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POLITICAL PARTIES AND SOCIAL CAPITAL,
POLITICAL PARTIES OR SOCIAL CAPITAL**Eric M. Uslaner*

Social capital and political parties seem like natural compatriots. Both involve gathering people together for a common purpose. Parties organize people to win elections. Social capital is all about bringing people together for any number of purposes. Surely forging campaigns and winning elections falls under this general rubric.

Putnam (1993: 171) argues that social capital reflects 'norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement'. Participation in political party activity, like social capital more generally, has been in decline over the past four decades (Putnam, 2000: 37–45; Seyd and Whiteley, 2002: 88). The linkage seems straightforward, but the notion of social capital proves to be a catch-all for all types of norms, values, and social connections. We need to unpack the concept to see whether parties really represent social capital. Despite the initial impression that political parties are one form of social capital – and the links forged in some of the literature between the two (Putnam, 2000: 37–45; Andersen and Young, 2000; Weinstein, 1999) – there is reason to be skeptical of the connection.

Social capital matters, Putnam and others argue, because it brings people together to solve common problems. Many forms of civic engagement, from joining choral societies and bowling leagues to informal social ties such as picnics, bring people together for reasons unrelated to civic life. People do not join bowling leagues to become better citizens. However, Putnam (1993, 2000) argues that membership in voluntary associations and informal social connections can lead people to trust each other, to discuss issues of community concern, and

to band together for collective action. In this sense, some forms of social interaction – bridging 'social capital', which links us to people who are different from ourselves (Putnam, 2000: 22) – are 'best'. Bridging social capital creates bonds across ethnic and class lines and 'can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital [connecting us to people like ourselves] bolsters our narrower selves' (Putnam, 2000: 23). For Putnam, however, almost *all* forms of social interaction help people get together to take collective action. The decline in social capital – in membership in voluntary associations, in informal socializing, in trust in other people, and (of course) in participation in political parties – is worrisome. Americans no longer connect to each other, they trust each other less, and our social and political life has become more contentious.

The linkage of parties and social capital, I argue, is misplaced. To show this, I must first unpack the notion of social capital. Briefly, my argument is threefold. First, the social connections part of social capital presumes that people interact with each other in voluntary organizations and that these ties bring people together. Yet, the evidence we have on members of major political parties – parties primarily concerned with winning office – suggests that: most members do very little for the party and may largely be 'checkbox' members; and when members do attend party meetings, they rarely socialize with each other. Across nations, there is little connection between joining voluntary associations and membership in political parties. In the American states, there is little connection

between the strength of party organizations and membership in voluntary organizations. Political parties are essentially elite institutions devoted to winning elections and governing. They do have members, but widespread participation in party governance would effectively destroy the ability of parties to win elections and formulate policy. Michels (1963) recognized this over a century ago and Schattschneider (1941) reiterated the argument six decades ago.

Second, the nostalgia for an era of widespread participation in parties may be misplaced. There may be less participation in party organizations now than in the past, but conjuring up a picture of a bygone era when hordes of citizens were involved in party work is an exercise in fantasy. Perhaps 40 years ago – or a century ago – more people participated in voluntary organizations (at least in the United States). Yet, even then, the share of people who worked for parties was tiny. And there is little evidence that participation was widespread elsewhere. Yes, some parties have extensive member participation. But these tend to be minor parties more focused on elaborating policy goals than on winning offices (Ström, 1990). When a party such as the Greens in Germany (and other European countries) decides to enter a government as a coalition partner, it must shift its focus away from widespread citizen participation toward more centralized control and moderate positions on issues.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, the idea that people would get together in voluntary associations and develop trust in their fellow citizens is questionable. The notion that people might get together in *political parties* and develop faith in people of different backgrounds is not tenable. As there are different types of social capital more generally, so there are different types of trust (Uslaner, 2002: Chapter 2). Here I only need distinguish between *generalized* and *particularized* trust. The former is faith in strangers, in people who *may be different from yourself*. It is *not* based upon adult experiences, such as joining voluntary associations (much less political parties). Rather, you learn it early in life from your family.

Generalized trust reflects an optimistic world-view. Even if you could learn it as an adult from various forms of civic engagement, there are two key obstacles to doing so: First, most people spend little time in any voluntary organization, at best a few hours a week. This will hardly suffice to make people more (or less) trusting in their fellow citizens (Newton, 1997: 579). Second, we are simply unlikely to meet people who are different from ourselves in our

civic life. Now, choral societies and bird-watching groups – two of the groups that Putnam (1993) found so central to civic life in Italy – will hardly *destroy* trust. And there is nothing wrong with such narrow groups. They bring lots of joy to their members and don't harm anybody. But they are poor candidates for creating generalized trust (Rosenblum, 1998). Political party activity is not as benign as membership in bird-watching societies. The whole purpose of joining a political party is to interact with people who share your values. So party membership is likely to enhance particularized (in-group) trust at the expense of out-group trust.

