Civic Engagement
– a Cornerstone of Contemporary America

An examination of civic engagement in American society
Abstract

A claim that civic malaise has spread among Americans has been put forward in current debates concerning civic engagement in America. Prominent research, with Professor Putnam in front, has argued that Americans have become so disengaged with each other and their communities that society will become fragmented and in turn endanger democracy.

In relation hereto, this thesis sets out to examine civic engagement in America. It has three main purposes, namely to examine why civic engagement is important, what the state of civic engagement is today, and discuss what the future implications for American society might be.

In order to examine civic participation this thesis uses Almond and Verba’s framework of civic culture. It furthermore draws on social capital theory and the notion of “the good citizen” for the analysis of a number of diverse sources.

The thesis initially explores the historical reasons for civic engagement becoming an important factor in American society and finds that factors such as the immigration of the Pilgrims and the settlers spurred philanthropy. Also religious beliefs helped spread values of participation and charity. Furthermore, the formation of the United States and the features of the welfare model required a strong civic society. Civic engagement is deeply rooted in the history of America.

The core section of the paper examines the current state of civic participation. The most important finding is that religion, traditionally a good predictor of and catalyst for civic engagement, is of diminishing importance. Secularization brings more loosely connected communities. But despite this secularization, Americans participate and engage when disasters strike. Their willingness to help fellow citizens even leads to new ways of participating and connecting.

A discussion of these ambiguous findings uncovers that the declining impact of religion can result in more loosely connected neighborhoods and an erosion of the civic culture. It also shows how Americans have begun engaging in new and creative ways, thereby connecting and forming social capital along new lines. Governmental support for civic involvement is continually encouraging citizens to take active part in their communities.
It must be acknowledged that American society faces future challenges, but the thesis concludes that civic engagement and social connectedness has not declined as sharply as argued by other research – instead, civic engagement changes. Americans are still a civic-minded people, and the basis for a viable political culture and society is still there.

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1. Introduction

“And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country”

– John F. Kennedy (1961)

In 1961 John F. Kennedy proclaimed these famous words, and he thereby encapsulated an essential component of American citizenship. For being a citizen in the United States of America does not only comprise rights – it also entails duties and obligations. Certain responsibilities, such as paying taxes, are written into the Constitution while others are not. One of them is the obligation of civic participation: each citizen is expected to engage in American society. Although deeply embedded in the American people and society, this feature is not formalized in legislation.

A founding principle of the USA is that its citizens should play a crucial role in the formation and maintenance of the country. In 1816, Founding Father Thomas Jefferson proclaimed: "[M]aking every citizen an acting member of the government, and in the offices nearest and most interesting to him, will attach him by his strongest feelings to the independence of his country" (Kidd, 2010); every citizen should be involved in his country as this will foster a healthy democracy. From the beginning of American democracy, founded on the Declaration of Independence in 1776, civic participation has played a crucial role in American society. Civic engagement has been a cornerstone of American democracy from the beginning and helped form a healthy and viable political culture.

Most recently, President Obama has called for a renewed community spirit among Americans. In his 2013 inauguration speech, Obama emphasized the strength of Americans when they work together (Obama, 2013); when Americans support each other they are able to achieve great things, as also proved by history. But when President Obama makes such a strong call for a more communitarian ethos among the citizens of America, he touches upon a matter which has been widely discussed in recent years, namely that of civic engagement. Scholars such as Robert Putnam (2000) have argued that civic engagement is in great decline, and that this will have grave consequences for the health of democracy.
With the claim that the basis for American democracy, namely civic participation, is eroding, this thesis seeks to examine civic engagement in contemporary American society.

The purpose of the thesis is threefold: first, the thesis will examine why civic engagement is important in American society. Next, it will assess the state of civic engagement today and last, it will discuss future implications based on the current state of civic engagement.

In order to provide a basic understanding of the purpose of this thesis and the relevance of the topic in general, I will start by providing a brief overview of the historical impact and importance of civic engagement in American society. This will pave the way for a subsequent review of relevant theory on civic culture, the role of the citizen, and social capital. The theory section is followed by an analysis of the current state of civic engagement. The analysis places special emphasis on religious participation in the community, but it also considers civic participation in disaster recovery. Finally, the findings from the analysis are discussed with the intention of outlining future implications for American society.

Putnam’s arguments pose the question of whether the cornerstone of civic engagement is eroding; have Americans become disengaged with their communities to the point where society becomes fragmented? The thesis addresses this question.

1.1 Method and Choice of Theory
To examine civic participation a number of sources have been consulted: statistical material, scholarly journals, articles from popular media, and reports from official government departments have been researched in an attempt to shed light on the topic from various angles and thereby provide a comprehensive and accurate picture of the phenomenon of civic engagement. The collection and review of the material for analysis is the methodological basis for this thesis.

As to theory, both classic texts as well as current theorists have been consulted. To provide a source of the origins of civic engagement the classic work on civic culture by Almond and Verba (1963) has been consulted; this work also provides a historical basis for the idea of a civic culture. More recent works, such as the thorough work on civic engagement by Putnam (2000), are also important contributions to building the theoretical groundwork of this paper. The notion
of a good American citizen has been dealt with throughout American history, and this phenomenon has therefore been looked at from both a historical and a contemporary perspective. Common to the theories applied in this thesis is that they are all set in a North-American context; all theories have an American stance to them and are set within American society. This makes them applicable to this study.

1.2 Delimitations and Definitions

For reasons of scope, I focus this thesis on the social and communal aspects of civic engagement – reducing the political and electoral aspects to a minimum. Electoral engagement in the form of voting is not completely omitted as it serves as an important and general indicator as to the state of civic engagement, but it will only be touched upon briefly. I choose to focus on the communal side to civic engagement as this leads to deeper knowledge of whether American society is becoming fragmented; it will lead to an understanding of whether the bonds connecting Americans are falling apart or not. I choose to focus the analysis on religious participation as this aspect has historically been important to civic engagement. Furthermore, the aspect of disaster recovery is important as it shows how Americans react to immediate crises.

