1998 Ithiel De Sola Pool Lecture: The UnCivic Culture: Communication, Identity, and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics

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Source: *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Dec., 1998), pp. 740-761
Published by: American Political Science Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/420711
Accessed: 02-10-2016 13:33 UTC

The UnCivic Culture: Communication, Identity, and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics*

by
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It is a great honor to deliver the Ithiel de Sola Pool Lecture. Ithiel Pool was one of the grand visionaries of the modern social sciences. As a founder of the field we call political communication, he traced the great outlines of communication and politics from printing to electronic media. The evolution of these *technologies of freedom,* as he called them (Pool 1983), introduced a "soft determinism" into the course of human history by enabling vast numbers of decentralized transactions to cross the globe with fewer limits imposed by time, space, politics, or culture.

In thinking about the advancement of human freedom, Pool was pessimistic about governments and optimistic about individuals. He understood that governments routinely make monumental policy errors with new technologies—errors often based on little more than the unwitting categorization of new media. Among the policy blunders that most distressed Pool was the (continuing) distinction between print and electronic media based on dubious economic and technological notions of channel scarcity rather than more fundamental political notions of individual access and content diversity. Such category mistakes[1] have resulted in cumbersome governmental intrusions that, variously, inhibit the development of integrated communication systems, create monopolies in the name of protecting the weak, and, ultimately, restrict freedom of individual choice, access, and privacy (Pool 1983, 226–51).

Yet, Pool also saw human invention and individual resistance as powerful forces acting against controlling or blundering governments. In his reading of history, the desire of individuals to freely communicate ideas ultimately transcends the capacity of governments to suppress and regulate. In his last work, Pool looked into a future that is now our present. Before most people imagined owning a personal computer, Pool imagined a revolution in electronic communication that could free people from the political limits of nation states and the social groups and institutions within them.

Today, a cottage industry of academics is at work assessing the challenge to coherent societies and effective governments presented by the breakdown of broadly shared social and political experience, and the rise of personalized realities. Robert Putnam, who delivered the inaugural Pool lecture three years ago, closed with a reflection upon Pool's (1990, 262) final prediction that new technologies and uses of communication "will promote individualism, and will make it harder, not easier, to govern and organize a coherent society." Putnam concluded his lecture with a call to consider not only how technology "is privatizing our lives . . . but to ask whether we entirely like the result, and if not, what we might do about it" (1995, 681).

One of the great debates of our time is whether civic cultures based in the stable group formations of both pluralist and corporatist polities are dying. For the sake of time and argument, I will provisionally accept the evidence of declining traditional group memberships in various democratic societies, particularly the United States. The important question, it seems to me, then becomes "What political significance should we assign to these trends?" In order to answer this question it is necessary to determine the extent to which group membership declines contribute to the demise of civic cultures—as defined by various measures of individual political engagement. Perhaps most importantly, since communication has been implicated in the transformation of society and politics, researchers also need to specify the causal role played by communication technolo-

Job seekers wait in line at the Brooklyn, New York, unemployment office, the nation's busiest. © Robert Fox, Impact Visuals

gies in the transition to less coherent societies and more individualistic politics.

To determine the reciprocal influences of social structure, communication, and democracy, I have collected and analyzed a variety of data on the political, social, and economic experiences of Americans over the past thirty years. The following questions guide this work.

- Do declines in group memberships and collective political identifications necessarily lead to individual-level disengagement from politics and community?
- What explanation for changing group memberships and identities best illuminates new patterns of politics that may be replacing the old?
- Are the uses of communication that dominate our politics better understood as causes or products of social and political fragmentation?
- Do declines in group membership and collective identification signal a coming crisis of democracy, or is this worry a nostalgic response to political change and, in the academic case, to paradigms lost?

Evidence for the Political Disengagement Thesis

Putnam, in his impressive 1995 description of the disengagement problem in the United States, presents compelling evidence of a steady group membership decline among all generations coming of age since the 1940s. In addition, Putnam shows that both the overall magnitude and the generational differences in group decline have sharpened since the 1970s, with successive younger generations joining groups and trusting others far less than their elders.

Within these broad trends, Putnam also acknowledges three anomalies for which his eventual explanation cannot fully account. First, both older and younger generations experienced decreases in group membership and trust as they moved through the 1972-94 time period. Second, group decline was inexplicably steep for all age cohorts in the 1980s. Despite the overall decrease in group memberships among Americans of all ages in the recent period, Putnam maintains that the puzzling pattern of generational difference holds; fewer young people join and stay in groups than older people (Putnam 1995, 673-74). The third and most challenging anomaly is that women's membership in groups has declined at nearly twice the rate of men (Putnam 1995, 670). I will reconsider these anomalies later, in light of the alternative explanation developed below.

For the moment, however, suffice it to say that Putnam's data are generally convincing on the points that recent generations of Americans have joined fewer groups, displayed lower social trust, and voted less than members of older generations. The now-familiar argument is that the decline of groups has undermined civic engagement, or, put another way, weakened the connections that people establish to each other and to the lives of their communities. This disengagement, in turn, undermines trust in others, and ultimately enters politics through the depletion of the "social capital" on which individuals base effective and satisfying political participation. 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" (1995, 664-65). The idea that social capital is a generalizable aspect of political culture is strengthened by its adaptation from a comparative analysis of the Italian case (Putnam 1993).[2]

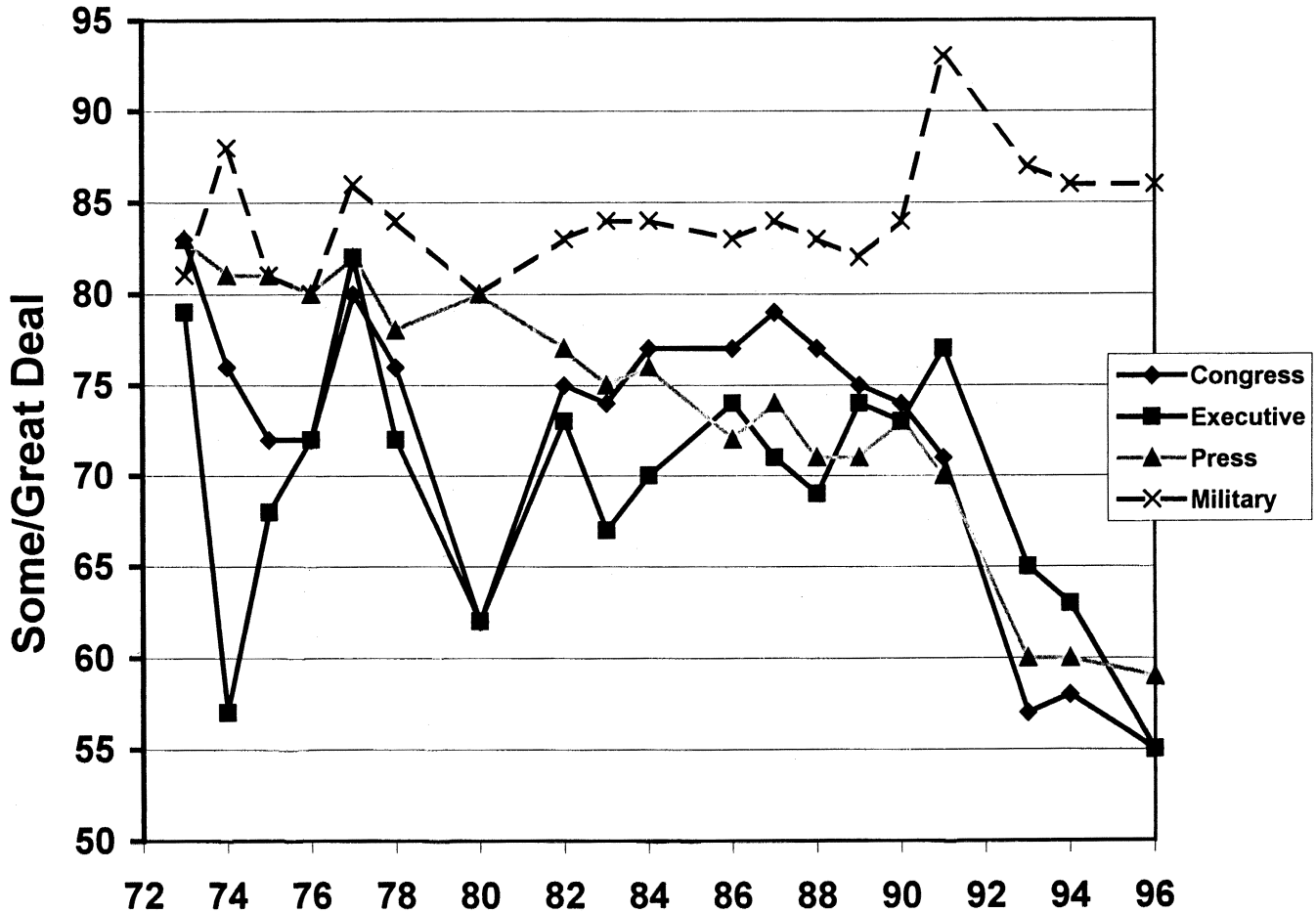
Other observers of contemporary politics have recorded a host of seemingly related trends that include:

- declines in the internal coherence of, interest aggregating capacities of, and citizen identification with political parties (Burnham 1982; Wattenberg 1994)
- intergenerational declines in political party loyalties and national identification among postwar birth cohorts in Western Europe and the United States (Inglehart 1997, 304–05, 311)[3]
- sharp intergenerational declines in the U.S. across six cohorts (from New Deal to post baby boom) in levels of social trust, knowledge, national identification, and voter turnout (Rahn 1998; Rahn and Transue 1997)[4]
- public cynicism and dissatisfaction with government and politics (Cappella and Jamieson 1997)
- culture wars and moral politics creating animosities among citizens and anger at government (Gitlin 1995; Hunter 1991)
- legitimation problems (Merelman forthcoming) or crises (Habermas 1989).

Additionally, confidence in the leadership of key institutions, from parties to entire branches and agencies of government, has also gone into steep decline. Figure 1 summarizes trends in public confidence in leaders of various institutions as recorded by the General Social Survey (GSS). Figure 2, based on Times Mirror Surveys (TMS), presents a fine-grained picture of steep increases in disaffection with elected officials, government management, government control of our lives, encounters with federal agencies, and government attempts to regulate business. In short, with the exception of positive feelings about the military, attitudes about government and the press have turned increasingly negative over the last several decades.

Although these trends seem to indicate dire problems for democracy, there are reasons to resist leaping to this conclusion. Beneath these superficial signs of citizen withdrawal are indications of more complex realities. Note, for example, that the declines in Figure 1 are anything but steady. The dips in confidence prior to the last decade correspond in time to institutional crises or policy failures such as Watergate and the Iran hostage crisis, and indicate an attentive and engaged public. Also note that during these earlier declines, high confidence in the press counterbalanced low confidence in particular institutions, suggesting that the media were given credit

Figure 1
Confidence in Leaders of National Institutions



Source: General Society Survey, 1973–1996.

