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Project Summary

“Inequality, Trust, and Civic Engagement”

“Inequality, Trust, and Civic Engagement” seeks to explain falling levels of civic engagement in the United States from the 1960s to the present. Fewer Americans are participating in civic life, especially in arenas that demonstrate a strong commitment to one’s community such as giving to charity and volunteering time. I argue that rising levels of economic inequality are a key reason why participation has fallen. But the relationship between inequality and declining participation may not be direct. I offer an alternative explanation: Rising inequality makes people less optimistic for the future, which makes them less trusting of others, and thus less likely to take part in activities that bind them to their communities. I shall test this claim through statistical models and present findings to both the scholarly community and to the larger public.

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There is widespread agreement that Americans participate less in civic affairs than they once did. Americans have withdrawn from all sorts of civic activities, from voting in elections to joining civic groups to the more demanding forms of engagement such as giving to charity and volunteering time.¹

I suggest in this research that much of the decline in civic engagement can be traced, either directly or indirectly, to rising levels of economic inequality in the United States. The link may be more likely to be indirect. One of the keys to an engaged citizenry is a sense of community, which is reflected in the level of interpersonal trust in a society. Trust leads to civic engagement. And trust has fallen sharply in the United States: In 1960, when the question was first asked in a national survey, 58 percent of Americans said that “most people can be trusted.” By the mid-to-late 1990s, this figure had dropped to barely more than one-third of Americans. As Americans have become less connected to one another, they should participate less in civic affairs—especially in activities that depend heavily upon a sense of community.

As I have shown in my book in progress The Moral Foundations of Trust, the principal reason for the drop in trust is the increase in economic inequality in the United States. There has been a 20 percent increase in the value of the Gini index of income inequality (the most widely used measure of disparities in wealth) in the United States from 1960 to 1998.²

I argue that increasing economic inequality leads to a less trusting society—and lower trust leads to a society with lower levels of civic engagement.

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1. On the decline in membership in voluntary organizations and in political participation, see Robert Putnam, Bowling Alone (New York: Simon and Schuster, in press). On giving to charity and volunteering time, see Eric M. Uslander, The Moral Foundations of Trust (unpublished manuscript, University of Maryland–College Park), ch. 5.
 2. United States Department of Commerce, Economic and Statistics Administration, Measuring 50 Years of Economic Change (Washington: Bureau of the Census, 1998); and Jared Bernstein et al., Pulling Apart (Washington: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities/Economic Policy Institute, 2000).

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Participation in civic life is a sign of people’s commitment to their society. The decline of participation in both political and social life bode ill for civil society. And when the decline in participation stems from rising economic inequality, serious questions arise about whether American democracy is becoming less representative. Voices that opt out of participating will not be heard, and public policy will reflect the views of those who are well off even more than it usually does.

Focus of the Research

This research will establish both the theoretical and empirical foundations of the argument about how economic inequality may lead to waning civic engagement. It will also add to the burgeoning national debate about inequality and its consequences.

The claim that income inequality is important for shaping civic engagement is hardly new.³ Yet, my take on this argument is distinctive. And it has important policy implications: Restoring our civic responsibility depends upon taking action to reduce income disparities.

Wealthier people are more likely to take part in a wide range of political and social activities. Well-off people have more education—and education is one of the major forces shaping participation in virtually every realm. Additionally, people who have higher paying jobs are more likely to have jobs where they practice skills, such as letter writing and organizing groups to work together.⁴

As the income gap between rich and poor has grown over time, there should be a corresponding increase in the class skew of civic engagement. And this simple trend should help account for the decline in many forms of civic engagement in the United States. Yet, some research casts doubt on this

3. See Walter Dean Burnham, Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970); and Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady, Voice and Equality (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

4. Verba et al., Voice and Equality, p. 457.

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explanation, and we need to think again about how inequality might affect participation.⁵

For some types of participation, it may be the case that as inequality goes up, participation goes down and the class skew should also increase. This simple relationship should hold for types of participation that are most skewed by class in the first place.⁶ Such activities include petitioning public officials, attending public meetings, writing to members of Congress or to newspapers, being an officer in a club, working for a political party, joining a group that works to reform government, and running for office. These are all demanding activities that use skills that are mostly available to the middle and upper classes.

There may be a less direct connection between increasing income inequality and other forms of civic engagement. More Americans volunteer their time than write to public officials or to newspapers (among other activities). Two key types of civic engagement, volunteering and giving to charity, depend more upon moral than financial resources. In my book manuscript in progress, The Moral Foundations of Trust, I show that both volunteering and giving to charity depend upon trust in other people even more than upon financial resources. Faith in others is essentially an acceptance of the belief that people who may be different from you are nevertheless part of your moral community. It is the moral glue that holds a society together (what I call the “chicken soup of social life”).