By looking at different types of texts it is shown how civic engagement takes many forms and is reflected in different ways in contemporary society. Therefore, not all contributions directly mention or state either “civic engagement” or “volunteering”. Yet, despite not using the exact terminology, they all invoke some kind of civic participation.

In continuation of this, it should also be stated that the terms “civic engagement”, “civic involvement”, and “civic participation” are used interchangeably; these terms all hold the basic notion of citizens involving in their communities. The notion of volunteering is defined as working for something or someone without being paid\(^1\) and therefore doing it with no personal financial reward in mind.

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\(^1\) See further definition on the term “volunteer” in Macmillan Education, 2002, p. 1578
2. Historical Context of Civic Engagement

The following section will look into American history to point to conditions and events that have made civic participation play a vital role in American society; it will look at where the patterns of involvement and attitudes of philanthropy stem from.

From the very beginning of modern American history, philanthropy has been essential to sheer survival; when the Pilgrims arrived to the New World in the beginning of the 17th century they relied on the goodwill of others to help them adjust to the new land (Bremner, 1988). The Pilgrims were unfamiliar to the environment of North America as it was different from their European origins, and so they needed help to adjust to the new conditions; they did not know which crops to grow, how to survive the winter, and how to communicate with the indigenous people, who did not speak English. In other words, they relied on others to help them survive. The Native Americans helped the newcomers when they “taught them where to fish and how to plant corn” (Foner, 2005, p. 57).

Not only had the first immigrants in America relied on help from others, also the settlers of new colonies had to turn to each other for help and cooperation. The land they came to was a wilderness, and there were no social structures for them to enter into (Ellis & Campbell, 2011), which meant they had to cooperate in order to establish a living for themselves. This meant, that they helped each other to clear land, build houses and barns, and helped each other harvest (Ibid.; Foner, 2005). Their joint efforts helped them build sustainable communities and societies, moreover their cooperation often meant the difference between life and death. Cooperation between neighbors and in communities helped the settlers grow in numbers and become prosperous; their community engagement helped them survive and gave them success.

The fact that many American immigrants were religious also played a role in making civic engagement a cornerstone of modern society. The Puritans in the colony of New England “feared excessive individualism and lack of social unity” (Ibid., p. 60) and believed people should unite both to promote their common good but also to promote their faith. They believed that social unity and community could be endangered by too much emphasis on the self (Ibid.). They saw missionary work as a form of help to others and wanted to convert the natives into Christianity.

In addition to promoting their faith, the religious communities were active in forming voluntary associations; when their religious beliefs were violated by others they acted together in
order to achieve change. An example of this happened when the government in the beginning of the 1800s decided to deliver mail on the Sabbath; a network of ministers across the country mobilized their congregations and sent petitions to the government. Later this group started operating outside the church and invited all to participate in keeping the Sabbath sacred (Schudson, 1998), and their models of organization spread (Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999).

These values, stemming from Puritans and other Christians, seem to have impacted society to such a degree that engagement in community and helping each other became a civic virtue; religion in colonial times seem to have helped spread certain values of community and philanthropy.

The formation of government and the welfare society model is another factor in forming the tradition for participation in civil society.

Dating back to 1776 and the making of the Constitution, it seems that the political debates surrounding the newly founded state got people involved in voluntary political meetings (Foner, 2005). Moreover, the participation in political debates spurred the organization of political societies that, besides political activities, “undertook philanthropic activity” (Schudson, 1998, p. 56). Thus, it seems that the founding of the United States was a factor for the tradition of involving oneself in both politics and civil society. But civic participation did not only arise from the citizens themselves, it was also encouraged by the nation’s leaders: the idea of free, state-supported public schools came from leading politicians, such as Jefferson and Adams, who believed education would “encourage the quality of “virtue” [and] the ability to sacrifice self-interest for the public good” (Foner, 2005, p. 189).

The liberal model of welfare society is another condition that has had an impact on making civic participation important in the U.S.A. Americans have always been skeptic of government and feared excessive national power; their politicians have long tried to maintain limited government which, for example, can be seen in the politics of Jefferson (Ibid.). By keeping the public sector small, by low income tax, little redistribution, and few service expenses, other service organs have had to take over; the limited public welfare benefits have meant that the responsibility to help the weakest members of society was left to private organizations and insurances. The solution to avoid big government has mainly been the voluntary sector (Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999).
In the light of these political and social developments in America, from the first settlers until the formation of the United States and welfare society, it becomes clear that civic engagement and participation is deeply rooted in American history. Religious, political, and social conditions made Americans cooperate and led to the blossoming of civic engagement.
3. Theory
The following section will review theory relevant to civic participation, i.e. theory on civic culture, the notion of the good citizen, and social capital.

3.1 Civic Culture in America
A set of shared social values and attitudes ensure that society does not become fragmented. This argument is put forth by Stanford and Harvard Professors Almond and Verba (1963), who furthermore argue that the political system of democracy relies on a basis of social trust: “Social trust facilitates political cooperation among the citizens in these nations, and without it democratic politics is impossible” (Almond & Verba, 1963, p. 490). This means, that without a foundation of social trust, democracy will not be able to survive. Americans must share a “general, over-arching set of social values” (Ibid.) and trust each other to some degree in order to sustain an effective and cooperative society.

These shared social values and social trust are components of the civic culture. The civic culture consists of several dimensions that are a mix of apparent opposites, for example affectivity and affective neutrality and power and responsiveness of government. The dimensions need to be balanced in order to foster a successful democracy as seen in America (Ibid.). The set of shared social values, and therein the important aspect of social trust, is important in order to maintain that balance in the civic culture; shared social values ensure that the disparity of a dimension of the civic culture does not become too great to allow democracy to function. Civic culture and civic society are therefore important to a viable political culture.