PARTIES AND GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Putnam (2000: 37–45) treats political parties like any other voluntary organization. Weinstein (1999) and Andersen and Young (2000) make a more explicit linkage between political parties and social capital. Both posit an *indirect* rather than direct linkage. Neither claims that parties themselves are traditional voluntary associations that bring people together. Weinstein argues that party mobilization leads to greater political participation, a thesis in political behavior that long pre-dates the concern about social capital. He demonstrates that aggregated levels of party contact in the American states strongly affect participation rates. He also shows that party mobilization has a powerful effect on a combined measure of community organizational life (group membership, serving as an officer in a club, attending club meetings) and informal socializing (visiting friends and entertaining people at home). The connection between party mobilization and turnout is not at all surprising. We have long known that party mobilization and the face-to-face contact it brings can have a powerful effect on turnout (Gosnell, 1927; Gerber and Green, 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen, 2003: 89–90). The link with organizational life is new (see below) and is worthy of further concern. So is the connection with informal socializing. This relationship is curious: Why should contact with a party worker make me more likely to hold a dinner party or visit a friend's house?

The Andersen–Young argument links political party organizations to voluntary associations in the United States. Andersen and Young argue that parties have built their organizations by mobilizing existing groups, such as ethnic, labor, church, teachers, business, and farm associations as well as volunteer fire

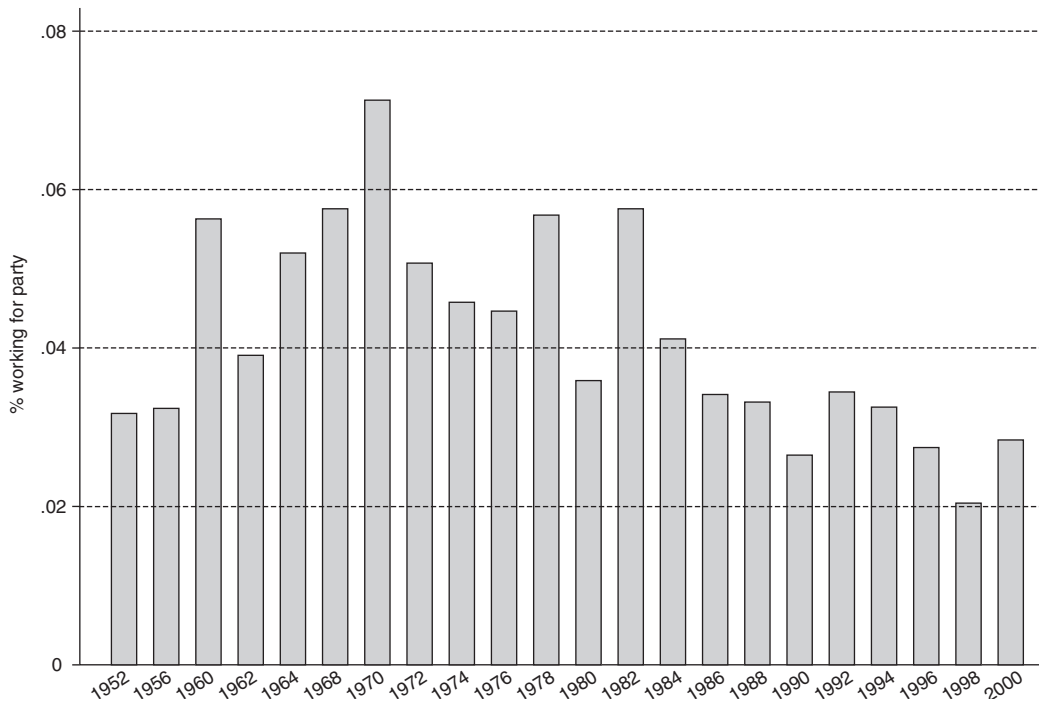


Figure 31.1 Share of Americans working for party, 1952–2000

Source: American National Election Study cumulative file (1948–2000)

Regression with time: $1.714 - 0.001 * \text{Year}$ ($r^2 = 0.587$)

companies. Wheat farmers played a key role in establishing political parties in Canada and the United States, the Saskatchewan branch of the Canadian Cooperative Foundation and North Dakota's Non-Partisan League (Lipset, 1968: 259–61). Andersen and Young (2000: 8–10) also summarize surveys of party leaders in American communities and delegates to party conventions; they find that most were also active in civic organizations.