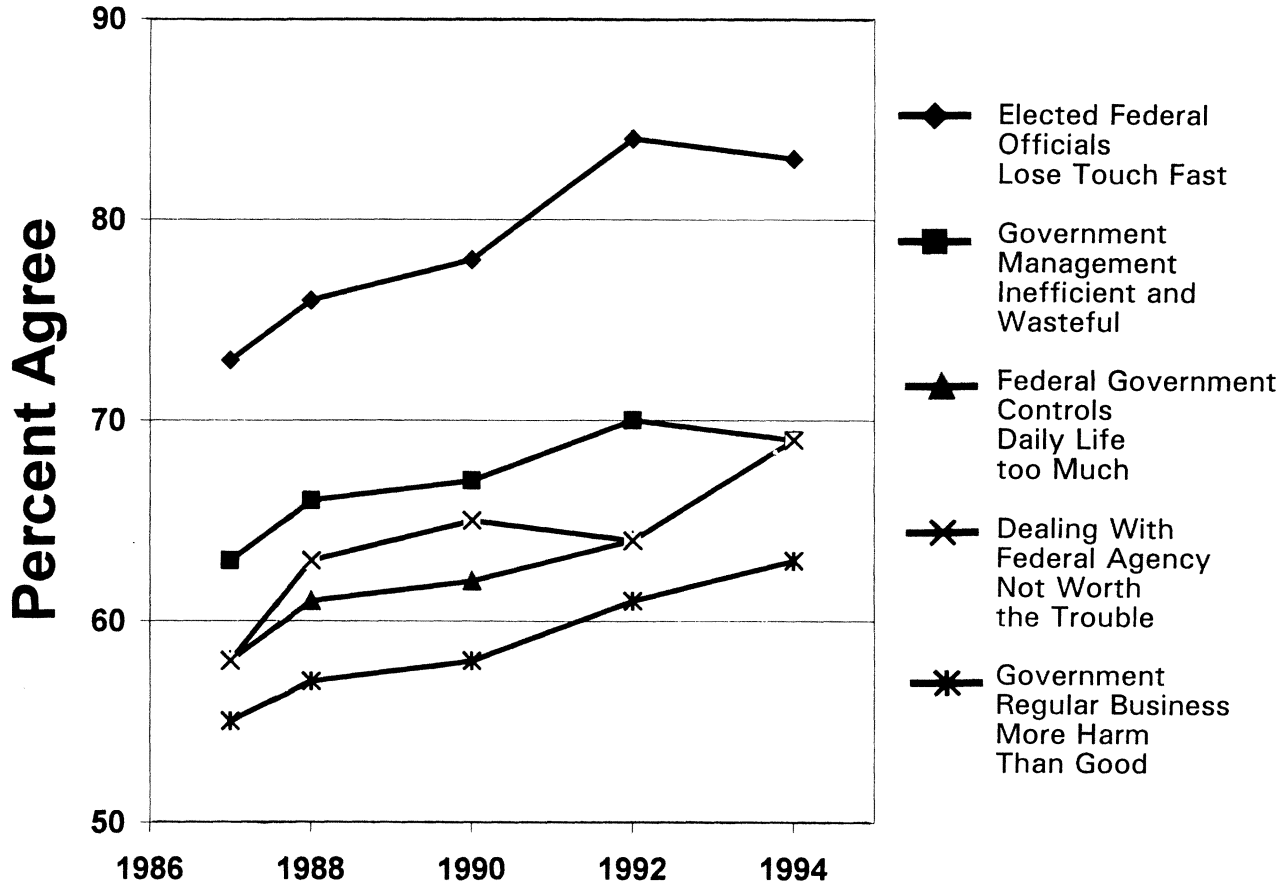
for bringing serious institutional or policy failures to public attention. These are less the signs of a long-detached public than of a public realistically engaged with the political performance of its governing institutions. As for the impressive spiral of lowering confidence since the late 1980s, I will present evidence that this pattern, too, represents something other than sweeping political disengagement. For now, I will return to the decline thesis.

Based on various indicators of growing political disengagement and the strong generational effects, Putnam argues that some substantial social change must have hit society with a sudden, sweeping impact. This mysterious "social X-ray," as he calls it, split the future citizenry from the norms and practices of what he refers to as the long "civic generation, born roughly between 1910 and 1940" (1995, 675–76). The impact on these recent generations "permanently and increasingly rendered them less likely to connect with the community" (1995, 676). After grilling an impressive list of suspects in his detective story, Putnam indicts television as the culprit. It was TV that entered the lives of the first post-civic generation in the 1950s, hit society full force during the 1960s, and changed the time allocations and social orientations of entire generations of Americans who entered adult life from the 1970s onward.

The idea that the sheer presence of TV has increasingly consumed the time, social motivation, and civic spirit of those born after its saturation of society may strike many communication scholars as naïve or theoretically underdeveloped. However, scholars have attributed various ills of democracy, if not to the sheer presence of television, to specific political uses of the ubiquitous electronic medium. For example, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) have shown that news coverage portraying politics as a game played by cynical insiders with little social concern breeds cynicism in audiences. Patterson's (1993) analysis suggests that the game schema for news coverage appeared at the scene of the crime in the late 1960s, about the time that Putnam marks the death of the civic generation. Thus, even if the sheer intrusion of TV into society may be an opaque explanation, there is a large sympathetic literature on how its content and uses have had deleterious effects on public perceptions of politics and social problems.

In an impressive effort to sort out the impact of TV on participation, Pippa Norris (1996) showed that overall hours of television viewing are associated with lower

Figure 2
Attitudes about Elected Officials and Federal Government



Source: Times Mirror Surveys, 1987–1994.

participation along a number of measures. However, viewing of news and public affairs programs correlated positively with the same measures of participation. Although the correlation coefficients are significant for both patterns, they tend to be relatively small. Norris demonstrated that trying to untangle the effects of TV on participation results in a complicated picture that is less clear or sweeping than Putnam's thesis.

In my view, the muddle over the political impact of television can be clarified best by considering an alternative account that both explains the anomalies in Putnam's analysis and shows us where to look for evidence of continued civic and political engagement. In my alternative account, the simple advent of television is not responsible for the changes in society. Moreover, what is changing about politics is not a decline in citizen engagement, but a shift away from old forms that is complemented by the emergence of new forms of political interest and engagement. In this alternative scenario, television and related media of political communication are implicated in various political crimes and misdemeanors, but the murder of civic culture is not one of them. In fact, according to the evidence I have found, civic culture is not dead; it has merely taken new identities, and can be found living in other communities.

The Logic of an Alternative Account

Many complaints have been lodged against the tube and its deleterious uses. I have contributed my share of media criticism (Bennett 1996). Yet a crucial distinction needs to be made between naming television as the primary causal force in a broad theory of social and political change, and identifying the symbolic uses of television that may shape the perceptions of people whose societies are fragmenting for deeper social and economic reasons.

According to the evidence I have found, civic culture is not dead; it has merely taken new identities, and can be found living in other communities.

Consider the possibility that TV is the red herring in our mystery story, the strong and tempting scent that

leads investigators off the more difficult and confounding trail of clues. Once again, accepting this does not mean that TV and the proliferating uses of electronic communication are unimportant in politics. Strategic communication techniques, news formats, and political advertising can shape perceptions, set policy agendas, and overdramatize the failings and vulnerabilities of policies, governments, leaders, and parties.[5] TV may even serve as a therapeutic complement to Prozac for the economically stressed and the socially dislocated. However, these effects are all theoretically separable from television's being the primary cause of group decline, much less, political disengagement.

How might the main trail of evidence be rediscovered? First, it is helpful to question the common wisdom that declines in confidence, identification, and participation surrounding traditional governing institutions necessarily reflect generalized political disengagement. A reluctance to leap to this conclusion permits considering evidence that the withdrawal from traditional institutional politics may entail a more selective and rational process—and one that is far more tuned in politically—than implied by accounts of a social and political withdrawal induced by watching too much TV. Recent analyses of panel data on work and individual lifestyle trends point to a different explanation for both the declines in group memberships and for growing popular criticisms of traditional institutional politics. The core elements of this explanation, as elaborated and referenced in the sections that follow, are these:

- Social and economic changes have most affected recent generations entering the labor force, disrupting social and family roles, flexibility in time budgets, and conceptions of self and society.
- Related shifts in values and interests feed widespread concerns about the relevance of traditional institutional politics.
- Despite the drop in formal group memberships, people continue to engage each other through volunteer work and loosely organized networks.
- Despite doubts about the role of government, people continue to be involved politically with lifestyle issues including environmental politics, health and child care, crime and public order, surveillance and privacy, job security and benefits, the organization of work, retirement conditions, morality in public and private life, the control and content of education, civil rights in the workplace, the social responsibility of corporations, and personalized views of taxation and government spending.[6]

Instead of witnessing the death of civic cultures, many nations may be experiencing the rise of more neutral political forms that might be termed "uncivic," in that they are not adequately described by the rise of antipolitics, antipublic life, or antigovernment sentiments. Adopting a more neutral term enables us to see that the uncertainty, social dislocation, and anger that are characteristics of change can coexist with high levels of political interest, substantive engagement, and the search for new political forms.

What is most distinctively uncivic about this emerging culture is the disappearance of standing cadres of civic groups ready to mobilize when leaders sound the political call. Replacing traditional civil society is a less conformist social world of the sort that Pool (1990) envisioned in which individuals were liberated from the grasp of governments: a society characterized by the rise of networks, issue associations, and lifestyle coalitions facilitated by the revolution in personalized, point-to-point communication.

The great dilemma of this new order may, indeed, be a sort of "governing crisis" based on difficulties in representing the interests of, and making policies for, publics that emerge from shifting lifestyle groups.[7] Fans of the nation-state, with its grand public projects and corresponding citizen obligations, may condemn any move away from this advanced form of human political order. However, Pool and many others would recall the catastrophic oppressions of nations and their ghastly expressions of collective political identity, and urge scholars and citizens to celebrate the liberation of individuals to create more sensitive and expressive forms of democracy.

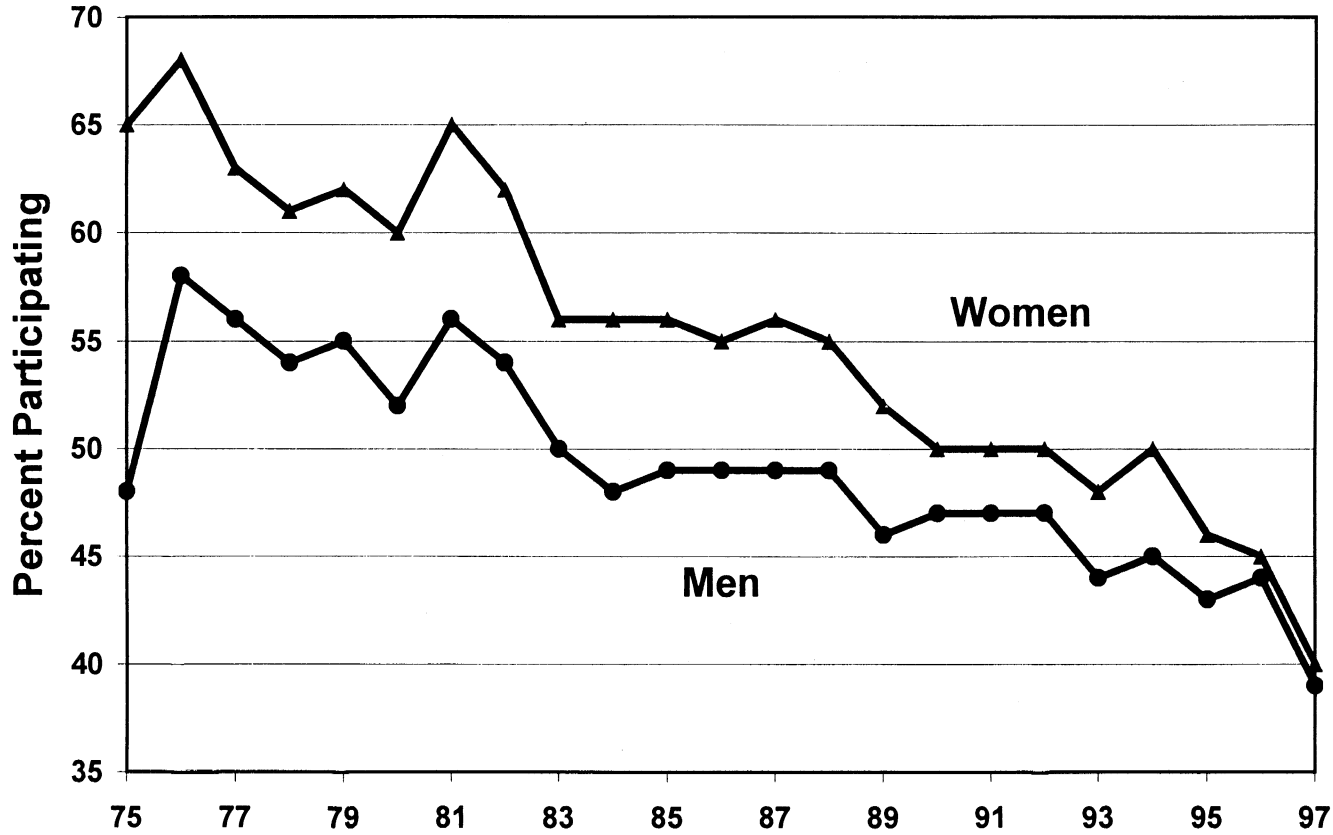
A core question for both sides of this debate is whether declining group affiliations and collective political identifications necessarily reflect a basic disengagement of individuals from their political affairs. In the next section, I introduce evidence that political engagement, while changing and unsettled, is not in decline. I then document an economic explanation for social fragmentation that is consistent with continued strong individual political engagement. In the concluding sections, I revisit questions about the place of communication in politics, and address potential problems confronting citizens in more voluntary, less socially rooted polities.

