly, both Sid and Liza chose to highlight their level of involvement even though they were aware that I asked to interview them as a direct result of their participation. In addition to clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders, these organizations also exhibited important internal distinctions between types of insiders. While this was markedly more rigid than the other organizations in the sample, fluidity evinced itself in different ways. For both labor unions and national citizen groups, the aforementioned temporary coalitions with other organizations became important.

Fluidity III: Newly Forming Organizations

The ephemeral nature of modern civic life enhances the possibility for new organizations to form swiftly and easily in response to external forces. The intersection of the major campaign stops and the character of contemporary associational life proved to be a productive climate for emerging organizations. Much to my surprise, five of the organizations in my sample formed explicitly for the campaign year and/or these events. Rochelle, a core member of DISRUPT, a direct action group, explained that DISRUPT, along with other local groups, and their overarching coalition, formed expressly because the Republican National Convention was coming to Philadelphia:

we [DISRUPT] weren't really a group prior. Many of us had worked together with other organizations, but we came together specifically for this action, this convention . . . people have been organizing around the convention for some time and originally there were people working around [the Republican National Convention], but they hadn't necessarily formed specific groups . . . now there is DISRUPT . . . United for Change . . . the welfare rights group . . .

Stand-Up St. Louis formed expressly to coordinate direct action, much like DISRUPT, but the other three new organizations emerged for legal political activity. One formed to create awareness about the role of the elite in politics (Inequality Forever), another formed to create solidarity among progressive groups (United for Change), and the third organization formed to support the passage of a school voucher initiative (School Choice, Family Choice).

Two of the new organizations indicated that their groups hoped to endure as an organization beyond the campaign. The first of these, United for Change, has since dissolved. The second, Inequality Forever, has remained very active, germinated close to 60 chapters across the country and five overseas, and had a high-profile presence again around the 2004 election.

Discussion

The question remains: Can a voluntary sector that is dominated by professionally run service organizations, national citizen groups populated by armchair members (which are often also staffed by professionals), and ephemerality fulfill the promise of civic life? In other words, do these associations serve as spaces that foster social solidarity, improve the legitimacy of representative democracy, and create opportunities to build civic skills? Exploration of voluntary associations in action provides unusual insight into the advantages and obstacles that accompany the new modal forms of American civic engagement.

The data offer a mixed report on opportunities for individual development. Citizen groups utilizing the mailing-list model, which pepper the participatory landscape with increasing frequency, are not seeking to deepen the involvement of their members, but to envelop more people in their broad network. These organizations appear to be predictably weak when it comes to providing their remote members with hands-on opportunities to develop transferrable skills (e.g., event planning, leadership, communication skills). While some national mailing-list organizations offered members of local chapters opportunities to meet others, develop skills (e.g., by making logistical arrangements and helping to staff events), and likely build confidence, the vast majority of the memberships did not have occasion to be involved in the process of choosing, organizing, facilitating, or attending the activities of their respective organizations. This breadth, not depth, approach corresponds directly to the goals of many national mailing-list citizen groups, which emphasize representation and political voice for constituents rather than fostering the personal growth and development of their memberships as, arguably, was the case in many classic American voluntary associations.

Professionalization, on the other hand, does not appear to preclude the possibility of meaningful individual involvement. The data reveal that professionals and nonprofessionals engaged in civic pursuits relate to one another in

a variety of ways, indicating that professionalization and the related push for efficiency has not involved a sweeping disempowerment of nonprofessionals involved with nonprofit organizations. It is possible that the presence of professional volunteer coordinators may enhance the opportunities available to participants. Indeed, as Millie articulated, feeling useful and important can be deeply satisfying. It is, however, important to note that the skills developed in this context may be less expansive and detailed than those developed in classic American voluntary associations, where amateurs handled all aspects of the organization from recruitment and agenda setting to fund-raising and event planning. Having said that, it is equally critical to recognize that the presence of professionals does not necessarily preclude nonprofessionals from assuming leadership roles in the associations with which they are involved, as Brian's experience illustrates. The presence of professionals may, but does not necessarily, restrict the potential for lay participants to garner quality experience.