The modern party has retained its ties to other voluntary organizations. Political parties sponsor sports clubs and professional teams, as well as other social groups. In Israel, most of the major banks were initially established by unions or religious organizations affiliated with political parties. Today there are far fewer face-to-face ties between the party and the citizen than in the past. Parties now develop ties with advocacy organizations that place little emphasis on direct contact with citizens and are more concerned with raising funds for campaigns. Putnam (2000: 40) argues: 'While membership in a political club was cut in half between 1967 and 1987, the fraction of the public that contributed to a political campaign

nearly doubled.' Party contact with voters has fallen dramatically over time (see Figure 31.1 for the trend in the American National Election Study, showing a powerful downward trend with a strong fit, $r^2 = 0.587$). Rosenstone and Hansen link this decline to falling turnout. And Putnam (2000: 45) points to a 42% decline in the share of Americans who report working for a political party from 1973 to 1994. Most European parties lost members from the 1980s to the 1990s (Ware, 1996: 73). There were much sharper declines over a longer time frame in Denmark (Bille, 1994: 137) and the Netherlands (Koole, 1994: 287); and in a shorter period (1990 to 1999) for the British Labour Party (Seyd and Whiteley, 2002: 88).

The portrait drawn by Putnam and by Andersen and Young is one of dedicated party workers serving their communities and mobilizing voters. It is a sign of social capital at work. Yet, it is an exaggeration of the role of party members in politics. Seyd and Whiteley (2002: 88, 118–19) found that for most Labour Party members in Great Britain the party was little more than a 'checkbook' organization, or what Putnam (2000: 32) called a 'tertiary'

organization. Members contributed money (64% of Labour members did in 1999) and displayed campaign posters (90%), but fewer than half of the members delivered party leaflets or even reminded others to vote. And fewer than a quarter of members helped with mailings, canvassed door-to-door, raised money from others, or drove voters to the polls. Only 10 percent participated in phone banks, ran street stalls, or attended vote counting. By the late 1990s, 65 percent of Labour Party members devoted no time at all to party activities and 75 percent said that they were not at all active or not very active. The story is similar in Italy, where 'ordinary members [have] little contact with the party's organization and scarcely participat[e] in any of its activities' (Bardi and Morlino, 1994: 255).

The modern party member gets involved in politics much in the same way that people who belong to groups such as Common Cause or many environmental organizations (from the National Wildlife Federation to Greenpeace): They come for the program (or for Labour, the programme), not for the social interaction (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992: 212-17; Rothenberg, 1992). Even among the more highly committed German Greens, only 20 percent of party members in Frankfurt attended meetings in the early 1980s (Kitschelt, 1989: 152).

Perhaps, as Putnam (1993: 115) argues, people join the party for ideological reasons, but develop social ties and a cooperative spirit as a 'by-product' of their membership. Party organizations once offered opportunities for social interactions in the United States and Europe. British, American, and German local party organizations in the early 20th century were often more social clubs than ideological forums; people gathered together to play snooker, drink beer, and collect stamps, rather than discuss the issues of the day. These clubs were not very effective in getting people to perform real party work. The 'recreational' activities led to 'an apolitical culture within the organization' (Ware, 1992: 83). By the mid-20th century, young people deserted party organizations for singles bars for their social lives. The people who continued to congregate in party organizations often had little time for or interest in socializing (Ware, 1992: 81-5; Sarrow, 1996: 190-1). In his study of political reform clubs in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles in the 1950s and early 1960s, James Q. Wilson (1962: 167-8) recounted what one Los Angeles leader told him: 'The club movement is not basically a social movement ... My social friends are not in the clubs. I don't go to the homes of the people I know in the clubs and they don't come

to mine.' Club meetings, Wilson (1962: 168) argued, were 'long and often dull in the extreme, with a seemingly endless agenda and interminable speakers'.

Seyd and Whiteley (2002: 98) found that a bare majority of Labour Party members who were not at all active (40 percent of the sample) thought membership was a good way to meet 'interesting people'; 75 percent of active and 84 percent of very active party members agreed that party membership helps establish social ties, but active members constitute just 25 percent of party members. Meetings of strongly ideological parties in Europe often degenerated into hostile debates between the in-group clique and new members who might not be as strongly committed, driving out all but the most dedicated (Ware, 1992: 82; Kitschelt, 1989: 126-7).

It is hardly surprising to find that the most active party members find friends in the organization. It also makes sense that these strong activists take an active role in other organizations. They are, after all, the most dedicated partisans. Are party members more likely to be civic activists more generally? The 1996 American National Election Study asked about membership in parties, labor unions, and other groups (business, veterans, church, other religious, elderly, women's, political, civic, ideological, children, hobby, community, fraternal, service, educational, cultural, and self-help). There was a moderate correlation ($r = 0.198$) between membership in parties and political groups, and modest correlations with service and cultural groups (0.13 each). All of the other groups had correlations of 0.10 or less (seven had correlations less than 0.05, including ideological groups). The 'civic activists' who belonged to both parties and either service or cultural groups comprised just 1.56 percent of the total sample. Overall, then, joining a party in the United States does not lead to greater civic activism, except among a small handful of people.