The Evidence for Political Engagement

A number of indicators of continuing political engagement warn against easy acceptance of a general decline thesis. Among these factors are the following.

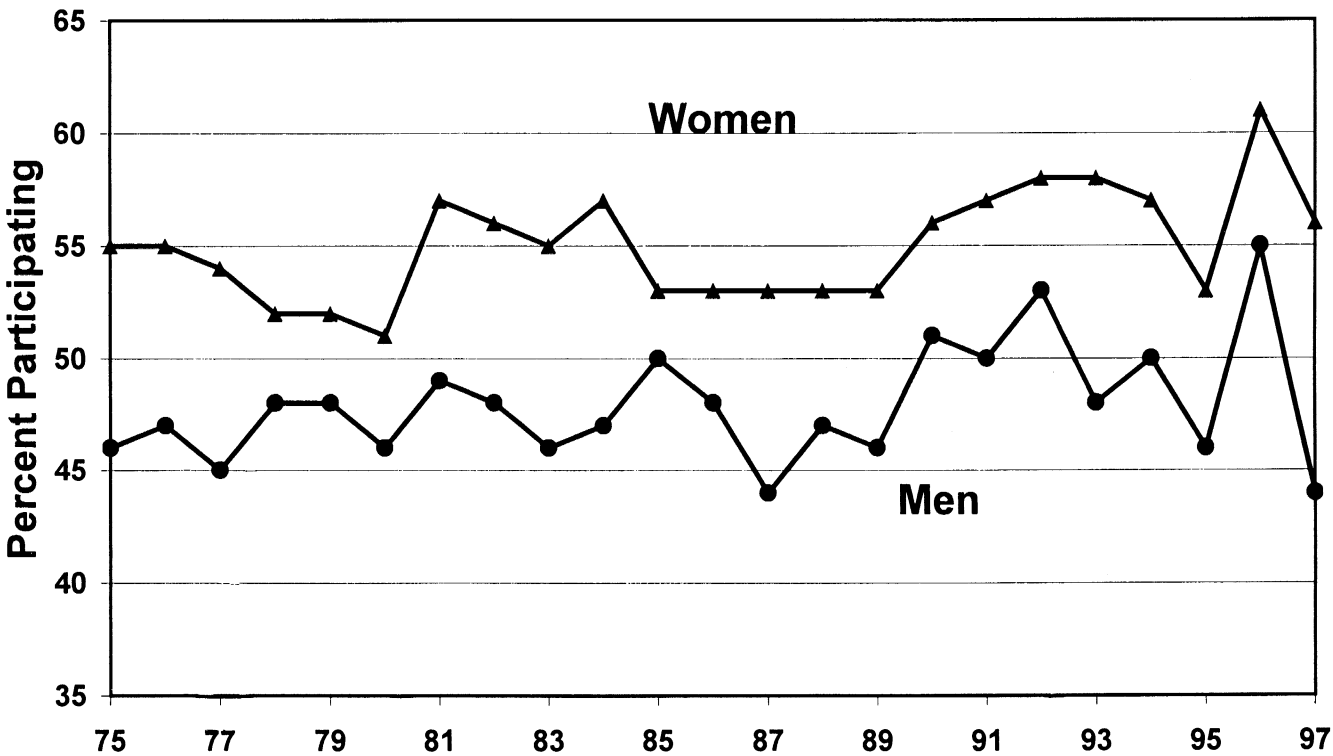
- Group memberships may have declined, but other important forms of civic engagement have not.
- Public support has dropped for politicians and governing institutions, but interest in politics, both local and national, remains high.
- Most citizens report strong differences between levels of satisfaction with their country, and satisfaction with their communities and personal lives.
- Those who continue to participate in traditional politics exhibit stability and substance in electoral choice, opinion formation, and policy deliberation.
- Alarms about broad-based political disengagement are dampened by increases in various forms of lifestyle politics

Figure 3A
Organized Group Activities



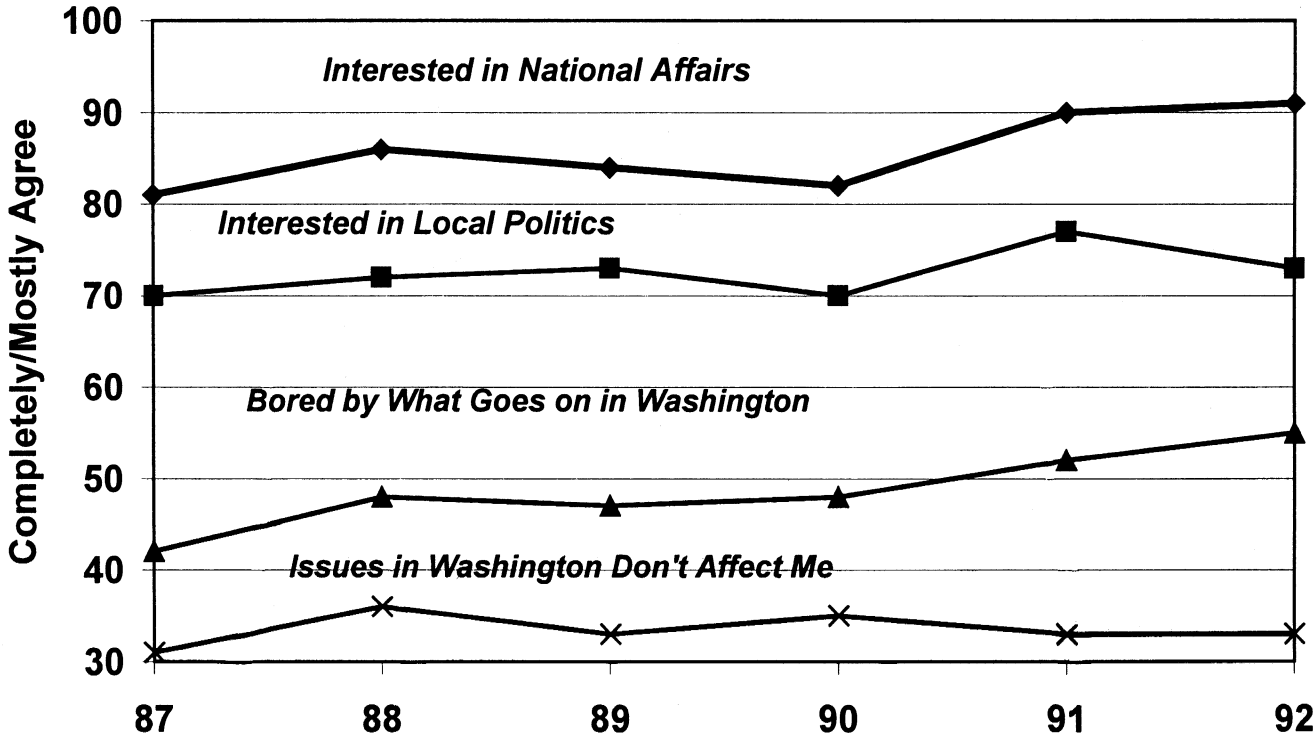
Source: DDB Needham Life Style Studies, 1975–1997.

Figure 3B
Volunteer Activities



Source: DDB Needham Life Style Studies, 1975–1997.

Figure 4
Interested in Politics, Bored by Washington



Source: Times Mirror Surveys, 1987–1992.

- Incivility begins at home: Lifestyle issues are highly personal, leading to direct and even confrontational personal solutions over governmental ones.

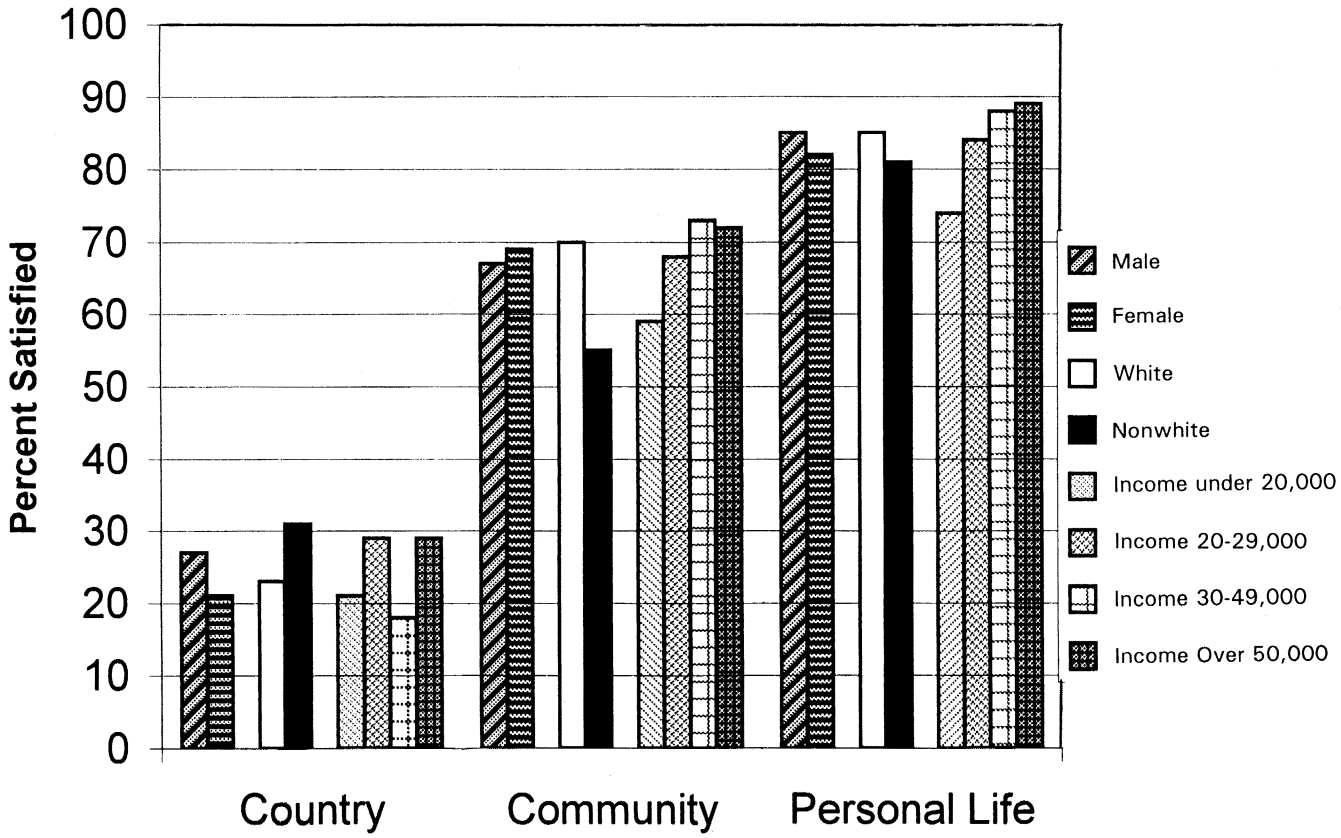
Group Decline in the Context of Strong Volunteerism

