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Civic Innovation
and American Politics

Over the past several decades American society has displayed a substantial capacity for civic innovation, and the future of our democracy will depend on whether we can deepen and extend such innovation to solve major public problems and transform the way we do politics. To be sure, the obstacles are forbidding and the outcomes uncertain. But important foundations have been slowly built through the painstaking public work of citizens, as well as through networks of professional organizers and practitioners who have learned to catalyze and support their work in progressively more refined and effective ways. Americans at the turn of the century face serious strains in their democratic institutions and worrisome signs in their everyday civic life, yet they have never stopped reinventing democracy. Indeed, over the past several decades they have created forms of civic practice that are far more sophisticated in grappling with complex public problems and collaborating with highly diversified social actors than have ever existed in American history.

The analysis that leads us to these conclusions will appear welcome to the thousands upon thousands of people who have been engaged in building communities and renovating the democratic foundations of American society for much of their adult lives. Indeed, it derives from a deep appreciation of their work, as well as from an attempt to learn from the paths they have taken as civic innovators. Our analysis might also provide a hopeful set of intellectual and practical handles for many others who seek new ways to become effectively engaged amid pervasive beliefs that nothing works. But our claims will undoubtedly appear contentious and counterintuitive to many others. Before laying out a fuller case for these claims and qualifying them with appropriate critical analysis, let us give a few examples of what we have in mind.
A TALE OF TWO CIVIC ASSOCIATIONS

The first story concerns Save The Bay, a statewide civic environmental organization in Rhode Island, which has transformed itself over thirty years from a local oppositional group to one that combines advocacy, policy design, education, and habitat restoration. The second is about Communities Organized for Public Service, in San Antonio, a largely Mexican American coalition of congregations dedicated to transforming poor and working-class communities that has evolved over twenty-five years from a confrontational style of community organizing to one based on collaborative public relationships rooted in faith, family, and democratic accountability.

Save The Bay

In the early 1970s citizens of the Narragansett Bay Homeowners Association and Save Our Community formed Save The Bay to stop the construction of an oil refinery in Tiverton, Rhode Island, and twin nuclear power plants at Rome Point. The bay had been degraded during two centuries of industrial development, initially by woolen and cotton mills, then by fertilizer plants and paint factories, and more recently by jewelry manufacturing and electroplating. Urban development and suburban sprawl added new sources of nonpoint pollution, such as roads and shopping malls, and sewage systems needed major upgrading. As citizen efforts expanded, Save The Bay emerged over the next decade as an effective statewide citizen action group that repeatedly engaged in legal and political confrontation with local and state agencies and polluting corporations. Its initial strategies were advocacy and opposition: advocate strong enforcement of command-and-control regulations and oppose any actions that might further degrade the bay. While it made its case in the court of public opinion, Save The Bay did not shy away from taking cases to the courts of legal enforcement.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 and the Clean Water Act of 1972 granted citizens important rights to participate in decision making and considerable leverage to compel compliance, but these were not power enough to protect and restore the bay on a long-term basis. For this, a broader civic strategy would be needed. Save The Bay thus began to identify common interests and to highlight the aesthetics of the bay and inland areas. Its new strategy emphasized the recreational and fishing uses available to all citizens and the need to preserve the environment for the children of the community. Rather than drawing stark lines between the evil polluters and the good guys in green hats, Save The Bay chose to downplay conflicting interests and ideologies and to avoid purely obstructionist methods that stopped short of solutions. It began to build new public relationships with boating and fishing groups, schools, civic associations, businesses, and regulators.
The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) itself began to encourage such a shift, as the Chesapeake Bay Program in 1983 and the National Estuary Program in 1987 provided a framework for local collaborative action with the aim of nurturing a "protective ethic" and a "sense of ownership" among the public. EPA's reasoning was that standardized, technology-based approaches provided very limited tools for protecting integrated ecosystems. Citizens needed to understand the consequences of their own actions, such as the use of lawn fertilizers and household chemicals, if nonpoint pollution was to be effectively reduced. And citizens needed to develop new sources of voluntary and collaborative action, because regulators could do only so much and could never generate sufficient legitimacy on their own to make the hard choices, such as passing major new bonds to upgrade sewage treatment systems.