Nor is there evidence that strong party organizations lead to a more civic environment. Mayhew (1986) classified the American states according to the strength of their political party organizations, ranging from the very powerful 'traditional party organizations' (high 'TPO' scores) in the industrial states to the much weaker parties (especially in the West). Do states with stronger party organizations also have a more vibrant civic life? Figures 30.2 and 30.3 suggest not. There is a weak *negative* correlation between party organization strength and Putnam's state-level measure of social capital ($r = -0.293$) from *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000) and his more specific measure of civic group membership in the states ($r = -0.158$).

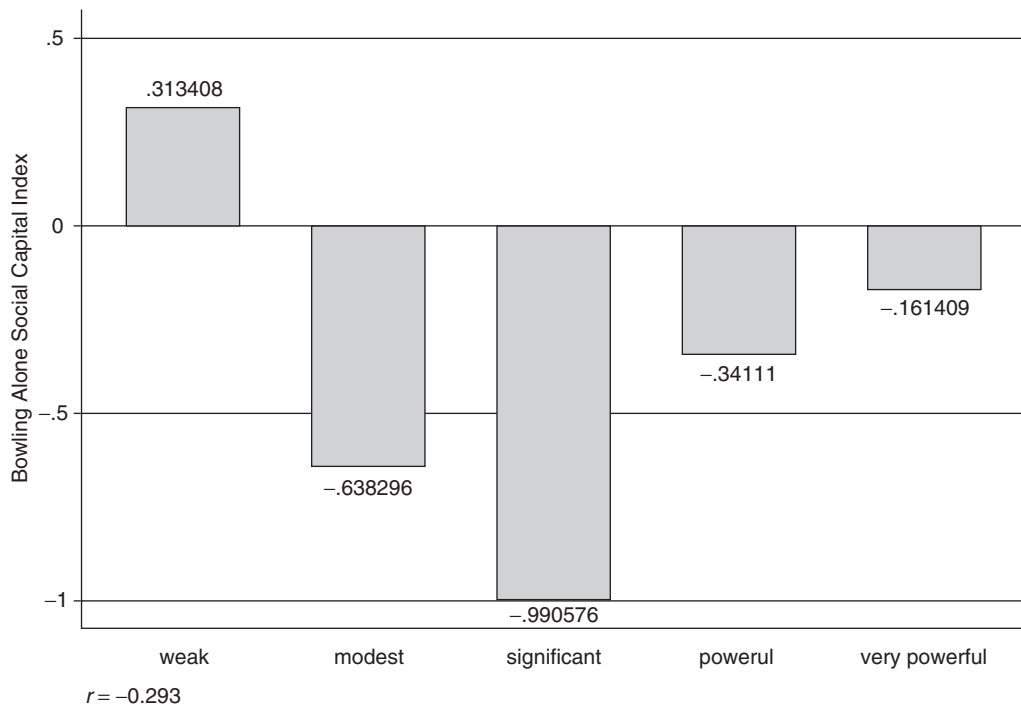


Figure 31.2. Bowling Alone social capital index by Mayhew party organization strength

States with strong party organizations have lower social capital.

The United States is hardly typical, so I turn to the World Values Surveys. Here we see much stronger correlations between party membership and participation in other voluntary organizations (ranging from $r = 0.248$ for church membership to 0.427 for environmental organizations, with unions, and charitable, sports, arts, professional groups in between). These are much more powerful correlations (especially since they are based on more than 150,000 cases). They warrant further analysis, so I aggregated the membership scores by country. I excluded Nigeria and the United States because both had inexplicably high memberships in parties (almost 40 percent in Nigeria and 26 percent in the United States). The aggregate picture still suggests a significant link between membership in parties and in professional associations (the civic group with the highest simple correlation), $r^2 = 0.368$ (see Figure 31.4). However, this result stems almost entirely from the low rates of membership across all organizations in the former communist nations (see Howard, 2003). When I eliminate these countries, the r^2 falls to 0.152 (see Figure 31.5). Overall, then, the relationship between

parties and civic life is modest at best. A handful of people participate in both forms of organization, but membership in parties is not common (averaging around 8 percent in the World Values Surveys) and *active participation* is the preserve of a small share of activists (4 percent in the World Values Survey say that they are active members).

Is this low rate of participation a contemporary phenomenon? Katz and Mair (1995) argue that modern political parties have become like cartels. Modern parties are like businesses, controlled from above and forsaking ideological purity. As party membership has fallen, control of the party apparatus has shifted to the parliamentary parties, which have sought greater autonomy from constituency groups.