One of the prime indicators of civic health since at least Tocqueville's (1945) observations on democracy in America has been voluntary association. A number of recent studies suggest that people are volunteering both politically (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) and socially (Morin 1998) at rates undiminished over the entire period of purported civic decline. Some studies (see Morin 1998) even report that as much as 60% of the population engages in volunteer activities each year. Since such self-reported data can be inflated by demand characteristics of one-time surveys, it is important to interpret them conservatively. A fascinating data source is the DDB Needham Life Style Studies (hereafter DDBN), which have tracked lifestyle characteristics of large panels of respondents in the U.S. from 1975 to 1997.[8] As the trends shown in Figure 3A indicate, both men and women report substantial decreases in organized group memberships (as indicated by reported attendence of club meetings), with the steepest decline reported by women. Stopping the analysis here would seem to favor the civic disengagement thesis. However, Figure 3B shows that levels of volunteering for women and men (as indicated by reported volunteer work) have actually increased (with fluctuations corresponding to economic cycles) over the period charted by these studies.

Similar trends in volunteer activity have also been documented in a series of five Gallup surveys conducted between 1987 and 1995. These polls show that both the percentage of the population volunteering (54.4%) and the percentage of households making charitable financial contributions (75%) peaked during the recession of 1989–91, and returned to stable ten-year averages afterward (Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1996, 1–2). Steady averages of over four volunteer hours per week further suggest that Americans have continued to engage in these most fundamental civic acts despite their withdrawal from more organized group activities. These data do not paint a picture of selfish Americans walled off from each other inside their electronic bunkers. Rather, they suggest that something has happened that makes structured groups less attractive to citizens leading increasingly complex, individualistic lifestyles.

Even more to the point of an economic change explanation is that group memberships have declined roughly twice as much for women as for men, while levels of volunteer activity for women have remained higher than for men across the entire period. Since women have entered the workforce in large numbers in recent years, it seems reasonable to interpret these data as less indicative of civic disengagement and more indicative of *lifestyle engagement.* Busy people (and working women are the busiest of people) can better adapt personal schedules to volunteer activities than to the more arbitrary rhythms of organized groups.[9]

Figure 5
Satisfaction with Country, Community, and Personal Life



Source: Times Mirror Survey, 1994.

Low Support for Politicians and Governing Institutions, High Interest in Politics

The civic decline thesis assumes generalized disinterest in politics. Interest in politics is a slippery concept to measure and interpret.[10] Reports of declining interest are generally based on single, poorly worded survey questions that invite respondents to conflate feelings about government and leaders with concerns about society and policy. By contrast, more carefully worded questions indicate that disaffection is specific to Washington and the politics within government institutions, and that interest in both national affairs and local politics remain high. Figure 4 presents data from a series of Times Mirror surveys illustrating these patterns (Times Mirror 1995).[11] These data show that people's rising boredom with Washington has not diminished either their level of interest in politics or their sense that what happens in Washington is important.

Satisfaction with the Country Is Low, but Satisfaction with Communities and Personal Lives Is High

The decline thesis asserts that people have become generally negative and disaffected from society. If this is true, one might reasonably assume that people's disaffection applies particularly to their respective localities, in which now-dying civic groups once engendered trust and engagement. As shown in Figure 5, Times Mirror data indicate that people are generally satisfied with their communities and personal lives (Times Mirror 1994). Dissatisfaction is focussed on the way things are going in the country. This suggests a sense of disconnection between society and government more than a generalized negativity and disengagement from politics.

Figure 5 also shows that the lowest levels of satisfaction with the country as a whole are reported by individuals earning between $30,000 and $49,000 per year. This is the group that has experienced the greatest dislocations in work life and related social roles over the last several decades, as I explain in the next section. Such social disruption, however, does not imply generalized despair or negativity, as indicated by the high levels of personal satisfaction in the same demographic group. The implication, once again, is simply that the new concerns of lifestyle politics are more personal and local than national and governmental in scope and relevance.

Traditional Participation Continues to Display Stability and Substance

Declines in voting and confidence in institutions are consistent with a growing sense that formal government solutions are either ineffective or irrelevant for many

lifestyle concerns. At the same time, when citizens decide to participate in electoral politics and public deliberations, they do so with remarkable continuity in the substantive considerations underlying their judgments. In his instant classic, "Monica Lewinsky's Contribution to Political Science," Zaller (1998a) argued persuasively that political engagement and the politics of substance were alive and well in the late 1990s. He demonstrated that despite the sensationalized media coverage of the Lewinsky affair, public opinion responded with sensitivity and restraint to various issues of presidential culpability, presidential job performance, and appropriate punishments for possible crimes and indiscretions. Elsewhere, Zaller (1998b) has extended this argument to voting behavior, and shown that the substantive bases of electoral choice have remained remarkably stable over the past fifty years. Such claims about the politics of substance draw on a rich literature documenting responsible citizen engagement despite possible deficiencies in institutions or information systems (Fiorina 1981; Gamson 1992; Page and Shapiro 1992; Page 1996; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Brody 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).[12]

Increases in Various Forms of Lifestyle Politics

Critics of the "politics of substance" argument may point out that the coherence of participation is of little consequence in an era when the frequency, importance, and legitimacy of electoral politics are declining. Yet, as the scope of traditional politics decreases, the scope of "politics by other means" in both the United States (Ginsberg and Shefter 1990) and in other democratic nations appears to be increasing. For example, Inglehart cited World Values, Euro-Barometer, and European Community surveys that give evidence of citizens' reduced confidence in most state institutions, greater dissatisfaction with the way democracy works, and diminished pride in nationality (there are notable exceptions in this last indicator), *and* increased individual interest in politics, higher frequency of political discussions with friends, rises in petition signing, and increased support for boycotts, demonstrations and other forms of direct action (1997, 298–305, 307–23).

According to Inglehart (1997, 295), these trends reflect a transition away from the collective politics of the post-World War II decades, in which mass publics were focused on broad issues of economic growth and national security. When such matters produced conflict, central governing institutions were useful arenas in which to forge compromises. By contrast, post-1960s (and, Inglehart argued, post-materialist) concerns such as affirmative action, abortion, and the rights of sexual minorities are issues about which large publics are either disinterested or unalterably divided. Either way, the impossibility of compromise has undermined support for many institutional remedies.[13]

Incivility Begins at Home: Lifestyle Issues Favor Personal, Even Confrontational Solutions over Governmental Ones

The new patterns of political engagement may not be particularly polite, as indicated by breakdowns in civility among national leaders and ordinary citizens. It is not surprising that people get personal about issues that are increasingly close to home. In the 1996 Survey of American Political Culture, majorities expressed strong concern about the standard of living, the American work ethic, the health care system, national leaders, education and schools, family life, the criminal justice system, moral and ethical standards, television and entertainment quality, and crime and public safety (Roper Center 1997, 10).[14]

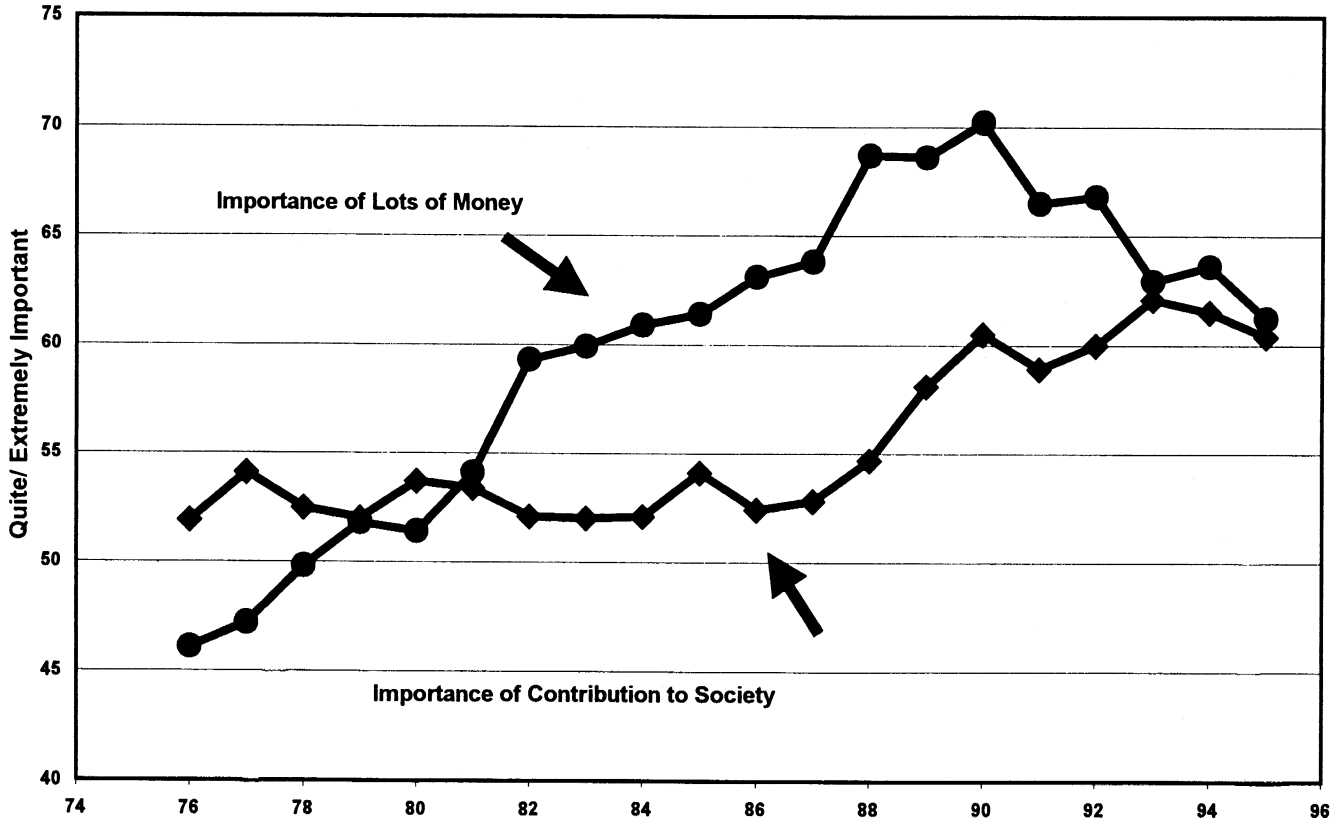
Reflecting the personal spirit of the times, respondents' favored solutions to these complex social problems were simple, individualized, and nongovernmental. The most popular solution to society's ills is to get even tougher on criminals, with 59% believing that this would "help a lot" to improve the country. The second most popular remedy, which received a 52% endorsement, is for fathers to "focus more on their families and less upon other things." Next came teaching traditional values in public schools, a measure strongly favored by 51% of respondents. Governmental remedies received only minority support, with greater involvement in voting and traditional politics strongly endorsed by only 44%. Fewer than 40% advocated new government programs to deal with society's problems (Roper Center 1997, 12).[15]

In this political context, it may not come as a surprise that only 35% regarded "being civil to others with whom we may disagree" an essential obligation of Americans. Only 30% felt that keeping fully informed about news and public issues was essential (although a majority thought it was a good idea). Yet a majority of 53% of respondents felt that Americans have the essential obligation to "speak and understand English" (Roper Center 1997, 14). One imagines a society of people rudely reacting to each other's uninformed views, but finding it important to do so in a common tongue.