Volunteering and charitable giving have fallen sharply since the 1960s. These trends track the decline in interpersonal trust much more sharply than they follow trends in economic inequality. Yet, trust itself strongly depends upon economic equality. Trust is a relationship among equals. And it reflects an optimistic view that the world is a good place full of people who share our fundamental

5. Jan E. Leighley and Jonathan Nagler, “Socioeconomic Bias in Turnout 1964-1988: The Voters Remain the Same,” American Political Science Review (1992): 725-736.

6. Verba et al., Voice and Equality, passim.

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values, that life will continue to get better, and that we can make it so through our own efforts. Mistrust, on the other hand, reflects a pessimistic view of the future and that we are prisoners of forces beyond our control.⁷

People become pessimistic as the gap between the rich and the poor gets larger. When inequality is rising, people at the bottom see those at the top as privileged *and* powerful. Pessimists distrust others *and* opt out of participation in civic life, especially those activities that reflect a deeper commitment to one’s community (and to people unlike yourself) such as giving to charity or volunteering time.

Methodology

I propose to test these two paths from inequality to civic engagement using both aggregate and individual level data.

I first propose to look at aggregate trends in participation (including voting, signing petitions, attending public meetings, writing letters to members of Congress and to newspapers, writing articles, working for political parties, making public speeches, joining “good government” groups, and serving as an officer in a club) and where data are available, trends in the class skew of participation from the 1970s to the 1990s. The data on aggregate trends in participation come from the Roper Social and Political Trends archive, which asked these questions of national samples from 1974 to 1994.

Second, I propose to examine the indirect linkage between trust and the forms of civic engagement that depend most on moral resources. Do volunteering and charitable contributions become the

7. See related arguments in Adam B. Seligman, The Problem of Trust (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 37-41; and Robert Putnam, Making Democracy Work (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 174. On the relationship between trust and inequality, see Uslaner, The Moral Foundations of Trust, chs. 2, 6, and 7; Stephen Knack, “Social Capital, Growth, and Poverty: A Survey of the Cross-Country Evidence,” Washington: The World Bank, 1999; and John Brehm and Wendy Rahn, “Individual Level Evidence for the Causes and Consequences of Social Capital,” American Journal of Political Science, 41:888-1023.

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exclusive province of the handful of trusters in an unequal society? If my hypothesis holds, then mistrusters opt out as the distribution of wealth becomes more unequal—and the class skew of civic engagement becomes more worrisome. I shall estimate similar models using trends in charitable contributions obtained from the United Way and from Giving USA and trends in volunteering from the Red Cross and the Roper Social and Political Trends archive. In each case, I shall examine whether there is a direct relationship between civic engagement and trust, or whether the relationship depends upon trust using standard time series regression techniques controlling for other variables such as changes in tax laws and economic conditions.

Third, I shall examine whether the level of inequality has a direct or indirect effect on trust as a predictor of political participation and volunteering in the American states over time. I propose to aggregate the levels of volunteering, political participation, and other forms of civic engagement (such as group membership) in the Roper Social and Political Trends archive, surveys by the INDEPENDENT SECTOR, and the General Social Survey to the state level for the decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. I shall also aggregate measures of trust across a range of surveys, including the General Social Survey, but also including surveys by the American National Election Study, the Survey Research Center (Quality of Life surveys), the INDEPENDENT SECTOR, the Washington Post, and the New York Times. I shall merge these data with state-level estimates of economic inequality, which are available from the Bureau of the Census.

I expect that states with greater levels of inequality will also have fewer trusting citizens.⁸ States with higher levels of inequality should also have lower rates of participation, controlling for other standard variables that predict various forms of civic engagement (education levels, income levels, level of political competition, age distribution of the public, etc.). However, the relationship between

8. See Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), ch. 19.

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inequality and participation:

- 1) **will vary depending upon the type of participation examined. There may be weak to moderate impacts for many types of political participation such as voting and joining civic associations, but much more powerful impacts for activities that rely upon resources that shape skills (such as writing letters to editors or articles, signing petitions, and serving as an officer in a club) and that rely heavily upon moral resources (such as volunteering).**
- 2) **will have an indirect, rather than a direct, impact on most forms of civic engagement. The indirect effect will go through trust. This entails establishing a causal chain (to be estimated by simultaneous equation modeling) from inequality to trust to civic engagement.**
- 3) **There is more likely to be a direct effect from inequality to civic participation for activities that rely upon skills that are developed through education or resources such as free time that depend upon having enough free time to get involved in political life. These activities include letter writing, petitioning, writing articles, serving as an officer in a club, giving speeches, working for political parties, and attending public meetings. These activities do not depend upon trust at all—and may involve the sort of political confrontation that will destroy any existing social trust.⁹ On the other hand, certain types of civic engagement do depend upon trust in other people. These are activities that rely more upon moral resources than particular skills: volunteering time and giving to charity. Here I expect only an indirect relationship between civic participation and inequality—a connection that is conditioned by trust.**