Having established an independent organizational base and impressive educational capacities, Save The Bay positioned itself in the 1980s to become the lead organization for public education in the Narragansett Bay Project, for which EPA provided funds and technical assistance. EPA also helped Save The Bay to organize the first national conference of estuarine groups in 1987 to develop a detailed activist agenda for protection and restoration. In the years since, Save The Bay has developed substantial organizing, technical, and educational capacities, with a staff of twenty-nine and an annual budget of more than 1.5 million dollars. More than half of its funding comes from member contributions and program revenues. It now counts more than twenty thousand members and supporters, with an average of one thousand or so volunteering during any given year. It has an ambitious, volunteer Citizens Monitoring project, built partly upon existing citizen efforts on many ponds and rivers, that includes computerized mapping, a public hotline, training of volunteers, and the operation of the specially equipped Narragansett Baykeeper boat and crew, part of the national Keepers Alliance. Save The Bay's business outreach strategy has included a cooperative effort with local businesses to develop employee education and leadership initiatives to reduce toxics. It has developed an array of local projects in Rhode Island and western Massachusetts, which is part of the larger watershed.

Habitat restoration work became increasingly important for Save The Bay in the latter half of the 1990s, and it now combines sophisticated scientific capacities with direct work by citizens themselves. In its initial assessment of habitat health across the bay, it recruited nearly one hundred citizens from shellfishermen's associations, scuba diving clubs, neighborhood associations, land trusts, town councils, environmental advocacy groups, country clubs, "friends of the stream" groups, and local conservation commissions. They were trained to do local interviews with homeowners to reconstruct the history of salt marsh degradation over many decades. They collected old photographs and maps, and developed computer mapping and databases
through diving and aerial photography. Now these and other volunteers are engaged in restoration projects, such as growing and transplanting eelgrass, removing invasive plants, and doing periodic cleanups. Their stories of public work, of the “blood, sweat, and tears” shed in hauling sandbags and building fish ladders, inspire engagement well beyond what the staff itself is able to enlist.

Save The Bay also trains volunteer “docents” and classroom teachers to work with youth groups and schools on extensive environmental education at every level, using methods that include creative puppet shows and on-line games. Its new capital campaign aims to raise 6.5 million dollars to expand bay education centers around the state, with an emphasis on urban schools with minority and working-class populations. Without much broader public understanding of habitats, Save The Bay reasons, people will not engage in restoration on a sufficient scale, nor will they adequately pressure the state legislature to pass the habitat restoration bill with enough funding to enable citizens to do their work. Save The Bay also provides information to local families on environmentally sound yard care, household toxics reduction, and “green” energy choices within the new deregulated market. It nurtures civic friendships and celebrates community achievements through a continuous array of fairs, festivals, yacht races, bay swims, Mother’s Day sails, kayak tours, seal watches, and On the Dock of the Bay dances. Its innovative approaches have been featured in leading national and local newspapers, and it was awarded the seventy-sixth Point of Light by President Bush in 1989.

Save The Bay nonetheless continues to engage in building strong advocacy coalitions with local urban toxics groups and national organizations, such as the Environmental Defense Fund and the Conservation Law Foundation. In the interests of sustainable development with democratic stakeholder involvement, these coalitions stopped the recent Army Corps dredging project on the Providence River and the Quonset container port. As Curt Spalding, Save The Bay’s executive director, puts it, “As we move into the next century, advocacy for the bay will be much more than preventing more damage. It will be a process of repairing and restoring the vital connections between bay and community.” And for this, a “civic organizing strategy” based on education and restoration by citizens themselves “must come first.”

Save The Bay has thus developed a model of an independent citizen organization that can collaborate with regulatory agencies and industry without being coopted and can define its essential mission as ongoing civic education and the public work of restoration without losing the capacity to engage in conflict, if need be. Through a process of extended social learning, it has generated new civic capacities that build upon its organized power of advocacy, legal norms favoring public participation, and existing associational networks. Its own learning “on the ground,” so to speak, has ramified upward and outward to federal and state agencies and to other estuary and
watershed groups throughout the country. It has provided critical local experience and national advice in the policy-learning process that is manifest at EPA and other federal and state agencies, as well as among policy intellectuals, who urged much greater emphasis on place-based strategies during the 1980s, and then inscribed "community-based environmental protection" (CBEP) as central to reinventing environmental regulation during the 1990s. Along with its eleven regional coalition partners in Restore America's Estuaries, Save The Bay has shaped the basic policy design and advocacy strategy for the Estuary Habitat Restoration Partnership Act, which Senator John Chafee of Rhode Island was able to shepherd through the U.S. Senate before his death in 1999. This bill would require the Army Corps of Engineers to help build local capacity and work collaboratively with community groups in restoration projects.