3.2 The Good Citizen
There is a perception of good citizenship embedded in American civic culture. This perception might be latent and unarticulated to the ordinary American but several intellectuals have taken up the notion of “the good citizen”. Almond and Verba (1963) bring up the rationality-activist model of citizenship in which a citizen is required to behave in a certain way in order to support the democratic system. This model emphasizes an “ideal of the active citizen” (Ibid. p. 475); the American citizen must be involved, informed, rational, and most of all active in society and community. These values are components of the civic culture in America. Almond and Verba point to the fact that the rationality-activist model of citizenship is an ideal and does not necessarily reflect reality. Instead, they argue, there is a balancing of the active citizen and the
passive subject role; in some matters a citizen is highly engaged and participating, but on other matters he is passive and unengaged. This balance between the activist and passive role is a result of complex demands of for example the time a citizen has on his hands. They argue that in America emphasis is placed on the active participant role more than on the passive and non-involved role; through civics training and socializing Americans are taught that a certain kind of citizen behavior is more accepted and appreciated than another – being active, involved, and participating in community affairs is a way to be “a good citizen”. This means, that the ideal of the rationality-activist model of citizenship is the one stressed in public life in the United States.

The Professor of Social Sciences and Sociology at Princeton University, Robert Wuthnor, has a similar view of the notion of good citizenship (1998). Wuthnow tries to uncover what Americans themselves perceive as good citizenship, and his findings point in the direction of the rationality-activist model of citizenship. He finds that the most important aspect of good citizenship is believed to be moral character (Wuthnow, 1998); one must know the difference between right and wrong and stand up for one’s beliefs. Wuthnow explores the notion of moral character which encompasses both being aware of own needs and “being genuinely concerned about the needs of others and doing one’s part to alleviate these needs” (Ibid. p. 157). Especially the aspect of helping others is important. This means, that being a good citizen entails more than voting for elections and taking care of one’s family; one must also possess civic-mindedness by being engaged in community affairs for the benefit of others.

It is considered a virtue to do volunteer work and participate in civic life – not only out of altruistic reasons, but also because it satisfies the volunteer and makes him a better citizen (Ibid.). Support of civic participation as an important element in being a good citizen can be found as far back as the time of President Jefferson, who “wanted citizens to be as involved as possible in the problems and decisions of their communities” (Kidd, 2010, p. 1603). To Jefferson citizenship was linked to interest in and participation in community – civic engagement was an obligation.

To sum up, the good American citizen is expected to hold moral character which results in engagement and participation in community. The notion of citizenship does not only hold rights but also duties and obligations: being a good citizen includes a responsibility to engage in civic life and actively participate in helping to improve the situation of others. This ideal of a good
citizen approximates the rationality-activist model of citizenship and is encompassed in the civic culture of America. American citizenship holds a high degree of civic participation which must therefore be said to be a cornerstone of American democracy.

3.3 Social Capital

The concepts of civic engagement and social trust are exactly what the theory of social capital is concerned with. The basic premise of social capital theory is that social connections have value, and that they provide a basis for social cohesion (Field, 2003; Putnam, 2000). This in turn means that social connections among citizens and in communities are helping to promote a strong and effective democracy; trust in government is a product of interpersonal trust and connections between citizens.

The term ‘social capital’ is related to measuring social trust. Researchers across different academic disciplines have employed the term social capital, but Social Scientist and Professor at Harvard University Robert Putnam has popularized it. Putnam defines social capital as: “Features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives … Social capital, in short, refers to social connections and the attendant norms and trust.” (Putnam, 1995, pp. 664-665). In this definition is a view that social capital is not developed for the sake of its own but instead through the pursuit of common goals.

The theory of social capital holds an assumption of a correlation between social trust and civic engagement; social trust and civic engagement follow each other, which one comes first has not been definitively established (Ibid.), but Putnam (2000) states that “any assessment of trends in social capital must include an examination of trends in volunteering, philanthropy, and altruism” (p. 117). There are many definitions of the concept of social capital, but they all boil down to the idea that networks have positive impact and value: relationships matter, not just to the individual but also on a wider societal level. Social capital can therefore be considered a public good².

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² There is debate over the possible negative outcomes of social capital wherein it cannot be considered a public good. For a clarification on this, see Field, 2003; Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 2000.
3.3.1 Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

Social capital can be broken down into two sub-types: bonding and bridging capital. Both work as a kind of social glue but in different ways. Bridging social capital, also called inclusive, is good for bringing people together across social divisions; it works as a “sociological WD-40” (Putnam, 2000, p. 23) that makes things go more smoothly among different social groups. Bonding social capital, also called exclusive, reinforces identities and homogenous groups; it is like a “sociological superglue” (Ibid.) that can create strong in-group loyalty with those whom we are similar to and at the same time create negative feelings towards out-groups (Field, 2003; Putnam, 2000).

3.4 The Civic Malaise in American Society

In a 1993 landmark study of Italy, Robert Putnam concluded that a strong associational life and high levels of public trust lead to more effective government (Putnam, 1993). With this finding as a starting point, he examined the state of social capital and civic participation in the U.S.A. He found disturbing trends, and in his early work on the topic he predicted that “Unless America experiences a dramatic upward boost in civic engagement … in the next few years, Americans in 2010 will join, trust, and vote even less than we do today” (Putnam, 1995, p. 677). He found a rapid and dramatic decline in civic engagement in contemporary America as compared to the 1960s. He used, among others, the rate of joining voluntary associations as an indicator that social capital and social connectedness is in decay to a point where it proves a serious problem. He concluded that “most Americans today feel vaguely and uncomfortably disconnected” (Putnam, 2000, p. 402). His prediction and claim is that unless the decline in civic engagement comes to an end America will become fragmented: the declining participation in civic society and lessening of social connections will erode societal cohesion and in turn democracy (Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999).

Recapitulating, theory suggests that civic engagement is the foundation of a viable political and civic culture, and that it is deeply embedded in the fabric of America. The framework of a civic culture as proposed by Almond and Verba (1963) encompasses an ideal of how citizens should behave; a “good American citizen” should participate actively in civic society. This ideal of the good citizen fits well within the theory of social capital because citizens who participate actively in community affairs create social capital. The theory of social capital proposes that social
networks have value; the more we connect and engage in our communities and each other, the healthier our democracy will be.