Parties are more centralized at the turn of the 21st century. Yet, we cannot look back to halcyon days where large numbers of citizens took an active role in party affairs. Major parties in most democracies did have more members 50 to 100 years ago. However, membership figures give a distorted view of how active members are. Ware (1992: 82) argued that the machine parties of the early 20th century were 'highly inefficient in recruiting labour to perform party

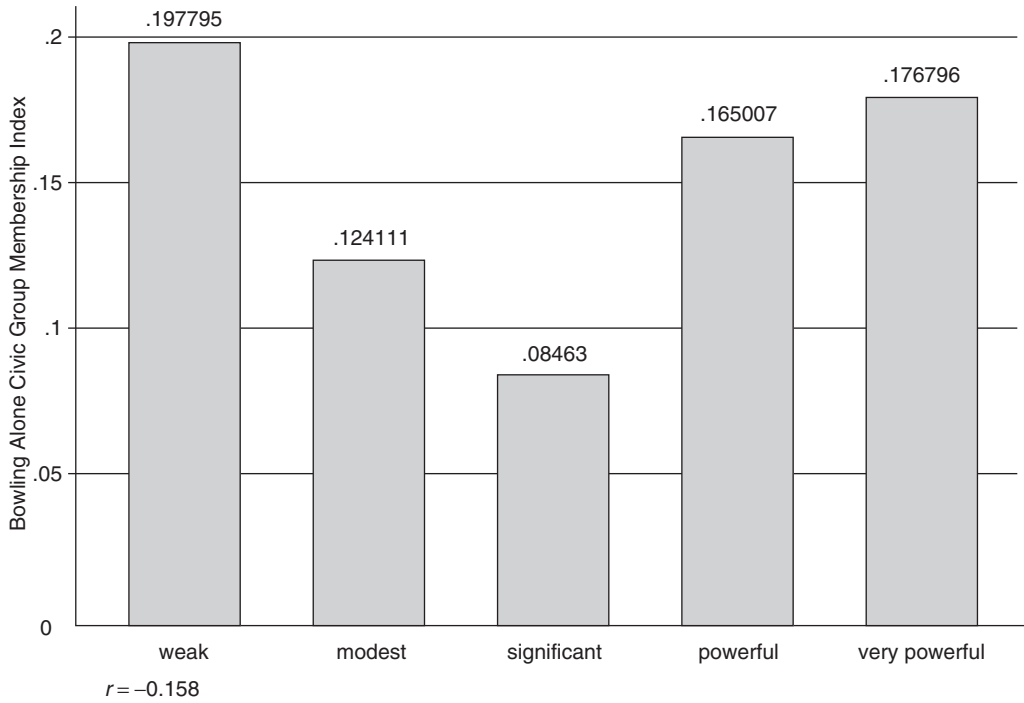


Figure 31.3 Bowling Alone civic group membership index by Mayhew party organization strength

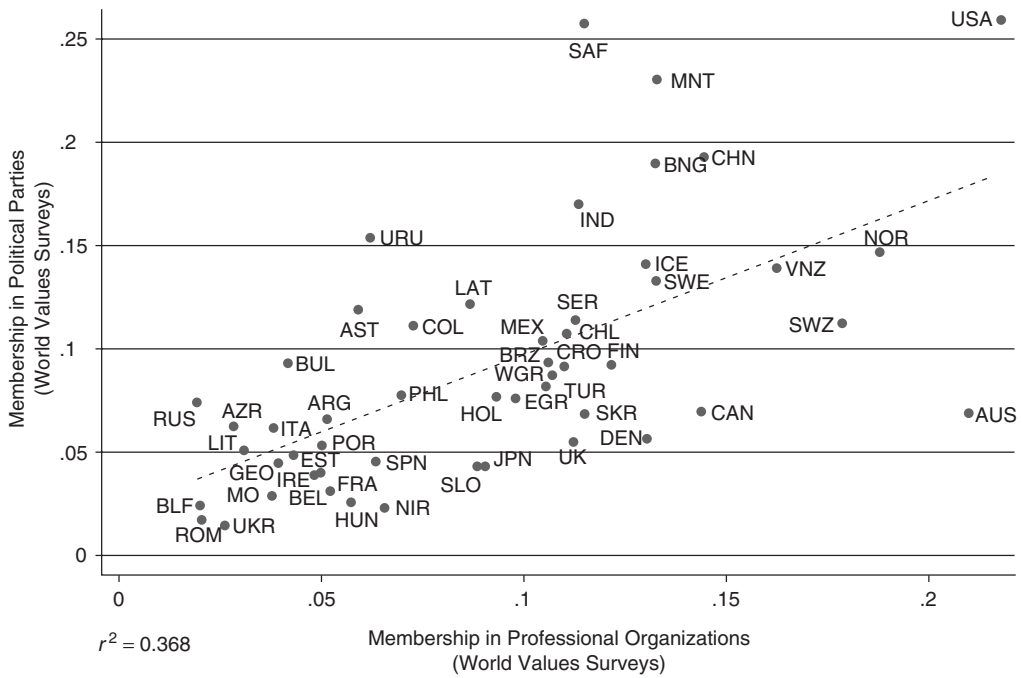


Figure 31.4 Membership in party organizations and professional associations (Word Values Surveys)