In terms of social solidarity, Berry (1999) depicts membership in national interest groups as a search for political community, and Calhoun (1991) argues that imagined communities are joined by individuals in search of identity. I thought that the breadth, liminality, and significance of presidential campaigns might compel large mailing-list citizen groups to utilize the increased political interest that surrounds presidential elections as an opportunity to build community, to invite their geographically dispersed members to gather and take action, and to concretize these imagined communities. Invitations were extended, but they were little more than empty gestures. None of the mailing-list citizen groups in my sample made a sincere effort to encourage their members to convene during the campaign events. This is particularly significant because, for many groups, the events that were organized around the major campaign stops represented their most extensive effort of the year. In other words, if an organization's most substantial mobilization does not prompt an attempt to convene its members, it is unlikely that anything encourages them to do so. Once again, apart from providing local volunteers with a chance to help out, national citizen groups appear unconcerned with building social solidarity among group members, at least in terms of face-to-face connections. It is certainly possible that newsletters and Internet ties may help some to feel connected to an organization, but they are less likely to help connect them to other members in meaningful ways (Putnam and Feldstein 2003).

The trend toward transient engagements seems perhaps most detrimental to voluntary associations' ability to foster social solidarity, but in reality, the fluid relationship between various voluntary associations and between voluntary associations and their affiliates appears to provide new spaces where norms of trust, respect for others, and attachment to community can emerge. The reduced importance of boundaries between association insiders and outsiders creates

a space where difference is more welcome than in moments past. Increased heterogeneity brings with it the advantage of promoting tolerance and connecting individuals to society in a fuller sense. The data also document the multiple, temporary, task-oriented coalitions that formed between voluntary associations in response to the conventions and televised debates. Temporary coalitions created opportunities for participants to work with other organizations and their members, and to make associations not only based on common interests, but also on the basis of different interests. Organizations working across traditional group boundaries enter a space that increases awareness of others in the community and potentially serves to develop valuable social ties between organizations, which Putnam has referred to as *bridging* social capital. So, while many contemporary voluntary associations may not foster group solidarity, or *bonding* social capital, in ways popular at mid-century, they have the potential to lay a framework for a more generalized solidarity, which may arguably offer greater rewards for social health than intense in-group bonds. This finding speaks to the debate over social capital in the United States, by revealing that social ties in the contemporary context are often built in new ways. While some may romanticize the lifetime commitments of the classic American voluntary associations, it is important to respect the vitality of these modern loose connections and the benefits that accrue to associations that collaborate with one another.

In terms of enhancing the legitimacy of representative democracy, the events held by many national citizen groups, while not directed toward their members per se, were settings for vibrant political discourse. The events provided important alternative spaces for discussion of political issues that the associations felt were inadequately addressed by the candidates in the official, campaign-related forums, such as those issues at the margins and those on which the two major presidential candidates largely agreed. So, while these organizations have been demonized by many, it is noteworthy that they were the organizations most likely to make sincere attempts to stimulate public dialogue and to support voter education. In addition, the professionals that staff these national citizen groups played an important part in coordinating these substantive efforts. It is possible that some of these events might not have taken place or might not have been of the same quality if professionals had not taken responsibility for the numerous details, fund-raising, and coordination of members, volunteers, and interested parties.

Research in two additional settings would be particularly useful to provide a more complete picture of the impact of these trends on civic engagement. First, exploration of heightened activity at moments likely to draw out different types of groups such as those organized around social activities, professional development, and the arts would be valuable. Perhaps the trends in civic engagement that have been identified by Wuthnow, Skocpol, Putnam, and others

manifest themselves in different ways for these types of organizations. Second, it is important to look at the role of citizen groups, professionals, and fluidity in less spectacular moments. Do national citizen groups attempt to provide spaces for public political discussion outside of the campaign context? Are there opportunities for volunteers to take on leadership roles in the day-to-day operation of the professionally run organizations for which they work? Do transient affiliations evaporate when the spotlight recedes?

Conclusions

The voluntary associations active during the campaign season offer insight into the consequences of broad changes in the associational landscape. In taking this broad snapshot of the associational terrain, the distinction between what individuals do civically and what organizations do civically emerges as a critical difference. While member activity may in some cases be minimal and/or fleeting and/or impoverished in the presence of professionals imbued with expertise and positions of authority, it would be a mistake to focus narrowly on these instances without asking broader questions about what it is that associations do for civic engagement more generally. Nowhere is this analytical division more useful than in the case of national citizen groups, which, while populated primarily by inactive supporters seeking representation more than personal development or social ties, contribute to a broader political discourse, reaching beyond their membership ranks in an effort to recruit, persuade, and pressure, by self-consciously provoking others to think and talk about political issues to which they had perhaps not been exposed.