These theories suggest that civic engagement and voluntary participation in community is of great importance both to the bonds connecting Americans and to American democracy. Professor Putnam has found consistent evidence that such civic engagement and social connectedness in America is in rapid decline.
4. Analysis

The following section of this paper will examine the current state of civic engagement; how involved are Americans in their communities and are they connected to each other? For reasons of scope it is not possible to examine all aspects of society, therefore, besides looking at some general trends, the section will primarily focus on religious engagement and times of crisis.

Putnam (2000) argues that joining voluntary associations through religious organizations is a strong indicator of social capital. Of this reason, religious engagement will be analyzed in order to examine how strong community bonds and social connectedness are today. Furthermore, our reaction to crises in our communities is relevant to look at as this can show how much we engage in times of crisis.

4.1 General Trends in Civic Engagement

There are many aspects of civic life that constitute social capital and involve civic participation. Civic engagement can be measured along many variables. The following passage will draw upon general trends in American society to examine how civic engagement has developed.

Casting your vote at elections is a way to use your civic rights and affect your country. Registration rates for presidential elections from 1968-2008 show a clear trend: fewer Americans register as voters today than did 40 years ago. In 1968 74% of eligible Americans registered as voters while only 65% did in 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009, table A-10) – a decline of roughly 9 percentage points. The number of registered voters has declined steadily since 1968 and now lingers around 65%. The same tendency holds for actual attendance at both congressional and presidential elections. Since the 1960s there has been a decline in voters of roughly 10 percentage points for both types of elections – even more for congressional elections (Ibid., 2009, table A-1). This decline is a direct indication that civic engagement is declining, cf. section 3.3.

Besides Americans voting less is that a large majority of Americans are dissatisfied with “the way things are going in the United States” at the moment. In a survey conducted by Gallup in March 2013 only 21% of Americans expressed that they were satisfied with the way things were going in the U.S. (Gallup, 2013). This survey has been conducted continuously since 1979 and overall shows dramatic changes in the national mood with large changes even over few years. It is worth noting, however, that the level of satisfaction has at times since the mid-1980s
been as high as 60-71%. Compared to these numbers, it is hardly debatable that the 21% satisfaction in 2013 leaves much to desire: the level of satisfaction with the way things are going today is very low.

The past few years in the U.S.A. have been marked by recession and a financial crisis. There is disagreement on whether this financial crisis has affected volunteering positively or negatively. Gallup (Lopez, 2009) argues that Americans continue volunteering during the economic downturn: they found that over the course of fall 2008 and until summer 2009 the general level of volunteers was stable, and that “Americans continued to offer their time to organizations” (Ibid.). Opposite this, the 2009 report “America’s Civic Health Index” (National Conference on Citizenship, 2009) found that Americans are cutting back on the time they spend volunteering, and that a majority of Americans feel that their fellow citizens are looking more out for themselves than before the economic crisis. The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) even goes as far as stating that “the economic recession is causing a civic depression” (Ibid., p. 2). On the other hand, the NCoC also points out that more personal forms of participation seem to be alive and well among Americans. Despite spending less time on organizational charity, it seems that Americans do engage on a personal level: many have helped out others by providing shelter or giving them food or money. In addition to this, Americans increasingly talk to and do favors for their neighbors (Jayson, 2012). This means, that Americans are growing closer to their neighbors and forming bonds along these lines: they create social connections to the people who live near them, creating bonding social capital.

4.2 Religion

The aspect of American religiosity is important as it can shed light on our social connections. Americans have in general always been highly religious, and the religious institutions have been central in creating social connections between Americans and engaging them in their communities. Religious engagement is therefore important to the creation of social capital. The following subsections will consider religious affiliation and engagement.

4.2.1 The Loss of Religion

Religious individuals continuously have a higher propensity to volunteer their time and to donate to charity. This was found in The Social Capital Community Benchmark Surveys of 2000 and
2006 (Family Facts, b). The surveys find substantial differences in both volunteering and charitable giving between persons who attend religious services and those who do rarely or not at all. This indicates that religious engagement is important to the level of volunteering and charitable giving. This is further supported by the newly released report on volunteering from the U.S. Department of Labor (2013). It found that the main organizations that Americans volunteered for are religious – over a third of all volunteers spent most hours volunteering for a religious organization (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). In sum, most volunteering and charitable giving happen in a religious context.

This naturally leads to a look at church attendance and membership numbers for religious congregations: if membership and attendance is on a downturn it could indicate that volunteering and charitable giving has already or will follow in the future.

American citizens are becoming increasingly secular. Numbers from the Pew Research Center show that over the course of five years, from 2007-2012, the number of Americans who do not affiliate with any religion has increased by almost five percentage points (Pew Research Forum, 2012). This now amounts to one in every five Americans not being religious, doubling the number since 2000 (Family Facts, 2010). As two in five new volunteers are recruited through interpersonal connections, i.e. that someone they know personally has asked them to volunteer (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013, table 6), this may also be expected to be affected by the diminishing religious affiliation. As fewer persons engage in religion they are less likely to be asked by someone in their congregation to volunteer.

The tendency that Americans are becoming less religious is further supported by figures of religious attendance. The General Social Survey (GSS) from 2010 found a significant decline in attendance at religious sermons as compared to the 1970s (Family Facts, b) – even just comparing 2000 and 2010 shows a decline. The Pew Research Center has found similar trends (Pew Research Forum, 2012), although their starting points are slightly different from the GSS’s. The number of monthly church-goers is roughly the same but the number of weekly church-goers has declined by nearly 10 percentage points. This means, that the group of regular churchgoers, those who attend most often, declines; the core group of churchgoers is diminishing. In effect, not only fewer people are attending religious services, but those who do it, do it less often than before. These numbers support the notion that Americans are growing less
religious. This means, that fewer bonds will be created through religion which, according to social capital theory, will lead to a more fragmented society.