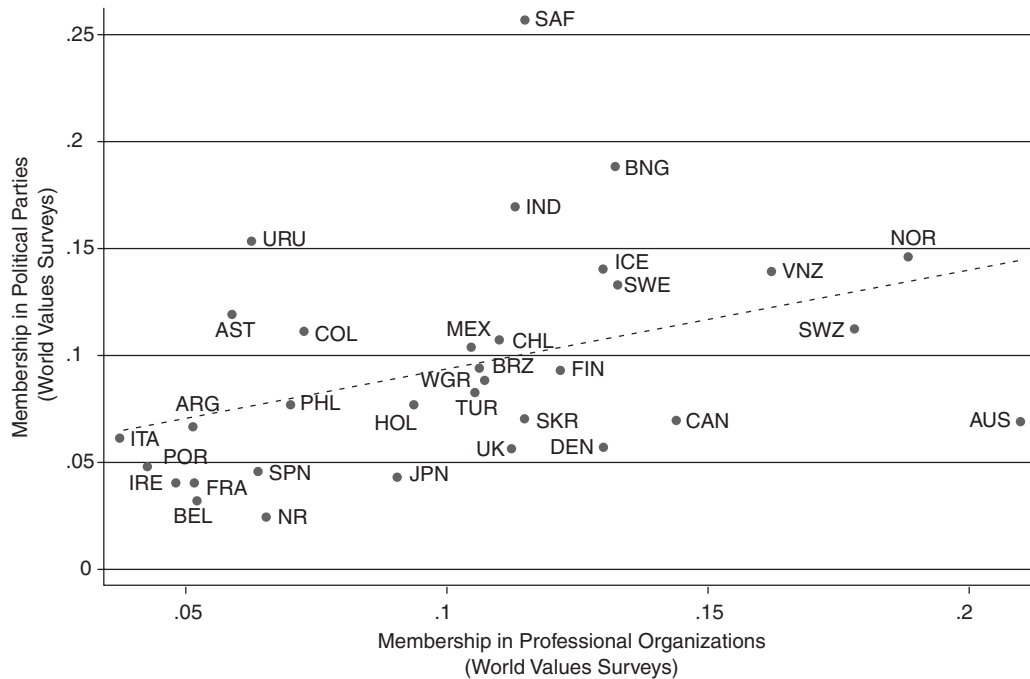


Figure 31.5 Membership in party organizations and professional associations (World Values Surveys)

$r^2 = 0.152$, excluding former Communist nations and USA.

tasks'. Lipset (1968: 259–66) noted that large shares of the populations of Saskatchewan and North Dakota were members of populist parties in the 1940s. However, he cautioned (Lipset, 1968: 265) that '[t]he Saskatchewan pattern ... provides no panacea for those who would plan society so as to create the basis for popular community activity'. The rural political setting (where neighbors regularly interacted with each other) and the poverty of the farm economy provided a recipe for a highly mobilized protest politics that is unlikely to be met in most political settings, even in the 19th century.

While Putnam (2000: 45) bemoans the sharp drop in citizens working for a political party in the United States, the 1973 starting point was just 6.3 percent of the American population, down to 2.8 percent by 1994 (Uslaner with Brown, 2004).¹ There are fewer party contacts with voters in the United States (Rosenstone and Hansen, 2003) and in Britain (Scarrow, 1996: 188). In both countries, however, the share of people who worked for political parties at any time in the past half century was minuscule, perhaps not even as high as 5 percent. The decline in party work, Scarrow (1996: 190) argues, is 'small, rather than ... dramatic'.

Parties and other voluntary organizations have an uneasy relationship. Parties have often depended upon outside organizations for support. In many instances, such as labor parties especially in Western Europe, parties are legal extensions of other organizations. These groups provide both activists and funding for the parties. Yet, they also constrain the parties. Outside groups will set the party programs, limiting the maneuverability of parties in elections. In more than a handful of cases, this will produce strains between a party seeking to win a national election and an outside group committed to a particular platform. Labour in Britain struggled with the trade union movement in the 1990s, finally declaring its independence and campaigning (successfully) as 'New Labour'. Christian democratic parties throughout Europe are associated with the Catholic Church; they have struggled to maintain moderate positions on controversial social issues such as abortion and gay rights, even in defiance of Church doctrine.

Parties seeking to win elections have an incentive to limit participatory democracy. Party leaders need to maintain control of their own platforms. Civic groups care less about