In Rhode Island itself, Save The Bay was instrumental in passing the first mandatory curbside recycling law in the nation. It also campaigned successfully to democratize the selection process for the Coastal Resources Management Council, on which its own founder and former director, Dr. William Miner, served as chairperson during the 1980s. Trudy Coxe, executive director of Save The Bay during this period, brought its experience in civic environmental approaches to her later position as secretary of the executive office of environmental affairs in Massachusetts during the 1990s. She collaborated extensively with a statewide network of more than sixty watershed associations to develop the Massachusetts Watershed Initiative and worked with a national network of self-described "watershed innovators" to learn from best practices nationwide. Today, hundreds of watershed "associations," "councils," and "alliances" identify as part of a larger "watershed movement," and many share a vision of "watershed democracy" as a core component of effective problem solving and civic engagement.1

Communities Organized for Public Service

Our second tale comes from San Antonio, Texas. In the early 1970s Mexican Americans had become the majority of the city's population but remained shut out of the Anglo power structure and deprived of decent services. Their neighborhoods were deteriorating, and they were vulnerable to repeated floods that damaged property and killed residents as a result of the city's failure to invest in adequate drainage systems. When delegates from twenty-seven churches gathered in the summer of 1974 to address this problem, someone facetiously suggested that they call themselves COPS—"You know, they're the robbers, and we're the cops." Since they were engaged in a battle with the city's Public Service Board, another suggested that the "PS" could stand for real public service, and they thus fashioned the name Communities Organized for Public Service to fit the acronym. Behind this play-
ful inventiveness, however, was a serious attempt to innovate by coming to grips with the failures of previous organizing in San Antonio, including the antipoverty and Mexican American civil rights organizing supported by private foundations and the federal government during the previous decade. On another level, however, COPS represented a systematic effort by leaders of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the nation’s oldest community-organizing network, founded by Saul Alinsky in 1940, to reflect on the strengths and limits of its own organizing traditions, as well as those of other movement-based models that had emerged in subsequent years. Ernesto Cortés, Jr., who was in the swirl of Mexican American organizing in the 1960s, had returned to his native San Antonio after several years of training and organizing with the IAF in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Lake County, Indiana. He and other IAF leaders then began to redefine the core principles of a new organizing model based on deeply shared values of faith and family, and oriented to building long-term public relationships and leadership capacities in communities.

Over the next twenty-five years in San Antonio, COPS refined this model continuously. It has enriched its leadership training with a powerful mixture of biblical text, contemporary theology, and democratic theory, and it has articulated a robust conception of the citizen as more than mere voter, client, taxpayer, or consumer. It has expanded its network of Mexican American churches and has developed extensive collaboration with its predominantly African American sister organization on the east side of the city, Metro Alliance, which it helped to found. COPS’s organizing and voter registration work transformed the political culture of the city and made it possible in 1981 to elect its first Mexican American mayor, Henry Cisneros. It has helped to reverse the decay of the central city after decades of neglect. Close to one billion dollars of community development funds have been invested in the inner city for infrastructure and housing as a result of COPS’s innovative model of distributing Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds, which it does through a process of participatory planning and negotiation among COPS leaders from different neighborhoods and between them and city councilors from their respective districts. Increasingly, COPS has been able to leverage its organizational power, based on strident confrontational tactics in its early days, into complex collaborative projects with leaders in banking, industry, education, and politics.

In the 1990s, for instance, COPS and Metro Alliance developed a highly innovative job-training program called Project QUEST (Quality Employment through Skills Training) on the basis of what they describe as a “new social compact” founded on collaborative relationships among employers, workers, and the community, and a “culture of accountability, negotiations, respect, and compromise” forged over the preceding two decades of organizing. The design for Project QUEST grew out of an intensive research process
on models of job training and local labor markets, which a core committee of forty community leaders from COPS and Metro Alliance conducted with academic experts and others, such as former Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall. The process was designed to build productive relationships, not just to gain knowledge. It was complemented by extensive “house meetings” in which members of the community told stories of their own experiences in employment searches and the job-training system, especially in programs under the Job Training and Partnership Act (JTPA). These house meetings also built support for a design that would guarantee a specific number of jobs from local employers paying a living wage, secure stipends that would permit two years of training, and coordinate social services to support trainees through the rigorous process.