The models I shall estimate lead to predictions that:

- 1) **Civic engagement will be lower in states with more trusting citizens—and with higher levels of economic equality.**

9. See Uslander, The Moral Foundations of Trust, ch. 7.

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- 2) As economic inequality in the states has increased, trust has decreased—and the level of civic engagement, especially for volunteering, should decrease. While the aggregate trends in most forms of civic engagement have been downward, the various forms of civic participation have not all fallen at similar rates. Nor do they all depend upon either trust or economic equality. There is at least moderate support for this linkage for turnout: As the level of economic inequality has increased across the 50 states and the District of Columbia from 1969 to 1989, turnout in Presidential elections has fallen from 1972 to 1992. Figure 1 demonstrates the connection between changes in economic equality and changes in turnout across the 51 states.¹⁰ I would expect even more powerful results for other, more demanding, forms of civic engagement.
- 3) In states with higher levels of inequality, not only should we see lower rates of civic engagement, but we should also see greater class skews of participation (as measured by Gini indices for participation that can be computed from survey data).
- 4) Does civic engagement really depend upon economic inequality, or upon the level of economic well-being of the citizen? I shall examine this linkage by positing standard models of volunteering and charitable contributions at the individual level (for the 1992 and 1996 American National Election Studies, 1996 General Social Survey and the 1996 INDEPENDENT SECTOR survey), following the analyses I conducted in The Moral Foundations of Trust. In these models, measures of trust are consistently the strongest predictors of volunteering and charitable giving. Economic status is also a consistently strong determinant of charitable giving. I shall then add contextual (statewide) measures of economic inequality to the models, as well as interaction terms between trust and

10. These results and the associated graph were provided by William Evans of the Department of Economics, University of Maryland–College Park.

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inequality, to see whether the level of economic inequality in a person’s environment also shapes (beyond socioeconomic status) whether someone volunteers or gives to charity. My expectation is that state level Gini indices should affect these forms of civic engagement. However, the level of economic inequality should be particularly strong for people who *mistrust* others—or who only trust people like themselves.

- 5) As economic inequality has increased over time, both the level of participation and the class skew of participation should increase. Thus, we should see a dynamic for inequality *and* trust over both space (across states) and time. Especially for volunteering, which should depend most heavily upon trust, we should find that the highest levels of participation (and smallest class skews) occurred in the most trusting states (the North Central states such as Minnesota and the Dakotas) when economic inequality was lower (in the 1970s). In contrast, we should see the lowest levels of volunteering (and the greatest class skew) in the least trusting states (the Deep South) when economic inequality is highest (the 1990s). I shall test this claim using simultaneous equation estimation with interaction terms for trust and inequality and for both trust and inequality at different time points.**

Audiences and Schedule

The research will be conducted during the 2000-2002 academic years at the University of Maryland. Much of the first academic year will be spent putting the data sets together. I propose to do aggregate analyses by state, but the measures of participation and trust come from large surveys. So I must, with the help of a graduate assistant, create the aggregate measures and build the data sets of state level indicators of participation and trust. Since these measures come from different surveys, there will be a fair amount of data manipulating involved. Some of the data set generation will involve comparing different weighting schemes in the surveys to come up with representative aggregate state-level data sets. Also I shall have to merge the state-level economic inequality data with survey data and this will also be

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time consuming.

The bulk of the analyses will be done in the summer of 2001 and throughout the 2001-2002 academic year and summer. The 2002-2003 academic year and summer will be spent writing the manuscript. As data are developed earlier, I shall present papers from the initial result.

This research proposal has two intended audiences. The statistical analysis of surveys, of course, will be aimed at the academic community and I shall write conference papers, articles, and a book from the research. There are also important policy implications from this research. I shall present these results to the policy community, as I have done previously--including invitations to give papers at such public meetings as the Communitarian Summit, the Department of State's Secretary's Open Forum, regular coverage of my work by the Washington Post, and media appearances such as interviews on ABC's Good Morning America and on CNN specials.