In sum, the general mood of democratic publics seems to be testy, as variously reflected in the tone of talk shows and the incivility of exchanges among opposing officials in public settings.[16] Yet for all the chaos and incivility it engenders, the transition from group-based to lifestyle politics is something that individuals seem to be taking in stride. Despite the outpourings of academic and journalistic concern about the decline of civic culture, "dissatisfaction with government and politics" barely registers on lists of the most important problems facing the country today. Times Mirror surveys indicate that this concern did not make the list at all as recently as 1987, and it was mentioned as the top concern of only 5% of respondents in 1994 (Times Mirror 1995, 121).[17] If incivility reflected a deeply sensed collapse of political life, one might expect a greater outpouring of popular concern.

What does appear to distress many Americans is their place in a new economy. Transformation of the work

Figure 6
Importance of Having Lots of Money and Making a Contribution to Society



Source: Monitoring the Future, 1976–1995.

experience hit society about the same time that the television generation came of age, and seems a more likely explanation for a host of social and political changes than that confounded electronic box.

What Changed? It's the Economy

Wendy Rahn's discovery of a broad cultural correlate that has generational properties—the rise of materialism—sheds new light on an economic account of contemporary politics (Rahn 1998; Rahn and Transue 1997). It is clear even to a casual observer that there has been a sharp rise in the importance of money, especially among recent generations that have exhibited the greatest civic disengagement. Rahn has described a "post-war generational syndrome" characterized by two related features: diminished citizen identification with both the nation and other citizens and "an unhealthy emphasis on making money and acquiring possessions" (1998, 2). Her evidence comes from a dramatic trio of trend lines from Monitoring the Future (MTF) studies of American high school seniors. The MTF trends show a sharp rise in the importance of having lots of money and correspondingly sharp declines in social trust and diffuse support for the system.[18]

In the end, I think that Rahn is right about increasing materialism, but a bit off the theoretical mark about its origins and motivational effects on political behavior. Despite contemporary common sense connotations, materialism does not automatically mean greed or selfishness. For example, Weber's (1958) analysis of the origins of capitalism in the self-sacrificing thrift of Calvinism illustrates a radically different social context in which materialism inspired solidarity and common purpose. Veblen (1961), who wrote about conspicuous consumption at the dawn of the twentieth century, provided another compelling theoretical context for materialism. Veblen saw conspicuous displays of personal wealth as anchors for a well-defined social order in which consumption patterns conferred class, status, and standing on individuals. Those who consumed conspicuously were making moral points of order (in a far more coherent society) for the less fortunate to note and try to emulate. As Veblen put it so eloquently:

> The leisure class stands at the head of social structure in point of reputability; and its manner of life and its standards of worth therefore afford the norm of reputability for the community. The observance of these standards, in some degree of approximation, becomes incumbent upon all classes lower in the scale. In more civilized communities the lines of demarcation between social classes have grown vague. . . . The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal. (63–64)

Today's materialism is unlike the forms described by either Veblen or Weber.[19] It is tempting to base generalizations about selfish, antisocial behavior on cultural shards such as greed on Wall Street, or the rise of shopping and consumption as primary leisure pursuits, but the resulting cultural picture would be incomplete. A more complex view of the rising importance of money among successive generations of youth must also include the increasing employment dislocation that they have experienced. To an important degree, the rise in materialism—particularly as indicated by the concern for having lots of money—may be a highly realistic response to uncertain economic conditions.

Despite its greedy overtones, the increasing importance Americans place on making money may simply be a realistic response to an unpredictable economy defined by job and career instability and little loyalty between employers and employees.

This interpretation is better supported by another pairing of variables from Monitoring the Future studies: the importance of making a lot of money with the importance of making a contribution to society. One would guess that cohorts of increasingly greedy materialists would lose interest in contributing to their problem-ridden society as they entered adult life with dollar signs dancing in their heads. However, the evidence is just the contrary, as shown in Figure 6.

Despite its greedy overtones, the increasing importance Americans place on making money may simply be a realistic response to an unpredictable economy defined by job and career instability and little loyalty between employers and employees. In addition, recent generations have faced this changing economic reality in a society that is less supportive, largely because the group structure has changed. In short, as they have been trying to tell us, the members of "Generation X" have been given a bad rap as greedy slackers. They are simply grappling with new economic experiences that are hard to quantify, and, perhaps, even harder to reconcile with political rhetoric about hope, prosperity, and optimism.

Economic Insecurity and Social Life

Everyone knows the story of the global economic transformation that pushed the industrial democracies from manufacturing to service and office economies.[20] The more elusive element of this story is how these changes have created continuing shock waves in job security and work time, and related disruptions of family life, group memberships, social roles, and individual lifestyles.[21] Such effects are poorly captured, and in many cases, entirely masked, by aggregate long-term income trends that show income gains for the upper 20%, losses for the bottom quintile, and relatively stable earnings for the substantial majority of households in between. Some optimists even conflate and tout middle-class income stability and declines in average workweek hours reported by employers as evidence of greater economic freedom and security.[22] This and other superficial readings of the data distract analysts from such underlying statistical patterns as increases in numbers of weeks worked per year, and increased likelihood of working multiple jobs. The former trend means that average weekly hours may decline as average annual work time increases. The latter trend means that more part-time employees are actually accruing fewer average weekly hours per employer (Bluestone and Rose 1997, 61).

The political difficulty of reconciling buoyant economic analyses with less cheery household realities was made clear during a briefing that Clinton administration deputy treasury secretary and Harvard economic *wunderkind* Lawrence Summers gave to the Senate Democratic Caucus. After Summers completed his upbeat portrait of an economic boom, Ted Kennedy reportedly stood up and said: "Well, I don't think you ought to be popping the champagne corks just yet. When we go back home, all we hear is people scared of losing their jobs and losing their incomes. You guys damn well better understand that this is how people are feeling" (quoted in Cassidy 1998, 56).

Confusion over the effects of economic change on individuals is understandable. The contrast between the general rising tide of wealth and new jobs and the countervailing insecurities of employees over the past thirty years are unprecedented in post-War economic history. The National Commission for Employment Policy drew this conclusion from Commission studies of employment experiences over the past 30 years: "Declining job tenure data explain much of the anxiety that persists in spite of much of the apparent prosperity demonstrated in aggregate statistics on growth, levels of employment, and price stability. The growing incongruity between measures of our overall positive economic performance and the declining economic insecurity of individual workers suggests profound structural changes in the way our economy is producing and distributing the growing largesse" (Carnavale 1995, viii).

Putnam reviewed and dismissed an impressive list of economic variables that might come ahead of TV in a causal model. In the end, he cites data supporting a conclusion that Americans are working no more, and may actually have more leisure time, than in the past. Yet he admits that he cannot conclusively dismiss the possibility that civic disengagement is the product of a "generalized sense of economic insecurity that may have affected all Americans" (1995, 669). It turns out that increased leisure time is a hotly disputed claim among labor economists. At the same time, numerous indicators of generalized economic insecurity have emerged in recent analyses.

Putnam's strongest justification for discounting economic change as the basis for civic decline is based on

findings from time diary studies conducted at the University of Michigan in 1965 and 1975 and the University of Maryland in 1985. Data from these studies suggest that popular and journalistic accounts of "the overworked American," based on the Census Bureau's annual Current Population Surveys (CPS), may be inaccurate because they rest upon the inflated estimates of individuals asked to quickly guess their annual weekly work time.[23] Spur-of-the-moment self reports in the CPS data cast some doubt on Juliet Schor's (1991) claim in *The Overworked American* that harried Americans worked an average of 163 more hours per year in 1990 than they did in 1970.[24] By contrast, analyses cited by Putnam are based on the time diary studies, which indicate that the American's average work week has remained fairly stable during this period (see Robinson and Bostrom 1994).

Bluestone and Rose (1997) have argued that data from a third source, the University of Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), have multiple advantages over either the CPS data or the Michigan/Maryland diary studies. They detailed several methodological problems with the time diary studies, which measured hours worked per week and, therefore, missed the significant increase in the number of weeks worked per year.[25] Moreover, the estimation of work time is further complicated by the uneven distribution of the increase across the working population. The PSID sampled a large panel of 5,000 families, tracking 17,000 prime working age individuals (ages 22–58) on an annual basis through their working careers. The data have been organized to permit comparisons based on three-year averages over the two extended business cycles of the 1970s and 1980s.[26] One finding of these analyses is an estimated 66-hour increase in annual work, or the equivalent of 1.5 weeks of additional work per individual over the 20 year span (Bluestone and Rose 1997, 64).

This increase alone is not enough to conclude that economic change is at the root of group decline. Indeed, Putnam (1995, 669) claims that GSS data indicate a positive correlation between work hours and civic engagement. The meaning and strength of such a correlation are subject to wide interpretation, but a debate on this point would divert attention from numerous other factors that contribute to a larger picture of widespread employment insecurity. In addition to increases in average individual work hours, researchers have built more detailed profiles of the new working conditions for different groups—in particular, married couples and women—that have emerged over the period in which the civic generation met its demise. Numerous indicators of economic insecurity have been identified in a series of careful studies based on the PSID data.[27] Among the findings from this research are the following.

Income Patterns

- Between 1947 and 1973, real wages for hourly workers rose 79%. Since 1973, real wages declined by over 13% (Bluestone and Rose 1997, 60).
- Of younger males beginning their work lives, only 9% ended the decade of the 1970s (at ages 34–38) with lower earnings than at the beginning. Three times as many (26%) ended the 1980s as income losers (Rose 1994, 12).
- Among all men in the 1970s, 24% had lower earnings at the end of the decade than at the beginning. Male income losers rose to 36% of all working men during the 1980s (Carnavale 1995, ii; Rose 1995).
- Women's earnings rose over the 1970-90 period, but 80% of the increase was due to doubling the average individual hours worked (Carnavale 1995, ii; Rose 1995).
- For working couples, income gains between 1973 and 1988 can be attributed almost entirely to increased hours worked, as real hourly wages increased only 2 cents per year during that period (Bluestone and Rose 1977, 67).