With strong community support and solid preliminary research, COPS and Metro Alliance leveraged the previous trust they had built with selected business leaders in campaigns on school reform and infrastructure improvement to convene a broader meeting on the future of employment in the city—the first such meeting in which employers themselves actually came together to exchange their views. COPS and Metro Alliance worked to identify the self-interest of employers—bankers interested in the continued general vitality of the city, health care employers concerned with filling skilled positions, and all employers interested in getting a supply of responsible trainees. To respond, COPS and Metro Alliance agreed to staff fifteen neighborhood centers with volunteers committed to doing eighteen thousand hours of outreach and initial screening in the first year alone. This effort would not only utilize relationships as a key source of information and continued personal support, but also build trainees’ sense of obligation to the community and promote a desire to give something back in return for the opportunity the community had created.

The struggle for funding was complex and leveraged a significant amount of CDBG funds controlled by COPS and Metro Alliance, as well as relationships built over time with Governor Ann Richards, City Council President Nelson Wolff, and leading bankers, such as Tom Frost, an early adversarial target of COPS in the 1970s. And while continued changes in labor markets have made it difficult to treat employers’ job pledges as anything more than moral commitments, Project QUEST has emerged as a broker of relationships among a variety of labor market institutions and actors, from employers and community colleges to churches and families. QUEST has catalyzed institutional changes, such as employer involvement in the design of training and the identification of future labor market needs. It has helped transform the relationship between the community college and employers, so that both are active partners in this process. It has also spurred extensive changes in curriculum design and flexibility to meet student needs and provide supportive team-building practices. In its first few years of operation, its results
have been substantial: annual salary increases between $4,923 and $7,457, compared to $900 for the typical trainee in JTPA programs, and success in moving single mothers off welfare. In that first meeting, recalls Virginia Ramirez, a COPS leader,

I realized all these important people were sitting there, and they had never talked to each other about what jobs were available. And I realized we had brought them all together to talk about jobs. I remember thinking, "Here's Virginia Ramirez, who a few years ago could only get a job sweeping floors. Most of our people never finished high school. And now we were telling these men how we are going to change the face of San Antonio." It was powerful, so powerful.²

Like Save The Bay, COPS has learned to leverage power based on effective advocacy into complex civic partnerships and innovative policy designs. As part of a larger IAF network, it has been able to diffuse innovative practices on the state and national level, as well as learn from other groups within the network. Several other national and regional networks of congregation-based community organizations have manifested similar developmental dynamics, sometimes borrowing lessons and models directly from IAF. Today, nearly two hundred such organizations are active in cities across the country, as are hundreds of other faith-based community development groups with different organizing models. They possess increasingly sophisticated training and funding supports and growing capacities for interracial community collaboration based on shared religious values and an organizing model that builds upon what unites people rather than what divides them. Theirs is a vision of collaborative citizen politics based on faith and the power of public relationships, rooted in ongoing reflection on the deepest traditions of American democracy. And, as both COPS and Save The Bay like to quote from the book of Proverbs, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."³

CONNECTING CITIZENS TO PUBLIC LIFE

Our task in this book is to understand such civic innovations as social learning extending over the past several decades and to explore their role in democratic revitalization. In recent years such learning has accelerated on a number of levels, even as the stresses on our democratic institutions have deepened. Indeed, a broader civic renewal movement has begun to emerge, with common language, shared practices, and networked relationships across a variety of arenas. When we first presented this argument in 1993, the debate on whether Americans’ stocks of social capital were in decline had not yet begun. We thus set the task of understanding this process of innovation not in response to a discovery of the possible erosion of social capital in American life but in response to an increasingly complex set of public problems that have proven resistant to traditional policy solutions and
institutional routines, and have elicited vigorous search and experimentation by ordinary citizens and civic associations, supported by professional practitioners within and outside government. The initial interviews Sirianni conducted in 1994 as research director of the Reinventing Citizenship Project, funded by the Ford Foundation and convened in conjunction with the Domestic Policy Council at the White House, provided further evidence for civic innovation. In attempting to understand the process, we invariably stand on the shoulders of those whose reflective practice has been driving it forward, and we hope to contribute to the policies and politics that might help innovations to flourish in the coming years.