Further supporting this fragmentation is the outlook on the nation’s moral values. Americans are split on the question of the current state of moral values: 20 percent say the state is good or excellent, 36 percent say it is “only fair” and a slight majority of 43 percent says it is “poor” (Gallup, 2012). These numbers show a disagreement on the state of the moral values in the country as it is today. But they generally agree that the state of moral values is getting worse. The negativity about the future of moral values is an issue as the notion of the good citizen encompasses that a citizen holds moral character, cf. section 3.2. When Americans believe that the state of moral values is getting worse, they indicate that more persons will not hold moral character. In the light of that, more individuals will not be able to live up to the ideal of a good citizen.

The most frequent mentioning of problems facing moral values is the consideration of and caring about others (Ibid.); there is a somewhat shared perception that people do not engage enough in the lives of others. Americans also point to a lack of faith being an important issue which implies that they believe that the loss of religion affects their moral values negatively. In sum, this shows that Americans have a negative outlook on the way moral values are developing, and that their main concern about it is that of less civic-mindedness towards others and a diminishing religious affiliation. Their concerns tie in with the concept of a good citizen: the aspects they worry about make up important components of the good citizen, cf. section 3.2. It seems that Americans feel a gap between the ideal citizen and reality which leads to a concern whether they are becoming less “good citizens”.

4.2.2 Community Ties Strengthened by Religion

Religious affiliation also plays an important role in the perception of one’s fellow citizens and community. According to social capital theory, cf. section 3.3, trust in others is an important aspect of social capital. Research has found that persons who are involved with a religious group have a greater tendency to trust others, while those with no religious affiliation are more prone to think that “you can’t be too careful in dealing with people” (Jansen, 2011, p. 18). This divide shows that either trust in others is affected by religion, or vice versa. It seems most plausible, though, that trust in others is affected by religion; participation in religious sermons can create
trust in others, but religion itself might also instill certain values of trust and altruism. The degree of trust is therefore positively affected by religiosity in the community. It is therefore a problem that religiosity is declining, cf. section 4.2.1: as a community becomes less religious, the less trusting its citizens will be of each other, which in turn means that social capital declines.

Religious individuals are not only more trusting of their fellow citizens, they also think more highly of their communities. Religiously active persons are more positive of their communities: they rate their communities as a better place to live than their non-religious counterparts (Ibid.). Besides this, persons who are affiliated with religious groups feel that they to a higher degree are able to positively shape their immediate surroundings (Ibid.). These findings suggest that religiously active Americans are more connected to their communities: they value their communities more, believe they can influence them positively, and are more trusting of their fellow citizens. Support of such connectedness to their communities can also be found in the article “In a Crisis, Humanists Seem Absent” from the New York Times (2012). This article depicts how, in the wake of the Newtown Massacre, the religious communities formed secure places for grief while the “non-religious part of community” was not able to provide such places. Religion seemed to connect people and let them mourn together, as humanist chaplain and author Greg Epstein also expressed: “What religion has to offer to people at a moment like this – more than theology, more than divine presence – is community” (Freedman, 2012). Community ties seem to be strengthened by religion. In accordance with social capital theory, religiously active Americans are supposedly better at building social capital; their engagement in their communities and trust in others are important aspects of social capital.

4.2.3 Rise of the Megachurches
The churches in the United States are growing even bigger, which brings changes in the traditional tight-knit structure of smaller congregations. A megachurch is defined as a “church with an average weekly attendance of 2,000 or greater” (Christianity Today, 2013). There has been a rapid increase in the number of megachurches since the 1960s. In the 1960s there were very few megachurches, just one megachurch for every 7.5 million Americans, but in 2010 there was one for every 200,000 Americans (Stetzer, 2013); an increase from 16 megachurches in
1960 (Green, 2012) to 1,611 in 2011 (Bird & Thumma, 2011, p. 2). Megachurches have therefore gone from being a rare occurrence to a widespread phenomenon.

Megachurches have very large congregations. Previously, a typical church had about 100 people in its congregation (Ibid.), but for megachurches weekly attendance is over 2,000 persons. With such large congregations it becomes impossible for the individual member to know everyone in the congregation, and the bonding effect of social capital traditionally associated with going to church thereby disappears. The congregation of a megachurch cannot be as tightly knit as smaller congregations can: in a relatively small congregation individuals will get to know each other as they most likely live in the same neighborhood and may take part in the same volunteer program. This means, that the members of the congregation will most likely know each other to a greater extent than members of a mega-congregation will, and closer bonds are therefore more easily created in smaller congregations.

This does not mean, however, that social capital cannot be created in mega-congregations; large heterogeneous congregations are good places for the creation of bridging capital. Bonding capital is not better than bridging, but good for different purposes. Bridging capital, as created in mega-congregations, can be good for getting a job but maybe not for creating close relationships (Granovetter, 1973). Whereas the traditional small congregations were good places for the creation of bonding social capital, megachurches, because of their size and following inevitable impersonality between the members of the congregations, are expected to create more bridging social capital. Bridging capital characterizes the loose and weak connections created through megachurches.

4.2.4 Religious Missions
Evidence shows that religion has come to play a smaller role in society, and that it is no longer the strong facilitator of community and social capital as it once was. But a look at missions from churches show that they still strive for impacting their communities.

The span of the missions is great; the churches focus on many different programs that have very different goals and ambitions. Common to all is that each program is designed to help someone

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3 Bird & Thumma define a megachurch as having 1,800 or more attendants weekly; this number is 200 attendants lower than the typical designation, and the 1,611 megachurches they report might therefore be slightly higher than the number found using the typical designation of a megachurch.
less fortunate, whether it is in the immediate community, nationwide, or even overseas. An example of a program within the community is The Neighborhood Academy under the Bower Hill Community Church in Pennsylvania: The Neighborhood Academy is a college-prep school helping students to overcome generational poverty (Bower Hill Community Church). The same church also has overseas projects, for example the Haiti Water Purification Project which is a project to install solar-powered water purification systems in Haiti; a project helping people far away from the Bower Hill community.