Time Worked by Gender, Race, and Impact on Families

- The above-estimated 66-hour increase in the work year, or the equivalent of 1.5 more weeks of work per individual (Bluestone and Rose 1997, 64), is very unevenly distributed by race, gender, and family.
- The increase in work has a race and gender bias. Between 1970 and 1990, white women's full time work output increased 10.3 weeks, with the result that black and white women now work roughly similar numbers of hours (Bluestone and Rose 1997, 65).
- The increase in work is a family affair. Forty percent of families report additional members entering the workforce or taking extra jobs due to money pressures (Bluestone and Rose 1997, 59).
- Working husband-wife couples increased their full-time work by 4 months over the 1970-89 period—adding an extra day-and-a-half to their work week over that time (Bluestone and Rose 1997, 65).[28]

Job Change and The Work Experience

- From 1946 to 1972, employment change was generally positive, involving promotion and raises. Since then, change more often means unemployment, demotion, or displacement to other careers (Carnavale 1995, ii).
- In 1995, part-time, temporary, and contract workers numbered an estimated 35 million, or 28% of the labor force (Bluestone and Rose 1997, 60).
- In 1973, only 19% of all part-time jobs were held by people seeking full-time employment. This figure rose to 29% in 1993 (Bluestone and Rose 1997, 61).
- Work instability—as measured by at least one year of overtime and one year of underemployment in

the same decade—affected 28% of all workers, and 37% of black males, in the 1980s (Bluestone and Rose 1997, 68).

- During the 1970s, only 12% of all men changed employers 4 or more times. In the 1980s, 23% of all men changed jobs frequently. For black men, the shift was from 13% to 34% (Carnavale 1995, iii; Rose 1995).
- Men who changed employers no more than once earned 75% more than men who changed employers more than four times (Carnavale 1995, iii; Rose 1995).

Bluestone and Rose summarize the new work experience this way: "Because of growing job instability, workers face a feast and famine cycle: they work as much as they can when work is available to compensate for short workweeks, temporary layoffs, or permanent job loss that may follow. What's more, while American families as a whole are putting in more time, that work isn't producing significant increases in living standards" (1997, 59). In short, increasing numbers of individuals found themselves on an economic treadmill over the same period in which group membership declined. These patterns explain a number of anomalies in the group decline data that the TV thesis does not:

- Why do all generations entering adult life after the 1950s show some signs of decreased group memberships? All age groups, with the notable exception of many in the retirement-age "long civic generation," have been affected by post-1970 workplace trends.
- Why was there disproportionate group membership decline among younger generations coming of age after the 1970s? These cohorts felt the full impact of increased employment instability across their entire prime-age working years.
- Why did group membership declines accelerate for all age cohorts in the 1980s? The cross generation effect corresponds to spikes in job instability and underemployment for all groups when the new economy became fully established in the 1980s, and the business cycle entered a downturn. The persistent generational differences reflect greater job insecurities among entry-level cohorts.
- Why have women left groups in greater numbers than men? Women experienced more dramatic upheavals in work life than men.

The Political Psychology of a New Social Order

Growing evidence that societies are reorganizing themselves around individual lifestyle constraints has given me an eerie appreciation for Margaret Thatcher's 1987 response to a reporter's question about whether her economic programs damaged society. Thatcher's characteristically haughty reply was, "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbor" (quoted in Bevins 1991).[29] For Mrs. Thatcher, of course, the shrinking of society was an ideological goal. For majorities in late-industrial nations, however, it comes as an often unwelcome *fait accompli*.

The contrast between the general rising tide of wealth and new jobs and the countervailing insecurities of employees over the past thirty years are unprecedented in post-War economic history.

It is important to determine how the sudden upheavals in work and social life have affected the emotional security of individuals and, consequently, how those social and psychological changes have affected people's political behaviors. In a recent survey by The Washington Post, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University, 76% of both men and women reported substantial changes "in recent years in the relationship between men and women in their roles in families, the workplace and society." While these changes are rated as both good and bad for the country, only 35% of men and 42% of women thought it would be "better for the country if men and women went back to the traditional roles they had in the 1950s" (Morin and Rosenfeld 1998, 7).

High levels of value confusion are associated with these role conflicts. A series of four Times Mirror Surveys between 1987 and 1994 show that about 85% of respondents claimed "traditional, old-fashioned values about marriage and family." Consistent with this, majorities reaching 75% in 1994 believed that "too many children are being raised in day care centers these days." Yet, responses to a question about traditional roles indicated that only older generations strongly support returning to a more traditional society. Overall, even fewer respondents (30%) than in the study reported above agreed "that women should return to their traditional roles in society" (Times Mirror 1995, 162–165). Further evidence for these trends is provided by the DDB Needham Life Style Studies showing that agreement with "a woman's place is in the home" has dropped from roughly half of all respondents to about 25% between 1975 and 1997 (DDB Needham 1997, 44).

Although people resist the idea of returning to an earlier social order, they acknowledge the personal challenges and hardships of their work-dominated lifestyles. *The Post*/Kaiser/Harvard surveys report majorities of over 80% of men and women feeling that changed work, family, and social conditions make it harder to raise children. Over 70% of both men and women felt that it was harder for marriages to be successful. And nearly 70% of men and women experienced the contradiction of needing to work in order to maintain standards of living,

while recognizing the lost benefits of staying home and caring for children (Morin and Rosenfeld 1998, 8).

A profile of a psychologically conflicted middle class dominated by concerns about work and material security is filled out by other trends from the DDB Needham Life Style Studies. Between 1975 and 1997, increasing numbers of both men and women reported working very hard most of the time, with married females recording the largest increase from 76% to 88%. At the same time, all marital and gender groups reported being increasingly worried about being too heavily in debt (DDB Needham 1997, 44). These worries are given credence by the harsh realities of rising household debt, credit card delinquencies, and bankruptcy filings over a period of sustained economic boom.[30] Busy lives are further defined by the growing percentages of workers who fantasize about spending a quiet evening at home. Married men most missed time at home (72% in 1975 and 80% in 1997). Majorities approaching 70% of both men and women described themselves as homebodies, yet fewer members of all categories entertained regularly at home (DDB Needham 1997, 30, 60, 65).

These data suggest that social life has become unbalanced and stressful for the majority of Americans whose lives revolve around the increasing uncertainties of work. However, most individuals also reject the inefficiencies and costs of centralized, heavily regulated economies, meaning that social and economic insecurities are typically defined as personal issues for which governmental solutions are deemed ineffective, if not outright unwelcome. Bluestone and Rose (1997, 69) described the resulting dilemma in the following way: "Americans will not find a better balance between work and leisure, between earning a living and spending time with loved ones, between wage earning and 'civic engagement' until the economy provides long-term employment security and rising wages."

Political life may seem turbulent because large numbers of people are trying, unsuccessfully, to find solutions to new personal problems within old institutions and value schemes that are holdovers from a different society. In summarizing the studies of the National Commission for Employment Policy, Carnavale described this dislocation between people and institutions, and underscored its unprecedented economic basis: "Our findings suggest profound changes in the American economy. But economic change is not new. What is new in this particular economic transition is the erosion of public confidence in the basic institutions customarily charged with guiding us safely through change. The persistent anxiety stems from a fundamental disconnect between new economic realities and those institutions that prepare Americans for work, sustain them during their working lives and provide for their retirement. As a result, Americans are anxious about their prospects and angry that the rules are changing in the middle of the game" (1995, viii).

Recent surveys of Europeans also reveal links between economic changes and dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working in various countries. Inglehart examined twenty years of American and European polls, and

A crowd waits to enter a job fair for employment with the city of San Francisco. © Alain McLaughlin, Impact Visuals

noted predictable declines in satisfaction during periods of economic recession. However, the European recession of the 1990s was accompanied by extremes in dissatisfaction not recorded earlier. Despite this evidence of deepening dissatisfaction with government, Inglehart found other indicators pointing to increased political engagement through other means: "Some observers have interpreted the decline of trust in government as a sign of general alienation. Pointing to declining rates of voter turnout, they argue that the American public has become disenchanted with the entire system and withdrawn from politics completely. The empirical evidence contradicts this interpretation. . . . Though voter turnout has stagnated (largely because of weakening political party loyalties), Western publics have *not* become apathetic: quite the contrary, in the last two decades, they have become markedly more likely to engage in elite-challenging forms of political participation. Furthermore, the erosion of trust does not apply to all institutions: it is specifically a withdrawal of confidence from authoritarian institutions" (1997, 295–96).

In short, changes in the social organization of work have created a host of familiar stresses and insecurities that stem from career changes, layoffs, and underemployment and result in disruptions of personal time, family patterns, and social roles. All of these changes have created dilemmas for individuals as they construct and manage personal identities. Younger generations may experience these dilemmas more profoundly both because they have more disruptive work experiences and because they receive less emotional support from group memberships. These identity dilemmas are expressed in the many forms of lifestyle politics.

Lifestyle Politics is Identity Politics

Among the most important implications of the economic analysis I propose is that it invites exploration of the changing relationships among political identity, government, and nation. The psychological energy (*cathexis*) people once devoted to the grand political projects of economic integration and nation-building in industrial democracies is now increasingly directed toward personal projects of managing and expressing complex identities in a fragmenting society. The political attitudes and actions resulting from this emotional work stay much closer to home, and are much less likely to be focused on government.

Responding to these trends, social sciences have devoted increasing attention to how structural social change affects individual identity formation (e.g., Turner 1996; Wagner 1996). Giddens has offered a tight summary of recent thinking on the subject: "The self in modern society is frail, brittle, fractured, fragmented—such a conception is probably the preeminent outlook in current discussions of the self and modernity" (1991, 169). Similarly, Wagner has described the commonly felt antagonisms and identity crises of the age as symptoms of lost coherence in society: "Coherence, in this sense, means that there is a collectivity of human beings, forming a 'society' by virtue that they share common understandings about what is important in their lives (identities), that they mostly interact with each other inside this collectivity (practices), and that they have ways to determine how they regulate their lives in common (rules of the polity)" (1996, 4).

The displaced emotions of individuals in a fragmenting society may account for a good deal of citizen anger about taxes, intrusive governments, and duplicitous politicians. The spiral of "anger politics" is kept going by socially dislocated individuals seeking social recognition and credible political representation for their personal concerns. One implication of this formulation is that opinions and behaviors often dismissed as noisy disaffection from politics may be better understood as forms of identity politics being practiced at the individual level. Personal frustrations with government and politicians may be rooted in the same social fragmentation and lifestyle diversity that underlie more familiar brands of identity politics, such as the culture wars that have splintered parties, polarized academia, and frustrated the organization of movements.

Because personal identity is replacing collective identity as the basis for contemporary political engagement, the character of politics itself is changing. Nowhere has this change been more pronounced than in the development and uses of sophisticated communication technologies to shape political perceptions and affiliations. Where parties and elections were once the primary mechanisms for interest aggregation and mobilization (Ginsberg and Shefter 1990; Patterson 1993), these functions are increasingly shared by direct marketing, issue advocacy campaigns, and action networking. As a result, elections and everyday issue and image campaigns all use similar marketing strategies to construct networks of individuals whose attentions and loyalties are reassessed and reassembled in the next campaign (Manheim 1994).

Society, Identity, and Political Communication

Following from the described changes in social and political identity are numerous implications for understanding the evolving role of communication in politics. For example, failing to consider the economic origins of social fragmentation makes it easy to think that increasingly individualized message targeting and marketing have, themselves, fragmented society (Turow 1997). The isolating effects of new communication technologies should not be ignored. In my view, however, the economic fragmentation of social structures and identities also constitute strong demand characteristics pushing the technological sophistication of communication. Similarly, there is great merit to the criticism that the press has given government a bad rap by representing it as a game (Jamieson 1992; Patterson 1993; Cappella and Jamieson 1997). However, researchers also need to grapple with the evidence that, for better or worse, politics *has* become a game—a communication game with well-defined rules, strategies, goals, and players.