At the same time, we are deeply aware of the many obstacles that exist and the great uncertainty—even profound disagreement—about what a vital civic democracy might mean at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The story we tell is thus not only one of innovation and learning, but also one of roadblocks and detours, struggles and failures. Some of these failures, to be sure, have provided occasion for further learning, but others demonstrate the difficulty of bringing innovations to scale, embedding them in policy design, and creating a politics that will sustain them. Much more work will be needed over the course of the next several decades if civic innovation and renewal are to have a major impact on American politics and public problem solving. Nonetheless, civic innovators from all walks of life have laid indispensable foundations upon which to build.

The dynamics of innovation are quite specific to each arena, as we shall see, yet they operate amid broader trends that shape the search for new forms of civic engagement. Perhaps the most important underlying trend is one that Ronald英格哈特 has identified in his extensive cross-national analyses of contemporary advanced industrial democracies. As he argues, the potential for political action among mass publics in the West has been gradually but steadily rising because the individual-level preconditions for participation have been increasing. These include dramatically higher education levels over the course of the last half-century, which enhance the skills citizens need to cope with political life and shift the balance in the distribution of these skills among elites and the general public. The increase in postindustrial job skills that favor autonomy, innovation, and collaborative problem solving in complex environments further add to this potential. Political information has also become much more available, and relative shifts in value priorities favor self-expression and the participation of women and other previously excluded groups. These changes underlie a long-term shift away from elite-directed modes of participation and towards elite-directing ones. While voter turnout may have declined, mass publics are "far from apathetic; these publics are becoming more active than ever in a wide range of elite-challenging forms of political participation."

In San Antonio, for instance, COPS was able to emerge because the
Catholic diocese was searching for ways to respond to the Vatican II (1962–65) mandate for lay participation, itself a response to long-term changes in values, education, and civic skills within church communities. Save The Bay not only drew upon new legal norms of participation in the environmental arena but could also leverage access to technical information and political skills among educated middle-class supporters to enable the organization to challenge regulators and industry on their own terms. A generation earlier, citizens in each of these arenas were not nearly as favorably situated relative to elites as they had become by the 1960s and 1970s.

This powerful underlying trend favoring participation, however, occurs amid the increasingly manifest limitations of a variety of organized forms for connecting citizens to public life. Indeed, the two are related in complex ways. Political parties, the regulatory state, and the welfare state are especially problematic. First of all, the profound and systemic disintegration of parties has continued for more than a century and is manifest in popular partisan dealignment and a declining capacity of parties to aggregate the interests of an increasingly diverse citizenry. The historical factors that account for party decline include the rise of a nonpartisan civil service, the shift from generalized distributive policies to new regulative channels, the emergence of the administrative presidency, and the increase in the number and activities of specialized, nonpartisan interest groups. This trend has been exacerbated by the post-1960s explosion of public interest and consumer groups capable of lobbying and setting agendas independent of party organizations, as well as by participatory reforms in party rules and changes in political means of communication that favor direct communication between candidates and voters independent of locally organized and party mediated interaction. Television advertising and polling techniques have played critical roles here. In the process, parties have been transformed largely into service organizations for candidates. Party loyalty has become increasingly conditional on performance, and “cognitively mobilized nonpartisans” are a growing group within the electorate.

Second, the New Deal regulatory state, characterized by industry capture, became delegitimated in both scholarly and public opinion alike in the 1960s, especially under the onslaught of new participatory claims. But the public lobby regulatory regime that succeeded it has come to manifest serious limits along a variety of dimensions. On the positive side, citizens have gained new rights of participation as a result of changes in administrative law and legislation that have accompanied the new social regulation. The proliferation of new citizen and public interest groups has permitted much greater precision in the representation of individual and group preferences through issue-oriented lobbying and has provided a more even balance in the pluralist representation of interests than existed previously. But the advocacy explosion has also manifested many drawbacks for democratic poli-
tices. It encourages a hyperpluralism driven by increasing incentives to organize and lobby along narrow interest and issue lines and to protect programs even when they may have outlived their usefulness. It displaces political discourse to narrow administrative arenas where complex procedural requirements and institutional coalitions among agencies, courts, congressional subcommittees, public interest groups, and industry lobbyists are much less comprehensible to the general public. Public interest groups often exacerbate the decline of trust in government because membership recruitment and mobilization emphasize not-yet-achieved goals, or even mandate unachievable standards, such as those in some environmental regulations which, when repeatedly unmet, breed public cynicism. Organizational incentives for public interest groups favor Washington-based and professionally driven lobbying over local engagement. And when they do mobilize locally, they tend to do so around narrow interests rather than broader forms of public deliberation and community building. As Robert Dahl has argued, the proliferation and fragmentation of interest groups that shape policy making has not yet been matched by a corresponding set of integrating political institutions that encourage conflicting groups to negotiate with one another, as well as with political actors more representative of the general public, in search of mutually beneficial policies.7