Some churches have specified their mission in a mission statement. These mission statements show how the churches take on responsibility to form their communities; by formulating a mission statement each church shows that it sees it as an obligation to engage its members in their local community. San Diego Church of Christ (SDCoC) writes: “Our mission is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength & to love our neighbor as ourselves. [...] We will extend the grace of God through compassionate service to the poor” (San Diego Church of Christ, 2013). In this way, SDCoC explicitly shows that it sees it as a responsibility and calling to serve the San Diego communities. Another church, the New Mission Missionary Baptist Church (NMMBC), Ohio, describes itself as “dedicated to serving God and serving the community through various ministries, services and outreach programs” (New Mission Missionary Baptist Church). Its mission is stated under the heading “Our Commitment to the Community”. The NMMBC, like SDCoC, clearly states that taking part in civil society is important; the verb “serving” implies that the church sees it as a natural obligation to participate in community affairs. These missions show that the churches find it natural to take on responsibility to the benefit of their community.

The wide span and great number of service programs offered through the churches shows that the churches and the congregations behind them continuously wish to play an important role in civic society. The programs and missions reach deep into the communities. The missions and service programs offered through the churches clearly embrace and rely on active citizens; the missions have been built upon an idea that each citizen should actively contribute to resolve the challenges in community. The ideal of “the good citizen” is clearly embedded in the missions.

4.3 Times of Crisis and Disaster Recovery
In the past 15 years the United States have experienced several disasters within the country both in terms of terrorist attacks as well as natural disasters. A recent disaster was Hurricane Sandy
which hit the American Eastcoast in late October 2012. The following section will explore how Americans reacted to and handled the devastations brought by Hurricane Sandy.

Before the storm President Barack Obama proclaimed: “The good news is we will clean up and we will get through this” (Knoller, 2012), while also encouraging the public to help clean up after the storm. His call worked, it seems, at least overwhelmingly many volunteers turned up in the Sandy aftermath. The volunteer organization New York Cares experienced that “A lot of people were frustrated because they were coming to our site and not seeing projects because they were filling up so rapidly” (Bond, 2012). The organization was not able to provide projects enough to keep up with demand. A sign of how active the citizens were.

Not only the local residents of the worst hit states have donated time and money, also the greater public has volunteered. A group of volunteers from Tennessee was turned away simply because their help was not needed: the group had brought mobile kitchens in order to cook for those without food and water but as mobile kitchens from other states were already set up there was no need for the them (Howerton, 2012). It seems disturbing to send away volunteers in such a crisis but must be considered evidence that Americans are in fact willing to get involved. This involvement fits well with the active, participant role that Almond and Verba (1963) outline as typically American, cf. section 3.2.

The many different volunteer opportunities is evidence that Americans step together in times of crisis. Both official and local agencies have provided overviews of how to participate in the disaster recovery. United We Serve, President Obama’s service initiative, has created an online portal with links to many agencies where it is possible to volunteer (United We Serve). The New York division of CBS has also gathered an extensive list of volunteer possibilities (CBS New York, 2012). Not only initiatives in the New York boroughs are listed, also initiatives in the greater Eastcoast region and even a description of how to find unofficial volunteer opportunities via social media are listed. Even national relief efforts were made; a live broadcast benefit show aired on 2 November 2012 on NBC (Montgomery, 2012). The show was a way to collect donations from all 50 states.

In addition to the easy access to volunteer possibilities, it seems that Americans came together in unusual movements and small associations to help in their communities. Members of the Occupy Wall Street started an Occupy Sandy movement; activists who were originally
engaged in political activism turned to relief work (Davis & Duerson, 2012). Not only original members of Occupy Wall Street decided to join, also individuals who had no prior connection to the movement have joined. Another example of an unusual match of volunteer forces is that of NYC Marathon of Relief 2012 (Bond, 2012): two women who had never met before got connected through Facebook and joined in order to urge runners of the upcoming marathon to volunteer instead. The two women had no previous connection but in their attempt to help after Hurricane Sandy hit they got connected and made a joint effort to mobilize other marathon runners. These examples show how Americans in the wake of Hurricane Sandy have joined forces and connected along unusual lines. Their creativity constitutes new ways of creating social capital, both bonding and bridging, while drawing on bridging social capital.
5. Discussion

In order to outline future implications for American society, the following section of this thesis will discuss the findings from the analysis.

5.1 Passive Citizens prove a Problem to Democracy

Despite having good incentives for influencing democratic decisions, Americans are becoming even more passive. This passivity proves a problem to democracy. The analysis demonstrated that Americans are generally dissatisfied and unhappy with the way things are going in their country, cf. section 4.1, – such dissatisfaction could be expected to lead Americans to participate more in democratic processes; when a large majority of the population dislike the way things are going in their country, the most obvious and direct response would be to engage more in order to influence decision-making. This does not seem to be the case. When looking at the declining participation rates in elections it becomes clear that Americans do not turn their dissatisfaction into participation.

The fact that Americans do not turn their dissatisfaction with their country into active participation in elections can prove a problem to democracy. Despite good incentives to influence what is happening in society, Americans instead of engaging even more, seem to “give up” and do nothing. That they do not lift their voices and show their nation’s leaders that they are unhappy with the course they have set for the country makes democracy unsuccessful.

5.2 The Erosion of Shared Values

The growing secularization of American society will lead to fragmentation within communities. The analysis uncovered that Americans are less religious today compared to 50 years ago. In itself this is not a problem, but taking into consideration that religion and civic participation go hand in hand, it does nevertheless prove a problem.

What is problematic about Americans engaging less in religion is that the church has previously been a place where individuals formed bonds (Putnam, 2000): they connected with people in their congregation and community when they met at church. Networks were formed and maintained through congregations. The church, in this way, can be seen as a catalyst for social capital. Being connected to a church, no matter which specific religion, furthermore promotes a shared set of values: religion unites by providing its participants a shared worldview.
This set of shared social values provided through religion has supported the civic culture but as Americans grow less religious the basis for such shared values can be expected to erode.

