

Chapter 1

Strengthening Civil Society

Civil society¹ has been cast as the vibrant core of modern democracy. In *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993), Robert Putnam suggests that civil society, or *civil communities*, should resolve problems of collective action² and encourage modern democratic institutions to function successfully. His detailed statistical analysis supports his central claim that civil society and individual engagement in civil society result in strengthening local government. Individuals who participate in various mediating institutions within civil society become more knowledgeable about their communities, their local governments, and their political representatives. They also tend to have a higher degree of social trust, or *social capital*, and they tend to participate in politics of “public issues” rather than politics based on “personal advantage” (Putnam, 1993, p. 96). These findings reflect those of Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) in the United States, who found that engagement in civil society “provide[s] additional opportunities for the acquisition of politically relevant resources and the enhancement of a sense of psychological engagement with politics” (p. 4). Both of these studies provide a clear understanding of what civil society does for local, regional, and national government, however, both fail to provide us with an understanding of how individuals are socialized into participating in civil society.

Charles Derber (1996) also makes the claim that civil society is important to American democracy, but like Putnam, he fails to adequately discuss how individuals become engaged in civil society. What Derber does offer is a critique of the modern liberal state and its focus on the individual which, as he argues, leads to *wilding*.

Wilding includes a vast spectrum of self-centered and self-aggrandizing behavior that harms others. A wilding epidemic tears at the social fabric and

threatens to unravel society itself, ultimately reflecting the erosion of the moral order and the withdrawal of feelings and commitments from others to oneself, to “number one.” (p. 6)

Democracy, according to Derber, is “the best antidote for wilding” (1996, p. 165). He argues, particularly, that the traditions of American civil society can counteract the warped sense of individualism that leads to wilding.

Civil society is the underlying antidote the wilding virus, involving a culture of love, morality, and trust that leads people to care for one another and for the larger community. A civil society’s institutions nurture civic responsibility by providing incentives for people to act not just in their own interest but for the common good. (p. 145)

Fundamental to Putnam’s and Derber’s positions is the belief that individuals who engage themselves in civil society learn to pursue self-interest within a broader notion of public life. In resolving problems of collective action and in realizing civic responsibility, each citizen must be able to see his or her private life within a context of larger public concerns, concerns that reach beyond the direct needs of the individual.

The ability to conceptualize private self-interest within public life is best referred to as *enlightened self-interest* (Tussman, 1997). Enlightened self-interest does not refer to altruistic behavior but “is what one would want if he [or she] is wise, or far-sighted, or mature, or ‘social’” (Tussman, 1997, p. 107). Through a direct look into the lives of individuals engaged in civil society, this book provides evidence that enlightened self-interest and engagement in civil society reinforce one another.

Unfortunately, American society is leaning away from participation within civil society, particularly participation related to one’s own community. Alexis de Tocqueville anticipated this decrease of participation in civil society due to the unique perspective of American individualism. While early American society relied on civil society for economic cooperation and political order, de Tocqueville believed that the unique emphasis of American individualism would, in time, erode engagement in community life (de Tocqueville, 1848/1990). In a similar vein, many contemporary writers such as Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1992) and Benjamin Barber (1995), along with those writers who are identified as communitarians (Etzioni, 1996; Walzer, 1995; Sandel, 1996), also argue that individualism and liberalism have led to a devaluation of community life. They state that individualism has become incorporated into the larger mechanisms of the modern market and state, and that these mechanisms have left little room for civil society.

While some deterioration of civil society can be found throughout American society, that deterioration is not complete. This book focuses on one community in which civic participation continues to be an important part of social life. This community has many members who are significantly involved in the welfare of their town. Their life histories provide some understanding to the unanswered question of how individuals become engaged in civil society.

Until recently, little attention has been paid to civil society, a surprising circumstance given its importance to successful democratic institutions. Perhaps the recent interest in civil society and the recognition of its importance to American democracy reflect the steadily increasing tension between the individual and larger structures of public life. While individual rights have continually expanded (Marshall, 1965), we have failed to provide a public context in which these rights are to be exercised (Etzioni, 1996). The Lockean liberal traditions that have dominated our society have also dominated our research. Research on civil society has been limited due, in part, to the structure of funding and the influence of the free market system (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997). In fact, researchers have focused on the very social formations that compete with civil society, including the free market system and the mechanisms of the state (Walzer, 1995).

When one examines the political socialization of citizen involvement, little beyond the social movement literature of the 1960s can be found to explain spontaneous civic engagement. Most of the literature on political socialization either refers to voting behavior or describes political participation as “activity that is intended to or has the consequence of affecting, either directly or indirectly, government action” (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, p. 9). While much of civil society does indeed have an impact on governmental action, its true value is the ability of people to resolve public problems without the intrusion of government agencies or large market mechanisms.