Arguing that social change is as much the producer as the product of the current state of political communication does not mean that the resulting negative, dramatized, and often populist content is either what people want, or, much less, what they need. However, it does follow that the spiraling expenses and human efforts devoted to contemporary communication campaigns would not be necessary if simpler, cheaper, and broader social appeals were effective in delivering audiences, customers, or voters. Since this is what self-interested advertising executives, newspaper owners, television producers, and political campaign managers have been saying, it makes sense to look for independent evidence for their claims.

The trend toward strategically targeted demographic communication may be understood, in part, as serving the practical necessity of herding already disaffected citizens back into the institutional patterns that they are resisting.

One of the few careful studies of historical change in communication formats is Leiss, Kline, and Jhally's (1990) analysis of advertising in Canada. These researchers trace advertising imagery through four phases from 1910 to 1990: utilitarian "product-information formats," group and role-based "product image formats," private emotional "personalized formats," and most recently, multiple social identity "lifestyle formats." The reciprocal influences between social structure and the symbolic regimes of advertising suggest that, even as it shapes society and emotions, communication adjusts to changing patterns of social order and individual identity.

Turning to political communication, Blumler and Kavanaugh (1998) identified three distinct historical periods in their impressive review of research on modern European and American systems. The first was a time before the dominance of television, when messages were subordinated to, and filtered through strong institutions and partisan beliefs. Following this was the television age, which was defined by an expanded mass audience and the elevation of news media to a more powerful institutional standing vis-à-vis parties and governments. The emergence of a *"political-media complex,"* as Swanson (1992) has called it, caused players to engage in more competitive, technology-driven information games, which, in turn, elevated the media to the status of a governing institution (Cook 1998). The third, and still emerging age identified by Blumler and Kavanaugh is an era of fragmentation in audiences, social reference groups, parties, and media systems. In this age, political messages are created strategically by communication professionals, news is edited and packaged from a marketing standpoint, and audiences are increasingly suspicious of politicians and journalists alike. Despite the cynicism of audiences who have spent too much time in the spin cycle, short-term political goals such as winning elections or defeating policy initiatives continue to be achieved through the sophisticated marketing of candidates and information.

These distinctive political communication systems evolved from ecological, interactive relations among many factors. A key factor interacting with communication variables is, of course, the group structure of society. During earlier times of greater social coherence, the dominant communication model was the classic two-step flow of communication (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), in which messages were received by elites and passed on to the audiences for whom they acted as references. Research suggests that similar cueing processes still prevail (albeit in a somewhat short-circuited form) in many political situations (Bennett 1990; Zaller 1992), but there are many other situations in which broad, group-based identity cues are either weak or nonexistent (Zaller 1998a, 1998b).[31] Recognizing that communication channels and audiences are also becoming increasingly fragmented (Gandy 1998; Neuman 1998) makes it clear why conventional mass communication (in non-crisis situations) is less effective in mobilizing mass audiences, and why practitioners rely increasingly on demographic and psychological research to assemble audiences of targeted individuals.

The trend toward strategically targeted demographic communication may be understood, in part, as serving the practical necessity of herding already disaffected citizens back into the institutional patterns that they are resisting. As a result, a return to social and political coherence of any but an undesirable propagandistic sort is unlikely to be achieved through programmatic communication fixes. None of this means that we should abandon political communication reforms involving election and issue advertising, journalism and information quality, and educating publics about the predatory uses of image-shaping and strategic communication techniques. These areas all would benefit from reductions in noise and deception, and offer hope for improving the quality of political discourse. However, it is important to place such reforms in theoretical contexts that recognize fundamental changes in society and its politics.

Communication and Democratic Theory

What are the issues for democratic theory that communication research can address productively in this new era? To begin with, changes in both the production and uses of information present new empirical challenges for old questions about journalism, political information, public deliberation, participation, and policy outcomes (Bennett 1996; Edelman 1988; Entman 1989; Gamson 1992, 1998; Jamieson 1992; Page 1996).

New challenges for democratic theory and communication policy also arise with the emergence of communication that bypasses widely known social reference filters on its way to strategically constructed audiences. For example, Jamieson (1998) has argued that journalistic

norms about source attribution may be crumbling, as evidenced by the growing appearance of pseudonymous news sources that enable greater deception in issue and election campaigns. Bennett and Manheim (1998) have shown that strategic communication campaigns often use lawsuits and various government regulatory processes, not to remedy specific problems, but to make news that damages the images of targeted companies, individuals, groups, and organizations. Moreover, these campaigns often communicate through surrogate organizations, obscuring the identities and partisan interests of the campaign sponsors. The rise of pseudonymous sources and surrogate groups may reflect the decaying reference structures of society. More research is needed on how these changes in information formats and cues affect both citizen judgments and the social basis of democracy.

Even as researchers confirm growing fears about predatory, marketing-based communication, they must continually return to the difficult question of whether fragmented societies can realistically support more coherently regulated information. This question becomes even more perplexing as evidence surfaces of a new era in which the intrusions of marketers are being supplanted by individuals' knowing submission of their tastes, feelings, and preferences directly to those who are trying to communicate with them. The capacity to submit and refine personal information preferences already exists in the search engines and information sites of the Internet. Future research and policy analysis must address how ever more personalized preferences can be accommodated in collective decision making. Pool (1990, 260–61) regarded the increasing personalization of preferences as a challenge for contemporary political systems, a challenge that called for creative communication solutions.

The Quality of Life in the Personalized Polity

Whether or not the prospects for healthy democracy are dimmed by the decline of group memberships and identities and well-defined civic duties, the emotional health of individuals may be undermined by the difficulties of sharing social recognition and support across diverse social and political realities. The possibility that individuals might suffer from too little identification with the collective symbols of the imagined communities that we call nations (Anderson 1991) was far removed from the identity problem that most worried the founders of political communication and political psychology. Living in an age of totalitarian states, figures such as Lasswell (1952, 1965) and Fromm (1941, 1960) were concerned that individuals might lose their personal identities by over-identifying with the collective symbolism of authoritarian regimes of the left or the right. A typical account of the politically over-identified self is Fromm's description of authoritarian conformity: "The individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be" (1960, 160).

The concern about individual identity today is just the opposite. Collective identifications in many societies appear to be weakened to the point of jeopardizing the social support and recognition that contribute to secure identities and self-images. In most cases, feelings of personal insecurity or loss of control come in the form of vague anxieties that have boosted the sales of designer tranquilizers and mood toners. For many, the psychological distress is even more severe, as registered in an alarming rise of clinical depression and other severe psychiatric disorders throughout the industrial world. For example, Americans born after 1945 suffer depression at ten times the rate of those born fifty years before, and nearly half the current total population is likely to suffer some kind of mental illness during their lives (Lane 1994, 3). Lane concludes his review of world mental health studies with the cheery comment that "While the United States is not the most depressed country in the world, it may be on its way to that infelicitous rank" (Lane 1996, 5).

As I noted at the outset of this discussion, Ithiel Pool anticipated the "increase in diversity in society and the breakdown in cohesion that may go with that" (1990, 261). Yet, Pool did not anticipate that emotional isolation would be a problem. To the contrary, he predicted the rise of supportive virtual subcultures: "There will be operas and opera news available for opera lovers, microbiology information bases and exchanges available for microbiologists." Pool went on to write that this cultural fragmentation would "draw some portion of people's time and attention away from the common concerns of the nation's sports, politics, heroes, and news" (261). The important question that remains unanswered is how well these virtual communities can provide the emotional bases for individual identity, acceptance, and empathy—factors that also contribute to the quality and health of a polity. In this regard, the decline of groups may not threaten the long-term capacity of governments to govern, but it may threaten the happiness of individuals in societies.

Lane (1994, 1996) has argued convincingly that friends and family provide the most important foundations for secure identities in fragmented market societies. The dilemma facing these primary support groups is that the economic and social fragmentation confronting individuals also complicates their efforts to find "quality time" with loved ones. These problems of emotional security might be remedied by restoring a lost civic culture, but that might entail nothing short of reconstituting an evolved global economy. Perhaps a more manageable goal is to secure greater individual control over jobs (and employers) so that friends and family can relate more coherently than in the present work-driven order. Imagining how such goals might be expressed and realized politically requires a deeper understanding of how issues are defined and publics are mobilized through the communication processes of lifestyle politics.

Conclusion

The evidence I have presented supports the following generalizations:

- Broad changes in labor markets and work experiences have affected post-1960s generations. These changes have undermined the coherence of the society in which traditional civic engagement made sense, meaning that the decline of groups has been something of a forced maneuver compelled more by economic conditions than by peripheral factors such as television watching.
- The withdrawal of public confidence from governing institutions is based on citizens' assessments that they no longer serve their needs within the new socioeconomic order (as opposed to some combination of media-induced passivity and unwarranted negative communication about politics and government).
- Beyond the disconnection between government and emerging lifestyle concerns, individuals continue to display active engagement with politics and social problems.
- Since the new forms of engagement fit poorly with traditional institutional politics, many citizens are understandably testy and cynical about the easy solutions they hear from politicians and pundits.
- Television, while an important political force, has been put in the wrong place in "declinist" causal schemes of society and democratic politics. The well-documented political uses and abuses of television are as much responses to, as they are primary causes of, societal breakdown, individual isolation, and generalized discontent with politics.

These generalizations lead me to the tentative conclusion that the erosion of confidence in national institutions is due less to passive withdrawal into private lives than to active calculations about how best to promote personal "lifestyle" agendas of political and economic interests. Large numbers of citizens seem to have reached the conclusion that governments are, at worst, responsible for the economic conditions that dominate private lives, and, at best, of little use for remedying them. For the vast majority, both the sources of identity and the concerns of politics lay increasingly close to home, and are, correspondingly, more removed from national and collective activity. In the meantime, until government and national politics can be reinvented, what governments can do—particularly in the American case—is collect and spend less of the taxpayer's hard-earned money.

My inferences from the complex trail of evidence shed a different theoretical light on the question of "What happened to civic culture?" Declining group membership, and, for that matter, the rise of materialism, make most sense as independent, symptomatic effects of deeper economic changes. As a result, people may be "bowling alone" not because they have somehow passively withdrawn from society, but because they cannot meet the time demands or, perhaps more importantly, live comfortably within the value schemes of broad social groups. Sustained levels of volunteer activity further support a story about continuing, but lifestyle-friendly, civic engagement on the part of increasingly individualistic people leading complex lives.

The evidence for substantial levels of political engagement challenges the popular fear that a withdrawal into private life will shrink the public sphere of democracy. The more relevant worry may be a proliferation of disconnected public spheres flooded with personal concerns. In this light, it is important to ask, as Rahn (1997) has done, whether declines in diffuse support and common identifications endanger those imagined communities commonly known as democratic nations. Followers of Ithiel Pool, who are more optimistic about individuals and pessimistic about governments, may welcome a future in which government is reduced to a collection of managerial roles: regulator of communication access, adjudicator of disputes, monitor of utility and service delivery, and provider for the common defense.

If such a future of minimized government and maximized individual freedom comes to pass, accompanying changes in civic culture may not be worrisome if individuals remain relatively engaged and sensible in their political actions. So far, political engagement seems to be holding its own. The more challenging issue is: How can communication technologies be adapted to the deliberation, interest formation, and decision-making requirements of societies that may be better positioned to experiment with direct democracy than any in modern history?