Diminishing religious affiliation and attendance at religious services can be expected to prove a problem to the continuation of many volunteer services; if there are no volunteers the programs will discontinue. As Americans grow more secular and stop attending religious services they will stop forming bonds along these lines and then leave communities without programs to foster bonding social capital. According to social capital theory such a decline in volunteer activity and community bonds formed through religious activities will lead to a more fragmented society.

On the other hand, a look at missions from churches does not imply that charitable donations and volunteering have gone out of fashion. The missions still have far-reaching goals and ambitions. The tradition of helping others is rooted so deeply in the religious institutions in America that they do not lower their philanthropic ideals. This indicates that the churches, despite diminishing attendance, have not lowered their ambitions; the churches seem to hold on to a belief of playing an important role in their communities where they connect and help people through their programs and services. This is a sign that civic participation will not fade away.

Despite the churches’ missions implying that they are still able to keep communities well connected, the decline in religious affiliation points in another direction. As pointed to in section 2, religion has been key to establish a set of shared social values in America. According to civic culture theory, shared social values ensure that society does not become fragmented, but as the importance of religion diminishes, the basis for these shared values will erode, and so American society will become fragmented.

5.3 Loosely Connected Neighborhoods

The growing number of megachurches leads to loosely connected neighborhoods. It is clear that the traditional pattern with many small congregations has changed; we now experience more and more megachurches with congregations many times larger than what we are used to. The analysis points to that this means a shift in the creation of social capital; when congregations become extremely big it is not possible to create the same bonding social capital as in smaller congregations because people do simply not know each other as well. Instead, more bridging social capital will be created. As the churches have traditionally fostered long-lasting connections and close interpersonal bonds it can be perceived as a problem that the churches
now to a greater extent create weak and loose connections: when churches do no longer facilitate the creation of close bonds, one can assume that the close bonds disappear completely.

In opposition to this, it can be argued that people now through the use of telephone and Internet are able to maintain close bonds with people who live far away, and that they therefore do not need the close relationships within their congregations. This is partly true; it is indeed possible, and probably easier now than 50 years ago, to maintain close relations with friends and family far away. But at the same time, close relationships with persons far away cannot substitute the close connections between citizens in a neighborhood. Earlier on, churches helped create the close bonds that let citizens within communities work effectively together on social issues and thereby improve their neighborhoods. When these bonds are no longer formed through congregations, neighborhoods will not be as coherent as they once were. The blossoming of large congregations in megachurches will therefore affect communities negatively.

5.4 A Misunderstood Self-image

The nation, although split on the question of how moral values are today, agrees that the state of moral values is becoming worse, cf. section 4.2.1. This in itself is a negative outlook and should cause concern: Americans think that their fellow citizens are becoming less considerate of each other. This is not a good starting point for creating trust between citizens and will undoubtedly affect social capital and in turn societal coherence negatively.

But when Americans believe their consideration of others is gone, they might have a wrong impression. Supporting this is Wuthnow (1998) who proposes that, “the new, loosely structured forms of civic involvement often leave people with the sense that they are not doing enough to help others and that their communities are coming apart at the seams” (Wuthnow, 1998, p. 203). He argues that the changing patterns of involvement lead Americans to a wrong self-perception. By moving away from long-term affiliation with one or a few organizations and instead being more loosely connected to many different volunteer associations, Americans have changed their ways of engaging in their communities: where Americans once formed very strong bonds to just a few organizations and through them performed their civic duties they are now instead connected to more organizations but in looser ways. Americans currently perform their civic duties in different ways than earlier – they now seem to get involved for shorter periods of time.
This change is further supported by looking at the ways Americans got involved in the recovery after Hurricane Sandy: citizens formed new associations with the single purpose of helping people who were affected by the storm. Other organizations that were not previously concerned with disaster recovery or volunteer work came together in unusual ways with the single purpose of helping out after this specific storm. These examples show the looser ways Americans now connect in when performing their civic duties. It is evidence that American philanthropy is still alive and well. So when Americans worry about the state of moral values becoming worse, their worries are unnecessary: Americans are just as considerate of each other as they have ever been, but the way they show it has changed.

Another supporting argument is that modern information technology has changed the way we interact (Wuthnow, 1998). The development and use of the telephone, TV, and the Internet let us connect in different ways than we did in the 1960s. The Internet has provided easy access for individuals to explore volunteer opportunities and to learn about the different ways in which they can contribute to local communities. Here, again, Hurricane Sandy relief efforts are a good example of the use of IT, cf. section 4.3: United We Serve and CBS created online portals listing different volunteer opportunities and a television show enabled viewers across the country to contribute both by donating money and by showing where it was possible to donate other goods. The use of IT has enabled Americans to connect in looser and more informal ways than before; now it is possible to participate in disaster recovery even without being physically located near the disaster. But that it is now possible to participate in your community by sitting at a computer screen is so different from traditional ways of participating, that many Americans might confuse it for not being of as much value. Volunteer work made possible by modern technology is just as valuable as selling cookies for the Boy Scouts.

It seems that although Americans are concerned that the state of morals is changing for the worse, they might actually be as considerate of each others as they have previously been – but because of new and different ways of participating they are led to believe otherwise.

5.5 Governmental Encouragement
Critics claim that civic engagement and volunteering has been squeezed out by a growing public sector (Wuthnow, 1998). They refer to the liberal model of welfare society that the U.S.A. has been built on, cf. section 2, where a limited public sector has, in their point of view, let civic participation grow. They believe that the public sector has grown too big today and with that
squeezed out the need for citizens to actively engage in their communities; there simply is not
the same need for volunteer organizations. Critics of large government might also bring in the
argument that the health care reform enacted in 2010 is yet another step away from the liberal
model, making volunteerism unnecessary.

However, as proven by history, the nation’s leaders have always encouraged Americans to
be involved in their communities and surroundings. This is also the case today: the United We
Serve initiative, for example, is a direct call from President Obama for the citizens to “Commit
to Meaningful Volunteer Service in Their Daily Lives” (Office of the Press Secretary, 2009).
This exemplifies that no matter what size the public sector has, the government continuously
calls on citizens to participate in improving their communities – the government has not simply
taken over the tasks that were performed by volunteer organizations.