Third, while the crisis of the welfare state derives from a variety of sources, it is manifest in no small measure as a profound public disillusionment with the continued extension of professional dominance and client dependency. This view is due, in part, to the expansion of clinical authority in solving problems despite the relative intractability of many problems to therapeutic techniques. Social welfare policy and practice by government and non-profit agencies alike do not foster independent, responsible citizens or self-governing communities capable of mobilizing their own knowledge and associational assets. Policy for poor and disadvantaged communities, in particular, tends to be driven by a deficit model that focuses on the deficiencies of individuals and communities, rather than building upon the individual, associational, and institutional assets and networks that already exist. Categorical funding designed to address each specific "problem" with a matching "program" often results in a jerry-built and fragmented set of antipoverty bureaucracies and serviced neighborhoods whose programs are defended by their personnel even when they produce no appreciable improvement in the community's capacity to deal with its problems. As John McKnight argues, "As the power of profession and service system ascends, the legitimacy, authority, and capacity of citizens and community descend. The citizen retreats. The client advances."8

The "rights revolution," which defines nearly every public issue in terms of the legally protected rights of individuals and groups, has gone hand in hand with the expansion of the welfare state and the public lobby regula-
tory regime. Indeed, divided government and institutional fragmentation in the United States may have increased the competition for policy innovation that is filtered through a rights discourse. On a number of important levels, as many of our cases reveal, the rights revolution has helped to drive civic innovation. Procedural rights to participate have been critical, if often blunt, tools for broadening the range of stakeholders willing and able to collaborate in searching for new ways to solve public problems. And substantive rights claims, such as rights to housing and health care, which underlay struggles for community development and community health centers in poor neighborhoods, have contributed to local innovations that mobilize civic resources and relationships. Here we agree with Michael Schudson that “the rise of the rights-regarding citizen has done more to enhance democracy than to endanger it.” Nonetheless, a rights discourse often tends to frame issues as nonnegotiable and in no need of balance among relative costs and other worthy claims. The expansionary logic of rights that become translated into noncompetitive and open-ended entitlements conflicts with other crucial virtues of a civic republic, namely, responsibility and deliberation. Within this framework, citizens do not have to consider their own responsibilities and assets for solving problems or enhancing the broader public good and do not have to deliberate about costs and trade-offs involved in achieving their specific programmatic goals.

The risk of citizens becoming disjoined from public life comes, however, from yet another direction that may ultimately be the most corrosive of all: the market. To be sure, America has been a vital civic republic only to the extent that it has always been a vital commercial republic. When Save The Bay works with regulators and corporations on environmentally sustainable methods of production that can ensure dynamic market growth, and when COPS works with businesses to upgrade the skills of poor and working-class communities so that they can compete for postindustrial jobs, they opt for a commercial republic, albeit one more deeply embedded in a vital civic infrastructure. But in recent years, corporations have pushed decisions upwards, to national and global headquarters, and executives have fewer incentives to build relationships with particular communities. Unions have been weakened, and capital has become globally footloose, sometimes devastating local communities. The market can thus rend the very fabric of civic life upon which it once depended. And as some of our public institutions go through difficult struggles to restructure themselves, the metaphors of the market become increasingly dominant and threaten to turn nearly every public good into a consumer choice. Even our attempts to reinvent government invoke the language of “serving the customer” more often than “engaging the citizen” as a vital coproducer of public goods in a commonwealth.