While not directly in the field of political socialization, there are some books that do relate well to this work and to some of the social movement literature of the sixties. These books also focus on the lives of citizen models. The models they use are somewhat different, however, but their findings support and enhance the findings in this book.

The first book, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, is most closely related in its approach and results. The authors researched the lives of 100 people who had “sustained long-term commitments to work on behalf of the common good” (Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996, p. 5). The extent of civic commitment generally is beyond that of the citizens researched in this book. Similarly, *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time*, by Paul Rogat Loeb, and *Local Heroes: The Rebirth of Heroism in America*, by Bill Berkowitz, also focus on exceptional commitments to social justice and the common good. These commitments tend to dominate the

lives of these citizens, while the lives of the citizens examined here maintain commitments to other jobs and careers as well as, like some of the subjects in all of these studies, to family life.

Their findings, and their focus on what could be called “extraordinary citizenship,” may be the next step in understanding citizen involvement in civil society. Interestingly enough, however, many of the subject descriptions offered by these studies and their subjects’ experiences during childhood are very similar to what we found here. These other subjects, particularly in the book *Common Fire*, seem to have developed a higher level of moral commitment to social justice and a more dominating idea of a civic career. In any case, their findings are tied into the findings presented in chapters 5 and 6.

While not all of these studies focus on involvement in one’s own community, this book explores civil society within the subjects’ specific community and describes and explains the motivations, identities, and experiences of those people who are engaged in community life. These descriptions and explanations provide some evidence for how citizens come to be engaged in civil society, and how civil society relates to enlightened self-interest. The citizens selected for this research were involved in mediating institutions in the community and had a reputation of having enlightened self-interest. They were asked for their theories of public life within the community, their life histories to explain their political socialization, and their own descriptions of their identity.

The practical outcomes of this research are to identify patterns of socialization occurring in social institutions such as family, school, work, and neighborhood that may influence young people to become more engaged in civil society. The discovery of these patterns may help us construct and support social institutions in ways that promote civic involvement in community life and reinforce civic action based on enlightened self-interest.

The second and third chapters of this book outline some of the important issues related to citizenship and citizen involvement and delineate conceptions of civil society and political socialization. Chapter 2 introduces the concepts of civil society and mediating institutions. It includes a brief history of civil society and a specific section on civil society in the United States. It also examines the importance of civil society to democracy and the differing perspectives one may take on civil society.

The third chapter briefly describes the field of political socialization, its problems as a field of study and the relevant research. Chapter 3 defines the major agents of political socialization and provides an overview of the research that informs the question of how citizens are socialized for engagement in civil society. The chapter also presents Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s (1995) view that civil society leads to greater involvement in political society and concludes with some general suggestions for theory and research in this field.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of the methods used in this research. This chapter extends the previous one and summarizes the expectations for research. The chapter discusses the social research practices used in this study, including the site and subject selection, the life history method, and community studies, and it identifies the significant explanatory variables. Brief biographies of each of these subjects are available in appendix D. The entire research process is outlined and concludes with a description of the analysis used to generate the results.

Chapter 5 provides the results of the study. It examines the model citizens in terms of their values, norms, motivations, political concepts, and ideas regarding community involvement. Along with political concepts, each subject's beliefs about how problems are resolved within the community are also presented. In this and in chapter 6, extensive quotes are used to provide the context for subjects' comments and to allow the reader an opportunity for further analysis.

Chapter 6 examines the patterns in the socialization of these civic-minded people. Generational differences, gender, and residential patterns are incorporated into these discussions. The research findings provided in these chapters are contextualized within the broader literature of the field of political socialization.

Chapter 7 uses the findings in this study to provide practical suggestions for enhancing civic responsibility and participation in civil society through various institutional settings. This chapter also points out some of the problems and shortcomings of this research and the possibilities for future research in political socialization.

Conducting research on socialization to civil society is imperative to the democratic ideals of the United States and other modern democracies. With the growth of dysfunctional individualism and the inability of many modern societies to act collectively, the involvement of citizens in civil society, and their capacity for enlightened self-interest, becomes more and more significant. This is particularly true as we struggle to make difficult public choices in the resolution of complex problems such as crime, racism, poverty, and drug abuse.

Fortunately, there are communities today in which involvement in civic life is still strong. Therefore, even though much of the research in political socialization has failed to focus on citizen involvement in civil society, there are opportunities for such research. This book takes advantage of one such opportunity by exploring the socialization of citizen models in one community in the north-eastern United States. To understand how and why citizens become involved in civil society, it is necessary to first define civil society and to explore its influence on citizen behavior.