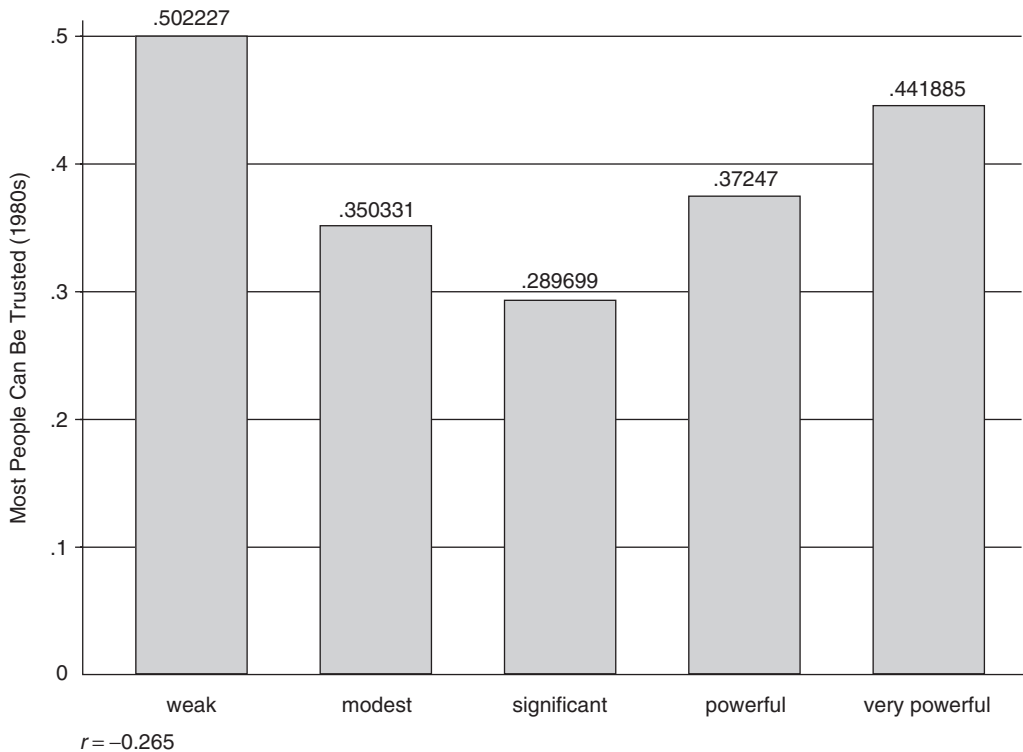


Figure 31.6 Generalized trust by Mayhew party organization strength

winning elections than about pursuing a cause. Too much social capital can mean weak parties that cannot contest elections. Party activists are much more ideological than the rank-and-file members, party supporters in the electorate, and especially the much heralded median voter (Aldrich, 1995; Flanagan, 1995; Seyd and Whiteley, 1992: 212–17). Parties need ideologies – to govern, to attract activists, and indeed even to win elections (Hinich and Munger, 1994). Yet they must not become too extreme, lest they pay an electoral price. And, if they had their way, the most dedicated activists would push the parties past the point of electoral safety (Strøm, 1995: 577; Uslaner, 1999: Chapter 5).

It is hardly surprising that the parties with the largest shares of activists represent radical policies, where militants disdain the goal of winning elections. For many of these radical parties, such as environmental parties in Belgium, the most militant members care more about community activism than about national electoral strategies (Kitschelt and Hellemans, 1990: 136–8). These policy-oriented parties can ‘afford’ widespread participation and even ‘infiltration’ by other interests. Office-seeking parties must try to constrain

their members’ participation. Party leaders need activists to help run the campaigns, but want to limit participation. So they may offer party workers the ‘selective benefit’ of greater opportunities to run for office in the future (Strøm, 1990: 576–8). Since barely a handful of members ever run for office,² such a pay-off restricts the influence of party members.

PARTIES AND TRUST

If generalized trust is a key component of social capital, we should not look to political parties – or indeed political life – to foster it. Much of political life is not about bringing people together for cooperation. Politics thrives on mistrust (Barber, 1983; Warren, 1996). Elections are inherently polarizing events and the further apart parties are from each other on an ideological spectrum, the less likely they are to bring about trust in people who are different from oneself.

In Figure 31.6, I show levels of generalized trust in the American states by Mayhew’s