Increasing awareness of the limitations of these ways of connecting citizens to public life underlies the search for ways to enrich and refine elite-
directing approaches to participation, especially by orienting them more toward deliberative democracy, community building, and collaborative problem solving among multiple stakeholder groups. Indeed, the growing social complexity, differentiation, and interdependence of postmodern societies generate increasing policy problems for which regulatory enforcement, programmatic entitlement, market incentive, and professional intervention are inadequate unless coupled with new forms of civic trust and cooperation. And many older forms of civic involvement also tend to be devalued in the face of increasing complexity and social differentiation, which raise the relative requirements of citizen expertise, the scope of relationships, and the cognitive preconditions for trust building, and increase the opportunities for “exit” to secure valued social goods. Civic innovation seeks to mobilize social capital in new ways, to generate new institutional forms, and to reinforce these through public policy designed for democracy. And it aims to provide citizens with robust roles—in their professional and nonprofessional roles, institutional and volunteer activities alike—for doing the everyday public work that sustains the democratic commonwealth.  

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CIVIC INNOVATION

Social capital refers to those stocks of social trust, norms, and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems. Networks of civic engagement, such as neighborhood associations, church groups, and sports clubs, represent important forms of social capital. The denser these networks, the more likely are members of a community to cooperate for mutual benefit, even in the face of persistent problems of collective action, because networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity by creating expectations that today’s favors will be returned later. These networks facilitate coordination and communication and thus create channels through which information about the trustworthiness of other individuals and groups can flow and be tested and verified. They embody past success at collaboration, which can serve as a cultural template for future collaboration on other kinds of problems. And they increase the risks to those who act opportunistically and so jeopardize their share in the benefits of current and future transactions. Social capital is productive. Two farmers exchanging tools can get more work done with less physical capital, and rotating credit associations can generate pools of financial capital for increased entrepreneurial activity. As a “moral resource,” social capital also tends to accumulate when it is used and be depleted when not, thus creating the possibility of both virtuous and vicious cycles that manifest themselves in highly civic—as well as terribly uncivic—communities.  

Civic innovation, as we use the term in this book, mobilizes social capital in ways that promote broad democratic norms, enhance responsible and in-
clusive citizenship, and build the civic capacities of communities and institutions to solve problems through the public work of citizens themselves, often in collaboration with various market, state, and professional actors and through policy designs that foster self-government. Indeed, civic innovation often emerges from the initiative of state actors or is sustained through various kinds of government supports—a pattern not dissimilar to earlier periods in the growth of civic associations in America, as Theda Skocpol has argued. And innovation often draws upon the expertise of “civic professionals,” ranging from the public administrators who collaborate with Save The Bay and the professional organizers who train local community leaders in COPS to the parish nurses in coalitions for healthy communities and the civic journalists transforming their newsroom practice in profound ways.

Our treatment of civic innovation is thus broader than that arising strictly “from the bottom up” but is also delimited quite intentionally. It draws upon certain traditions within normative democratic theory, as well as upon specific analytic frameworks for understanding the problems of democratic institutions, viable communities, and effective policies in the contemporary United States. We do not cast the net so broadly as to include all forms of social capital, each dimension of civil society, or every mode of citizen participation. Why do we make the choices that we do?

One reason, of course, is that not all forms of social capital lend themselves well to public problem solving, and some forms work in the opposite direction by fostering deep distrust of outsiders or fundamentalist beliefs that brook no compromise with adversaries. The world is filled with forms of social capital that promote ethnic hostility and erode capacities for democratic governance. It is also replete with social capital that lies relatively dormant as a resource for democratic politics or community problem solving. Thus, the organizational forms and strategies for mobilizing social capital matter a great deal. COPS represents an important civic innovation, for instance, because it mobilizes religious norms and church networks—and, through the latter, family networks—in such a way as to increase the power of disadvantaged communities in the larger polity, build trust across racial boundaries, develop new forms of collaboration with other political and institutional actors, and generate policy and program designs that enhance human capital in the face of a changing postindustrial economy. Civic innovations in health, environment, and social services also mobilize the social capital of congregations to develop new problem-solving capacities. But many congregations, while performing important functions, have not made their social capital available for community problem solving on a broader scale, and some have mobilized so as to make collaboration with diverse others extremely difficult.