Lending support to the notion that larger government is not the cause of reduced civic
involvement is the fact that the structural conditions in the U.S. encourage charitable behavior.
This point of view has been set forth by Brett Scharffs, Professor of Law at BYU. Scharffs
(2010) argues that the legal system in America makes it easier and more favourable to volunteer
and engage in charitable behavior. Especially tax deductions and tax exemptions are important
factors, but also the fact that it is relatively easy to become a volunteer plays a role in
encouraging volunteerism and civic-mindedness. The legal framework encourages citizens to get
involved in their communities.

The public sector in the United States has, as discussed above, not squeezed out civic
engagement. On the contrary, the government has continuously encouraged to and provided
incentive for the citizens to take active part in their communities and broader society. In short,
civic participation is still an important aspect of the governing of America.
6. Conclusion

The following section will summarize the main findings of first, the impact and importance of historic events and social developments to civic engagement, second, the analysis of the current state of civic participation, and third, the discussion of future implications. Lastly, it will conclude what these different findings point to in terms of social cohesion.

To sum up, this thesis has uncovered that several historical events and social developments have contributed to making civic engagement important in American society.

Philanthropy played a crucial role in helping the Pilgrims survive in the New World, and later cooperation between settlers helped them create sustainable communities. Religion has also contributed to making civic engagement important as it has helped spread values of community and philanthropy and modes of organization. The formation of the nation state as we know it spurred involvement in political and civil society. It also became evident that the nation’s leaders have always urged Americans to take active interest in shaping their communities. Furthermore, the liberal model of welfare society in America has contributed in the sense that many welfare tasks were left to civic society.

The analysis shed light on the current state of civic engagement by examining both general trends, trends in religious affiliation and engagement, and how Americans reacted to the devastations of Hurricane Sandy.

The analysis showed that despite a general feeling that things in America are not good at the moment, Americans participate less in elections than they did in the 1960s. It is not clear what the current financial crisis has meant to the level of civic participation but it seems that Americans are becoming closer with their neighbors.

Americans are becoming increasingly secular; fewer and fewer affiliate with any religion which can be expected to have a negative impact on the level of civic participation. But despite religious affiliation being in decline it seems that the churches are not lowering their philanthropic ambitions; they continuously take on great responsibility to shape the communities and the world they are part of. Americans do not have high thoughts of each other: they are concerned about a lessening of civic-mindedness in the future and that their fellow citizens will not be “good citizens”.

It was furthermore found that religious individuals trust others more than a-religious individuals, and that they are closer connected to their communities. A look at churches revealed that megachurches have gained ground and become more common. The large congregations of these churches are expected to be more loosely connected than congregations of smaller churches – in effect, more bridging social capital is created in mega-congregations.

Americans took on great responsibility in response to Hurricane Sandy: the number of volunteers was overwhelming and people from near and far offered their help. The access to many different types of volunteering and the fact that Americans connected in new ways showed their willingness to get involved.

Based on the current state of civic engagement, the discussion illustrated what can be expected in the future as to what the changes in civic participation might imply.

To summarize, the discussion pointed to that democracy will suffer under declining electoral participation. Despite the churches upholding ambitious missions and goals, the growing secularization of Americans will prove a problem to civic participation. The occurrence of megachurches and large congregations will impact communities negatively as people will not be as closely connected in these congregations.

The changes in the ways of getting involved in local communities has led to a perception among American citizens that they are not concerned enough about each other. That perception is not correct, though: Americans are not less considerate of each other but as a result of changes in association affiliation and modern IT it might seem like it at first sight. Furthermore, the claim that the public sector has crowded out civic participation is incorrect as the government through various means encourage citizens to get involved in their communities.

All in all, this thesis depicts a complex situation and outlook for civic engagement. Civic participation is deeply embedded in the history of the land and people, which has helped make it an enduring tradition among Americans. Despite this, the analysis showed that both declines in electoral attendance and religiosity can prove problematic to the creation of social capital and in turn a set of shared social values providing the basis for the civic culture. On the other hand, the handling of crisis recovery depicts the American people as being deeply concerned about each other and willing to get involved in community affairs. The handling of such crises gives life to the idea that Americans are still “good citizens” who perform their civic duties. American
citizens continuously form bonds to each other but in new and different ways; they rarely have a life-long connection to a few organizations, instead they join sporadically. This results in less bonding social capital and enduring connections being created in such organizations – which lead to a belief that Americans are less connected to each other than they once were. But modern technology has enabled Americans to stay close with persons even far away from them. In addition to this it seems that they are once again becoming closer with their neighbors; a sign that they still have close relationships but now often outside the organizational structures that once provided the frames and connections. So it seems that Americans are not necessarily less connected than earlier, but that they now connect in different ways.

Findings from this examination are ambiguous but indicate that community engagement is “changing, rather than simply declining,” as also proposed by Wuthnow (1998, p. vii). Civic engagement has declined somewhat but not to the point where it leads to a fragmentation of society; Americans now connect in different ways and engage in looser, more sporadic ways than they once did. But they still engage. This means that civic participation as a cornerstone of American society and democracy is not eroding – but civic participation takes other forms today compared to earlier times. So when Robert Putnam argues that Americans are so disengaged with their communities that society becomes fragmented he makes out a worst-case scenario: this thesis has found some evidence supporting his claim but has also found more uplifting tendencies among Americans. To sum up, American society does face future challenges in order to avoid fragmentation but Americans still show interest in and willingness to engage in community affairs today. As the traditional catalysts for social capital are diminishing the main future challenge seems to be to adapt to the changes in community involvement. The future question is, how do we encourage and revive civic participation and community spirit?

On the basis of this thesis it can be concluded that when President Obama recently proclaimed that “In this country, we look out for one another. We have each others’ backs. Because despite our differences, we are Americans first, and that’s what Americans do,” (Obama, 2012) it still rings true: Americans are to this day still a civic-minded people who serve their country, thereby maintaining a cohesive society and a healthy democracy.
7. References