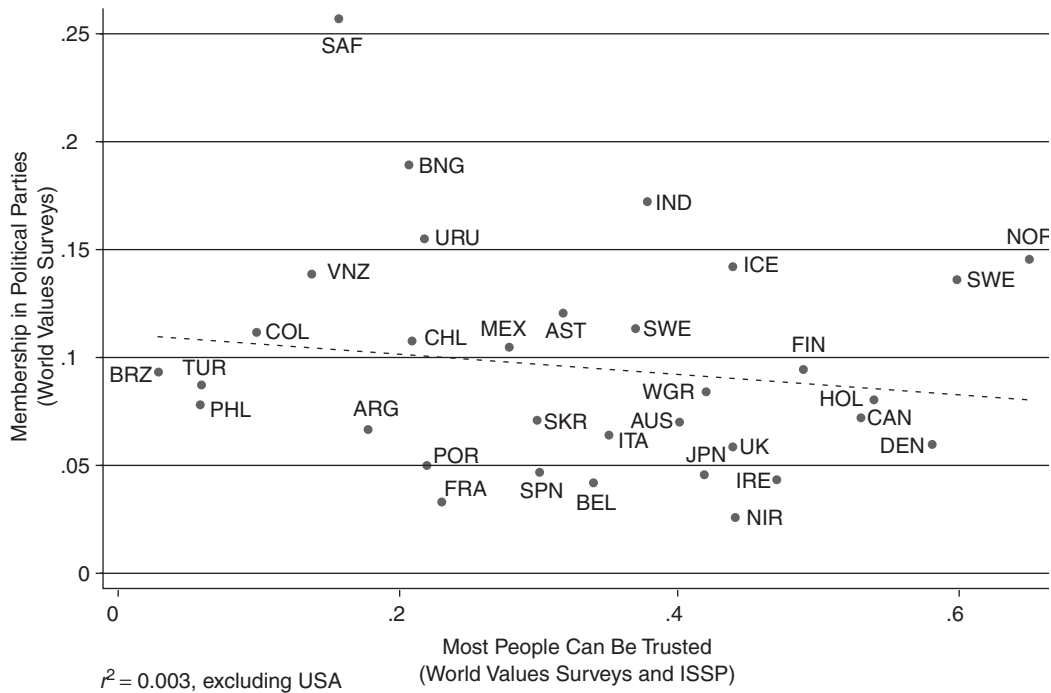


Figure 31.7 Membership in party organizations and generalized trust

traditional party organization index. And there is at least modest evidence ($r = -0.265$) that strong parties lead to less trust. States with the strongest party organizations have *less trusting citizenries*. Cross-nationally, there is less support for this linkage: When I plot generalized trust against party membership across the countries in the World Values Survey (Figure 31.7), there is no relationship at all between party membership and trust ($r^2 = 0.003$). There is stronger support for the negative relationship in roll call voting in the United States: As generalized trust has fallen in the United States, party polarization in legislative voting has increased (Uslaner, 2000).

Party activity is all about building *particularized trust* (in-group trust) rather than generalized trust. Strongly ideological activists are likely to see cooperating with the opposition as illegitimate. Seventy percent of Americans who are strong ideologues believe that 'compromise is just selling out', compared with 53 percent of moderates. Three-quarters of people who are both strong ideologues and who are politically active view compromise with suspicion (compared to 43 percent of the inactive non-ideologues).³

When activists play a stronger role in shaping the party's agenda, the party shifts more strongly toward ideological extremes (Aldrich, 1995). Where the parties are tightly controlled by a small elite, electoral considerations dominate over ideological purity. New York State Senator George Washington Plunkitt, head of the Tammany Hall Democratic machine in New York City in the early 20th century, had little time for the great issues of the day. He was a political boss and his two primary concerns were winning elections and dispensing patronage. To ensure his continued power base, he maintained cordial relations with the opposition Republicans (Riordon, 1948: 51–2): 'When Tammany's on top I do good turns for the Republicans. When they're on top they don't forget me. ... Me and the Republicans are enemies just one day in the year – election day. Then we fight tooth and nail. The rest of the time it's live and let live with us.'

REPRISE

Major political parties are elite institutions focused on winning elections and formulating

public policies to govern the nation. In each case, social capital may prove to be more of a hindrance than a help to a party's mission. Too much participation can push a party to an ideological extreme and make it more difficult for the party to win an election. The Labour Party in Great Britain reasserted itself, and became dominant, in the 1990s by denying its membership base the power to set party policies. The Greens in several European countries have fought internal battles over what strategy to follow. The 'Realo' (realist) faction in the German party prevailed in a fierce intra-party battle, leading the Greens to join the Social Democrats in a governing coalition. The Greens' leader, Joschka Fischer, a former radical, became German foreign minister and a supporter of a largely activist foreign policy vehemently opposed by the 'Fundis' wing of the party.

Parties cannot afford too much participation. Not only do they abjure the ideological drift of the activists, but governing coalitions cannot tolerate constant meddling from constituents on the details of public policy. Parties don't need, and their leaders don't want, the camaraderie of a choral society or a bowling league. Parties need to mobilize voters *on election day*. At other times, the party leaders prefer that voters go their own way.

Parties also don't depend upon trust. A trusting environment helps parties reach agreement across the aisle on controversial policy issues (Uslaner, 2002: Chapter 7). Parties may find the commitment to seek compromises to be anathema to their goal of getting elected. If the party promises compromise too early, it has no message and voters may have little reason to choose it over the opposition. No wonder, then, that among the chorus of civic leaders bemoaning the loss of trust and civic engagement, party leaders have been consciously absent.

NOTES

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1. The figures from the American National Election Study are very similar: 5.7 percent in 1968 and 2.7 percent in 1996.
2. In the Roper Political and Social Trends data cited above, in 1994, 2.8 percent of respondents worked for a political party, while just 0.7 percent ever claimed to run for office; 23 percent of people who worked for a party had at least once engaged in a sit-in or protest, compared to 16 percent who ran for office.
3. These data come from Hibbing and Thiess-Morse (1995). I am grateful to John Hibbing and Beth Thiess-Morse for providing them to me.

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