The same can be said for other kinds of social capital. Some neighborhood associations function primarily to maintain exclusivity, while others become broadly representative, collaborate with all sorts of civic, community devel-
opment, and environmental groups, and even evolve into citywide systems with formal powers of spending and governance. Some sporting clubs remain focused on recreation, while others take upon themselves larger tasks of conservation and restoration, and work in complex partnerships with environmental groups, agricultural associations, businesses, and public agencies. We do not mean to deny that those associations with less ambitious or explicitly public tasks do many good things or provide a reservoir of trust, norms, and networks available for various challenges of social cooperation. The youth soccer league that is just a soccer league can still teach kids the value of teamwork and respect for diverse skill levels and cultural backgrounds, and it can still link parents in ways that may prove helpful for addressing other community problems. As active (if not always competent) soccer coaches ourselves, we know this. Our focus here, however, remains on those forms of social capital that are mobilized for broader tasks of civic collaboration.¹⁶

We also delimit the story of civic innovation in this book by not including new social movements or public interest groups per se, though clearly by any comprehensive and purely descriptive classification they represent important innovations within civil society in recent decades. To be sure, new social movements such as the environmental movement and public interest groups such as the Sierra Club play an important role in our story. As we have noted, public interest groups expand citizen representation and power considerably. And movements generate new values, identities, and networks critical for civic innovation. They creatively disrupt set ways of seeing and doing, mobilize new power resources, and win new rights to participate, without which other kinds of civic innovation would often be unable to emerge. Thus, social movements and public interest groups play an important role in the social learning processes we analyze. Nonetheless, public interest groups also contribute to problems of governance and often constrain or displace effective community problem solving. And movements can generate the kinds of value fundamentalism and fragmented identities that impede those collaborative and deliberative designs at the heart of our story, which emerge often as a way of moving beyond the perceived limits of existing movement approaches.¹⁷

We do not wish, however, to draw the boundaries too rigidly. Many forms of civic environmentalism, for instance, emerge within the broader environmental movement, even as they challenge some of its emphases. Some community innovations draw from the relational organizing legacies of feminism, even as they have little or no formal connection with women’s organizations or agendas. Many leading innovators formed their core civic identities in a range of participatory democratic movements of the past four decades, even as they later significantly revised their action frames and practices. And many of the innovations upon which we focus have come to adopt movement labels and traits themselves. This is true for the “watershed movement,” the “community development movement,” the “healthy communi-
ties movement," and the "civic journalism movement." To complicate our story still further, we analyze an emergent "civic renewal movement" and make an argument for building this further as a way of rechanneling some of the vital democratic energies of recent social movements while holding in check some of their more problematic features.

What role can civic innovation play, however, if overall trends show a serious depletion of stocks of social capital in the United States over the past several decades and if Americans are increasingly "bowling alone," as Robert Putnam has argued? For Putnam, many measures of formal associational membership show clear declines. Participation in church-related groups and regular attendance at church services are down by at least one-fifth over the past twenty years. The percentage of parents involved in Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) or unaffiliated parent-teacher organizations has suffered substantial decline since the 1960s. Union membership has steadily eroded since the 1950s, falling to less than half its peak. Membership in the General Federation of Women's Clubs is down by 59 percent since 1964, and in the League of Women Voters by 42 percent since 1969. And membership in fraternal organizations like the Elks, Lions, and Jaycees is also down significantly. Especially worrisome is the collapse of the activist membership core of civic organizations of all sorts, which witnessed a 45 percent drop from 1985 to 1994 alone. Thus, as Putnam argues, by this measure "nearly half of America's civic infrastructure was obliterated in barely a decade." Neither self-help groups nor social movements have effectively counteracted these trends. The former are not closely associated with other forms of community involvement, and the latter have generally resulted in professionalized, direct-mail organizations with little or no active membership. Even when mass membership in "tertiary" organizations that do not rely on face-to-face interaction among members, such as the Environmental Defense Fund, are included, as well as professional associations that have increased along with rising occupational levels, total associational membership has declined significantly between 1974 and 1994 within all educational categories. Other forms of associational ties, such as family and informal neighborhood socializing, have also eroded, as has generalized social trust, which is highly correlated with associational membership.18

Deep social changes underlie these trends, according to Putnam. Women's increasing entry into the labor force makes them less available for community activities, and suburban sprawl draws people away from local involvements. But the biggest factors are the technological shifts in leisure that lead to the private listening and viewing habits associated with the walkman, the CD player, and especially television, and the replacement of the generation whose civic identities were formed by the World War II ethos of national unity and patriotism. But even if some of the other causes are still uncertain, he argues, "Every year over the last decade or two, millions of citizens more have