These organizations made stimulating public awareness and discussion of political issues central to their mission, even more so than organizations with face-to-face interaction among their memberships. While other organizations (e.g., the direct action groups) were also concerned with bringing their message to a broader audience, it was the large citizen groups who most effectively talked *with* the public, rather than talking (or chanting) at them. Other researchers have highlighted the dialogue that transpires within closer knit groups (e.g., Hart 2001; Lichterman 1996), but this research illuminates the critical role that discourse plays even for organizations less concerned with dialogue among their members. Indeed, research has shown that it is the exposure to political dialogue that can transpire in voluntary associations that encourages political activity, rather than generic membership itself (Sobieraj and White 2004). In other words, exposure to the contexts created by these large citizen groups may do more to mobilize people for future civic engagement than officially joining an association with a less expressly political orientation. This, coupled with the more commonly cited benefit of representing those voices who might otherwise go unheard, suggests that citizen groups, even those using the national mailing-list

model, are associations that actively seek to promote political discourse, at a moment in associational life, which others have shown is often marked by an apolitical sociability (Eliasoph 1998).

Ephemerality at the association level also presents some unexpected opportunities for enhancing democracy. Specifically, this translates into a flexibility and spontaneity that allowed for the creation of several new organizations and coalitions between organizations inspired by a common desire to respond to the nominating conventions and televised debates. This responsiveness brought with it new opportunities for civic engagement, opening organizations to new affiliates (e.g., Loren, coming to Philadelphia from Tampa to engage in direct action with DISRUPT), take new shapes and try new strategies (e.g., the street theater satirical antics of Inequality Forever), with which more rigid organizations (e.g., labor unions and traditional service organizations) may be unable or unwilling to experiment. This innovation and action created a palpable vitality, an excitement less visible in more routinized strategies (e.g., voter registration drives held by college political clubs).

In spite of these relatively optimistic findings, contemporary associations seem to offer little in the way of creating opportunities for individual development of civic skills. Citizen groups with armchair members offer few opportunities for members to be active (outside of perhaps periodically signing a petition or sending prewritten e-mail of concern to an elected official) and develop the skills that traditional service organizations often helped members to develop. Further, while the presence of nonprofit and social movement organization professionals does not always mean a deskilling of amateur member involvement, in many cases it does reduce the depth of involvement by eliminating opportunities for meaningful decision making, brainstorming, and strategizing that often (though not always) is the province of experts.

The voluntary associations active during the campaign season increased awareness of others in the community and created spaces for substantive political dialogue, but it is also essential to recognize the limitations of organizations that provide members with little more than the promise of political representation, and of associations too small or too poorly funded to command the ears of candidates for public office. Many activities of these associations were intended to have a broad impact by shaping public thought about an issue and subsequently impacting the outcome of political decisions. This was troubled by many intervening factors, rendering the political effectiveness of most of these association activities questionable. This is something that cannot be thoughtfully addressed here, but which will be detailed in future work.

In seeking to unpack the changes in the voluntary sector that have been identified by previous research, this project relied on a broad look at diverse associational contexts. As a result, while trends may appear to have some likely

positive and negative implications, it is critical to acknowledge that each association develops its own culture and practices which may or may not provide these opportunities and constraints. Even an organization that attempts to foster political dialogue, for example, may, in fact, create a climate where political speech is impoverished and one-directional and/or corrupted by power and inequalities. Similarly, even an association that seems unlikely to foster social solidarity may be able to do so through organizational innovations not represented in this research.

In spite of the many questions that remain unanswered, this research lays bare the importance of looking beyond formal membership in traditional service organizations when assessing civic engagement. Much of participation in civil society today has a new texture, requiring social scientists to recognize civic engagement in its diverse, often fleeting forms. It is inaccurate to assume that to contribute to a healthy civic life, voluntary associations must have a lengthy list of formal members or that organizations must be enduring to be meaningful. Without question, the associational landscape has changed dramatically since the oft-idealized 1950s, presenting organizations with new challenges and opportunities, but difference does not necessarily equate to decline.