Notes

*I am grateful to a number of people who have shared both data and unpublished analyses with me. In particular, I thank Marty Horn, director of research at DDB Needham in Chicago, for sharing the exhaustive research on personal lifestyles contained in the Life Style Studies, 1975-97. Also, Stephen Rose, formerly chief economist for the National Commission on Employment Policy and now at the Educational Testing Service, has provided valuable analyses of individual-level workforce trends dating from 1967. Wendy Rahn has stimulated my thinking with her original analyses of General Social Survey and Monitoring the Future data. Additional analyses of the GSS and MTF data sets for this project were conducted by Valerie Hunt, without whose assistance far too many questions would have gone unanswered. Regina Lawrence provided creative input through web-based data searches, as well as with her usual cogent criticism. I am also indebted to a number of colleagues for their readings and responses to earlier versions of these ideas. They include Murray Edelman, Robert Lane, Bill Gamson, Robert Putnam, and Ed Greenberg. I also thank David Altheide, David Swanson, and Bruce Gronbeck for opportunities to present talks on aspects of this project at Arizona State University, the University of Illinois, and the University of Iowa. Gene Borgida, Wendy Rahn, and John Sullivan provided a stimulating forum for early airing of these ideas at the Minnesota Political Psychology Symposium. The responses of the participants and audiences in all cases were most helpful to developing these ideas. Bryan Jones and the Center for American Politics and Public Policy at the University of Washington have provided both a stimulating environment and important support for this research.

1. This term is Murray Edelman's (1993) reference to policy thinking based on implicit (common sense or ideologically predetermined) categorizations of problems that produce their own category-driven outcomes.

2. There are, of course, various critiques of Putnam's analysis that raise important theoretical and methodological questions. See, for example, Levi (1996) and Goldberg (1996). However, I am less interested in contesting the evidence for group decline, or questioning the theoretical integrity of the social capital argument, than I am with reevaluating the causes of group decline and rethinking the implications for individual political engagement.

3. The national identification trends are mixed, with some smaller countries (e.g., Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, South Africa, Argentina) actually experiencing increases in national sentiment, perhaps due to historic political changes or to increased pressures from such forces as global economic change and immigration. However, the trend in the larger nations is away from national identifications (e.g., Mexico, Britain, Germany, Italy, Spain, Canada, and the United States).

4. Based on six age cohorts identified in the 1996 GSS data. Rahn's indicators of national identity and diffuse support for government include, among others, hope about the U.S., enthusiasm about the U.S., pride in how democracy works, the importance of American identity, and the importance of American citizenship. These patterns also occur in other data sets, such as the 1996 Survey of American Political Culture, which asked respondents how they rated the United States: as the greatest country in the world, as one of a group of great countries, or whether there were countries better than the U.S. While only 45% of the 18-34 year olds placed the U.S. in the "greatest" category, fully 69% of those over 65 did so. Similarly, 48% of 18-34 year olds placed the U.S. in equal company with other great nations, but only 29% of those over 65 did so. See Hunter and Johnson (1997, 6).

5. See, for example, Cappella and Jamieson (1997), McCombs and Shaw (1972), Iyengar (1991), Bennett (1996), Bennett and Manheim (1998).

6. It is obvious that many of these issues in themselves are not new. However, the intensely personal ways in which they are framed is more recent. For example, the disputes over environmental issues often reduce to framing in terms of jobs versus recreational preservation. Abortion rights conflicts revolve around intense commitments to personal choice. Consensus on health care reform breaks down over intense differences involving personal choice and the quality of care. In these and other areas, common standards and binding public principles have become increasingly divisive and unpopular symbolic positions.

7. In addition, as the communication revolution facilitates new and greater political engagement for some, it may impede the participation of others, portending a new sort of class politics based on communication access. However, this potential problem has many relatively obvious solutions. I suspect that Pool would argue that new communication technologies have historically reduced power differences based on communication access, and not magnified them.

8. The sampling procedure in these studies departs considerably from scientific methods. Millions of invitations are sent to names on numerous mailing lists, yielding an affirmative response rate of under 1% (!), raising serious questions about the representativeness of these samples. However, Robert Putnam reports in a personal communication that several months of diagnostic testing against known reliable surveys produced comparable results on a range of similar indicators. In addition, the trends in both Figures 3A and 3B correspond to findings at comparable time points in national samples gathered through more conventional means. Other sample characteristics are notable as well. From 1975 to 1984, the sample consisted of 2,000 married females and 2,000 married males drawn from different households. Beginning in 1985 and 1986, respectively, the sample was increased to 5,000 to include single females and males. Response rates (from the aforementioned small percentages of contacted individuals indicating a willingness to be surveyed) have varied from 82% in 1975 to 69% in 1997, meaning, for example, that the actual 1997 sample consisted of an N of 3462 individuals, of whom 1225 were married males, 366 were single males, 1225 were married females, and 646 were single females. According to the description accompanying the DDBN report, the samples are intended to represent "mainstream America" in its balance of region, family size, age, income, and population density. However, "the very poor, the very rich, the transient, and minority populations are under-represented in this panel" (DDB Needham 1997, 2.). In Figure 3A the group trend is based on responses to "Went to a club meeting." The volunteer trend in Figure 3B is based on responses to "Did volunteer work." Figures 3A and 3B combine married and single respondents, as no significant differences were found on these variables.

9. Putnam (1995, 670) confirms the steeper group membership decline among women using another data source, but rejects the workforce interpretation based on his reliance on time diary studies. I revisit this empirical issue with fresh data below.

10. For example, the DDBN surveys indicate relatively lower and slightly declining agreement with the general statement "I am interested in politics." However, this statement could easily conflate respondent feelings about politics in Washington with interest in political affairs more generally, thus offering less discriminatory power than the TMS items summarized in Figure 4.

11. Based on national samples drawn in May 1987, May 1988, February 1989, May 1990, November 1991, June 1992. The variables displayed here are items v, w, and x, in Times Mirror (1995, 166).

12. This does not diminish the fact that citizens participating in elections are operating in a shrinking political universe, as citizens turn away from the voting act itself in increasing numbers (hitting a modern era low of 48.5% of eligible voters for a presidential year in 1996). Moreover, many who continue to vote report dissatisfaction with candidates, issues, and campaigns. However, these trends may represent a general sense that institutional politics seem ill suited to current life concerns, which is far different than a diffuse disengagement from politics in general.

13. While his data contain important indicators of the rise of more individualized and less collectivized styles of national politics, I think Inglehart has got the explanation wrong. He contended that most of the industrial democracies have entered a post-scarcity age that enables individuals to reduce their dependence on authoritarian, institutional problem solving, and to find more self-expressive political outlets. Unless readers graft a circular "rising expectations" caveat to the Maslovian roots of Inglehart's thesis, it is hard to reconcile a mass politics of self actualization with the fine-grained accounts of economic struggle and social upheaval that middle class-citizens have encountered in their new national economies. For example, his claim that people have shifted their focus from job security to concerns about interesting and meaningful work (Inglehart 1997, 42-44) simply does not square with economic survey data. For example, the DDB Needham 1975-97 Life Style Studies show a stable twenty-year trend of overwhelming (average 75%) concern for job security (DDB Needham 1997, 42). The aggregate value scores reported for nations also challenge his theory. Although it is hard to quibble with the core of Inglehart's thesis (that contemporary advanced industrial society has freed most people from concerns about physical survival), this low threshold of change does not explain the considerable variation in values reported for the many nations that presumably have cleared it.

14. These problems are listed in ascending order from 54 to 74% agreement based upon the seriousness with which respondents viewed them.

15. Rivaling the minorities who advocated government solutions were the nearly one-third of those polled who felt that it would help a lot if more parents used spanking to discipline their children, and if organized religion were allowed in the public schools (Roper Center 1997, 12).

16. Even substantial portions of traffic fatalities and injuries have been linked to that increasingly familiar form of incivility, road rage. The National Highway Traffic Safety Commission has linked aggressive behavior to nearly 28,000, or two-thirds, of the nation's annual traffic deaths. The head of the Commission attributed the rise of "road ragers" to "an increase in a 'me first philosophy' and a society that has grown less deferential" (Wald 1998). Studies of accidents find that rage behind the wheel takes many forms, including: "tailgating, weaving through busy lanes, honking or screaming at other drivers, exchanges of insults, and even gunfire." Such factors are also present in one-third of the three million injury accidents per year.

17. This was substantially below the double-digit votes accorded to problems such as crime, health care, jobs, and a "values" cluster including morality, ethics, and the family. Based on Item 12, "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?

18. Rahn's main indicator of diffuse support is agreement with the item "despite its faults, our system of doing things is still the best in the world."

19. In contrast to Weber's account, levels of debt and consumerism that almost suggest a new sort of patriotism have replaced thrift and savings. In contrast to the era described by Veblen, contemporary displays of material acquisitions are less obviously ideological exercises constrained by collective meaning. Smooth symbolic transitions in "manner of life" up and down the social ladder have ruptured, and the

pursuit of highly personalized, materially defined lifestyles now occurs in societies where shared class and broad group identities are less and less operative. Fascination with the lifestyles of the rich and famous more closely resembles a popular entertainment spectacle than the emulation of well-defined role models motivated by social striving.

20. A study of long-term employment and education trends conducted at the Educational Testing Service described this new American economic structure not as a service, but as an office economy: "Conventional wisdom has always viewed the American economy as a pyramid with a broad, solid base of jobs in manufacturing, construction, and natural resources. . . . In fact, the opposite has come true. The old industrial pyramid has been turned upside down. In the new economy, workers employed in a wide variety of office functions from marketing to managing and consulting are driving value added by reinventing, reorganizing, and rationalizing old industrial, natural resource, and service industries. . . . Making the product and delivering the service have become a simple parlor trick in the global economy—it can be done with equal ease in Chicago or Bangladesh" (Carnavale and Rose 1998, 1).

21. Schor and You (1995) provide a useful overview of the economic bases of these global changes.

22. The average workweek reported by employers has declined five hours between 1947 and 1996 (Bluestone and Rose 1997, 61).

23. As I was informed by Stephen Rose, the CPS data are also inflated by including paid vacation in annual work time, and understated by poor estimates of additional short-term employment.

24. The striking increase in subjective impressions of time worked may be significant in itself as an indicator of economic stress.

25. Stephen Rose also notes in a personal communication that there were troublesome changes in the questions and difficulties in sampling over the history of the diary studies. In addition, the diary studies excluded break time and down time at work from the work category, a conceptual decision that resulted in not counting all the time respondents spent on the job as work time.

26. Per the description of the data set by Rose (1994), the data reported for the 1970s are based on three-year averages from 1967 to 1979, and the data reported for the 1980s are based on three-year averages from 1977 to 1989.

27. In addition, of course, there are the almost daily reports in the news documenting the personal trials of "downsized" middle-aged business executives, and such alarming factoids as the five-fold rise of personal bankruptcies over the last two decades. On the latter point, see Klam (1998, 68). Also noted in this and similar journalistic accounts are such facts as the rise in household debt to after-tax income, which has soared from 59% in 1984 to 83% in 1998 (67).

28. Based on business cycle adjustments, Bluestone and Rose (1997, 65) report an average increase in work hours of 32 hours per year for working couples.

29. The original interview is attributed to *Women's Own* magazine, October 1987.

30. Between 1992 and 1997 debt, as percentage of disposable income, rose from 76 to 83%, credit card delinquencies rose from 4.1 to 4.9%, and bankruptcy filings rose from 968,000 to 1.4 million per year, according to sources cited in Pae and Stoughton (1998, 20).

31. Group identifications (both positive and negative) make collective symbols effective, accounting for the strength of cueing in conventional political messages. Moreover, group identifications animated the three basic elements of classical models of persuasive communication: the (social reference) credibility of sources, the supportiveness of audiences, and the salience and meanings of message content. As individuals leave groups, the challenges of constructing effective messages increase in direct proportion to the requirements for increasingly refined demographic research on message salience, credibility, and the social context of reception.

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