The success of this research depends upon both positive reception by the scholarly community and especially by my success in contributing to the debate over rising economic inequality in the United States. Inequality has become a more prominent issue in political discourse, owing to studies by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and has even caught the attention of conservative commentators such as Arianna Huffington. I hope to add to this debate.

I expect to write several conference papers that I shall submit for publication, a book, and more popular pieces for newspapers and magazines. For the public audience, I shall submit a paper to the next Communitarian Summit and look for similar forums where I can present my work to a more general audience. Several academic publishers, such as Princeton University Press, the University of Michigan Press, Cambridge University Press, and the University of Chicago Press have long-standing interests in my work and have solicited my manuscript on The Moral Foundations of Trust. In addition, the Brookings Institution Press has also expressed interest in my work and would be particularly keen on a project that has such clear-cut policy implications. I would expect the book to be drafted by the Summer

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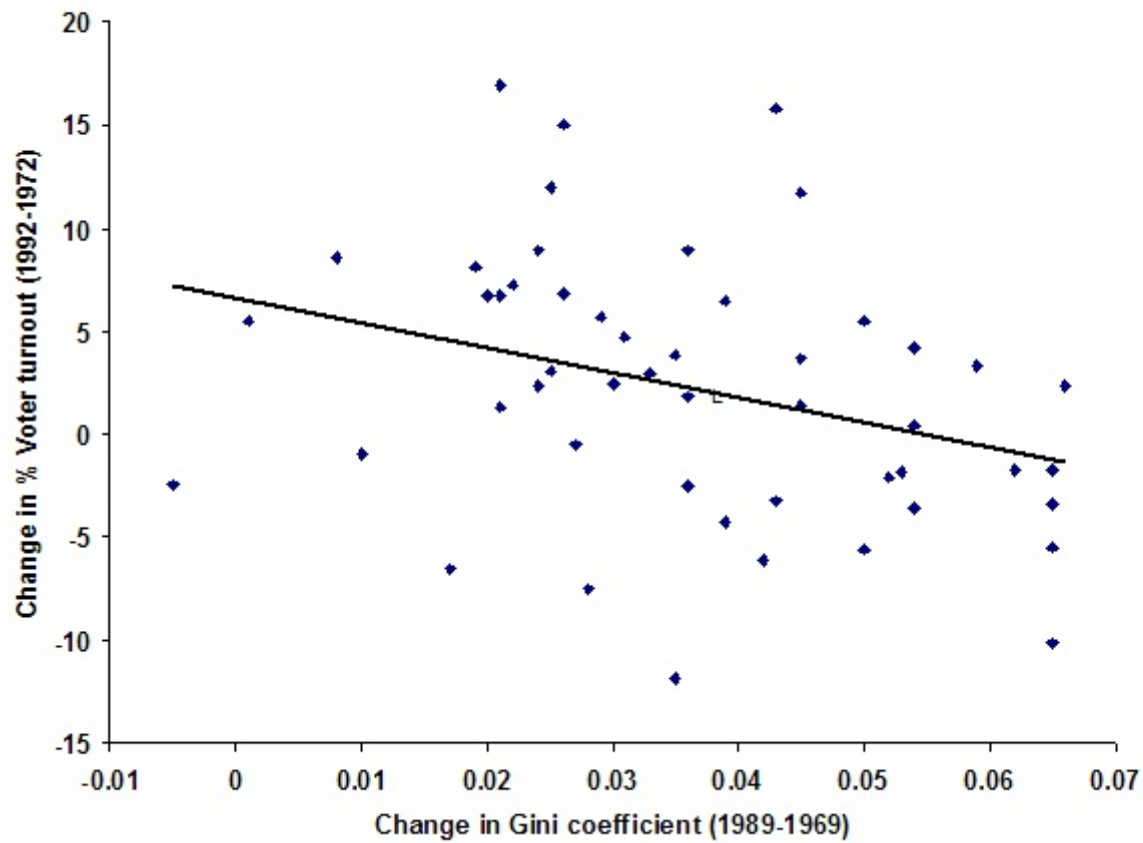
of 2002.

I also, as noted, will seek wider publicity for my work through Op-Ed and magazine articles and addresses to public forums. I would expect that my work will be featured prominently in the Washington Post. The polling editor, Richard Morin, writes a semiweekly column, “Unconventional Wisdom,” where he highlights work from the social sciences. He has devoted considerable space to my work in the past and we maintain an ongoing dialogue about it. I shall also make more contacts with research organizations focusing on economic inequality to engage them in a discussion of additional consequences of the growing gap between the rich and the poor.

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Figure 1

Relationship Between Change in Turnout (1972-92) and Change in Economic Inequality (1969-89)
Across the 50 States and the District of Columbia



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