ENDNOTES

¹Of these, Tocqueville is the most enthusiastic and best-known advocate of associational life in democratic nations (Tocqueville [1835] 1984). See Sobieraj and White (2004) for a more detailed discussion of other theorists concerned with voluntary associations.

²For additional work by Putnam on declining social capital beyond "Bowling Alone," see Putnam (1995b, 1996). For critiques, see Galston (1996), Lemann (1996), Portes and Landolt (1996), Schudson (1996), and Skocpol (1999). For Putnam's response to his critics, see *Bowling Alone* (2000).

³Kanter and Summers' oft-cited 1987 piece, "Doing Well while Doing Good" is indicative of the pressure on nonprofit organizations to measure their accomplishments, in spite of the fact that the bottom line for many nonprofits is intangible.

⁴Volunteers of America is an excellent example of one such organization.

⁵Importantly, Rotolo and Wilson's (2004) analysis of the civic behavior of two successive generations of women reveal the absence of generational differences and argue that (at least when comparing older and younger women) there are cohort differences in the type rather than the amount of volunteering. This indicates that perhaps volunteering patterns have not changed as dramatically as some others have suggested.

⁶Self-help groups (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous) provide an interesting contrast. The groups in this third growth contingent exhibit even more intimate ties between members than the traditional service organizations (Wuthnow 1994). These groups often encompass a very large part of members' lives and typically involve a substantial time commitment and extensive face-to-face interaction. It can be argued that support networks and self-help groups benefit the community by giving rise to healthier citizens (e.g., Wuthnow 1998), but the line between public benefit and member benefit is undoubtedly blurred by these organizations.

⁷The categories are, of course, not mutually exclusive.

⁸Current debates implicitly conceive of contemporary civil society as either a realm of continuous activity or as an arena that is increasingly disengaged, but empirically, voluntary associations have degrees of intensity and engagement that vary (what might be called differential mobilization). In an effort to pinpoint the dimensions, characteristics, and qualities of contemporary civil society, most theories foreground the consistencies that they unearth. For example, Cohen and Arato (1994) describe a civil society that remains in motion, while Habermas ([1962] 1989) describes a civil society mired in inertia. However, in the United States, ample empirical evidence exists that suggests that it is inadequate to conceive of the varied organizations and activities within civil society as continuously engaged or disengaged. Voluntary associations take on new forms during moments of crisis and celebration. Events that produce great excitement or great anxiety have the effect of generating new associations and of increasing the intensity, frequency, or membership levels of already existing organizations. For example, new organizations arose in response to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. For associations already in existence, activity intensity can be sparked by such events. For example, the National Rifle Association has been more active and has attracted numerous new members since the political and cultural backlash against the private ownership of guns instigated by the spate of school shootings in 1998–1999 (Dao and Van Natta 1999).

⁹For an interesting article on the role of activists in platform development, see Toner (2000).

¹⁰Though it is important to note that not all groups were active in order to be political; some organizations were active around the key campaign events because they viewed them as an opportunity to reach a large number of people. For example, the National Union of Creative Artists used the influx of people into Los Angeles for the Republican National Convention as an opportunity to publicize their labor issues.

¹¹Most events are preplanned to a degree, but most campaign stops are scheduled only days in advance, and are rarely well publicized. For this research I focused on events that were scheduled and publicized early enough to create adequate lead time to allow associations to respond/participate.

¹²The names of all respondents and organizations have been changed.

¹³Sirianni and Friedland (2001) and Putnam and Feldstein (2003) highlight several case studies that serve as useful illustrations.

¹⁴Critical Mass is an excellent example of how elusive modern voluntary organizations can be. Critical Mass is a 10-year-old association of bicyclists who gather to ride (and often disrupt traffic) to promote fossil-fuel-free transportation, attempt to redefine use of social space, and speak out against materialism. One Web site says, “The ‘.org’ domain notwithstanding, Critical Mass is not an organization, it’s an unorganized coincidence. It’s a movement . . . of bicycles, in the streets. Accordingly, this isn’t the official Critical Mass Web page, because there is no official Critical Mass Web page. There are, however, a bunch of unofficial Web pages” (<http://www.critical-mass.org/>). There are no officers, there are no members, there are no fund-raisers, but there are Critical Mass groups in hundreds of cities globally that bike the last Friday of each month. . . . There are Web sites, there is publicity, there are parties, there are T-shirts, there are meetings, there is community, but there is, reportedly, no organization.

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