"America’s civic life has shifted from stress on shared values and goals to the pursuit of specialized interests."

The great civic transformation of our time has diminished America’s democracy, leaving gaping holes in the fabric of our social and political life. The civic past cannot be revived, of course. Nor should it be. Before the rights revolutions of the late 20th century, too many people were marginalized and disempowered; and before the recent proliferation of citizen advocacy groups, too many important values were excluded from agendas of public debate. Nevertheless, critical aspects of the classic civic America we have lost need to be reinvented—including shared democratic values, a measure of fellowship across class lines, and opportunities for the many to participate in organized endeavors alongside the elite few.

To strengthen our democracy, we Americans need to reform our civic life, reasserting ourselves as practitioners of the preeminent democratic arts of “combination.” But what sorts of reforms should we undertake? Currently fashionable proposals call for shrinking government, concentrating civic energies at the local level, and handing public social services to religious congregations. From the perspective of the history we can readily grasp why such proposals might do more harm than good. Then we can move on to consider national-level reforms, including fresh strategies for civic organizing, and measures that could be undertaken to make the national media, elections, and government supportive of renewed democratic vitality in American civil society.

We live in a nation marked by growing gaps between the rich and the upper middle class versus everyone else—in a country experiencing the withdrawal of privileged people into gated
communities, Potemkin village vacation spots, separate schools, and expensive box seats at sporting events. America’s civic life has shifted from membership mobilization to advocacy and management and from stress on shared values and goals to the pursuit of specialized interests. In an era when the highly educated

We must find ways to nurture national solidarity, as well as local community.

and the well-to-do are cocooning within separate and privileged arrangements of all kinds, at a time when money and top-heavy initiatives count for more and more in organized politics and associational life, how could our national democracy possibly be revitalized through indiscriminate increases in any and all kinds of local sociability and neighborly charity? The people most likely to take local community and “social capitalism” to heart—to benefit from them and feel self-satisfied—are, I fear, the same folks already flourishing, in increasingly privatized ways, in America’s ever more lightly governed version of just plain old capitalism. Improving local communities, and social life more generally, will not create sufficient democratic leverage to tackle problems that can only be addressed with concerted national commitment.

The state of Maine, for example, is a wonderfully civic place, scoring near the top of Putnam’s cross-state index of social capital. No surprise, for Maine has strong civic traditions, a progressive Clean Elections Law, and relatively high voting rates. The state boasts remarkably neighborly towns; active nonprofits and citizens’ groups; elected officials readily available for personal contact; public radio and television stations plus the Bangor Daily News practicing civic journalism at its best; and native wealthy citizens (above all novelist Stephen King and his wife, Tabitha) who give generously and wisely to community undertakings everywhere in Maine. All of the good things prescribed by communitarians and social capital theorists are already happening in Maine. But Mainers still need to be part of broader national community and democratic politics with real clout. Over the decade of the 1990s, four-fifths of Maine families have experienced a steady deterioration in real incomes. What is more, the erosion of health insurance marches forward inexorably, as more and more Maine businesses and middle-class as well as poor people suffer from the rate-setting practices of nationally powerful insurance companies. Despite local civic vitality, in other words, many Maine communities and people have been badly hurt by the erosion of active democratic government in the United States.

Much the same may be true across the United States. A recent Pew Foundation study found that 77 percent of Americans “feel connected to their communities, and say the quality of life there is excellent or good.” Detailed results debunk “the popular myth that Americans are isolated in their homes and offices.” They document that “people have a profound sense of connectivity to their communities and their neighbors, are volunteering in record numbers, are helping neighbors to solve problems, and are optimistic about the future.” Yet “Americans still have many concerns,” concluded Suzanne W. Morse, executive director of the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, who directed the study. Respondents were asked to rank order various concerns, and the “top problems ... facing communities across the country” turned out to be “the lack of jobs that pay a living wage” and “access to affordable health care.” These,
of course, are widespread problems that must be addressed by active democratic government. They cannot be solved by scattered local action, neighborly interactions, or occasional volunteering orchestrated by church congregations or nonprofit agencies. The Pew results suggest that many pundits in the current civic engagement debate have misdiagnosed the problem.

To correct for recent civic losses and revitalize American democracy, we must find ways to nurture national solidarity as well as local community. And we need national-level reforms with bite, targeted on powerful institutions and nationally ambitious activists. No more than anyone else who has studied civic trends in the United States do I have a magic wand to produce immediate civic revitalization. That acknowledged, let me make some bold, even speculative recommendations—most of which run very much against the grain of currently fashionable civic reforms.

Civic transformations happened abruptly in late-20th-century America, driven by youthful activists who bypassed older membership federations, launched new social movements, and ended up fashioning new models of professional advocacy to press rights for the disadvantaged and fresh understandings of the public interest. Social, political, and technological factors converged to facilitate the civic transformation of the 1970s to 1990, yet new ideas about the value of professional association building were also crucial. Now that the downsides of earlier changes are becoming apparent, there is, once again, room for fresh understandings of what it will take to enhance American civic democracy. Leaders who understand the democratic deficits of our overly professionalized and elitist contemporary civic life can devise new models of association building, blending the best of the old and the new civic America.

Innovation need not proceed in a vacuum, because promising reinventions are already under way. From a broad brush perspective, the substitution of professional management and advocacy for mass-mobilizing politics and membership-based associational activities has been the dominant trend since the 1960s. But organizers in certain social movements have more or less self-consciously combined classic and innovative styles of civic organizing—using the most up-to-date communications tactics for fundraising and lobbying while at the same time drawing large numbers of Americans into associational networks and organized shared endeavors. Many of these same movements and associations have also rediscovered the efficacy of using social contacts to draw members and their friends and neighbors into political campaigns. The latest political science research reveals that when it comes to drawing people to the polls on election day, person-to-person contact works better than repeated mailings or anonymous telephone canvasses, let alone impersonal television advertising. Strengthening participatory associations may thus be the key to political as well as civic revitalization. During the 1990s, a number of real-world associations and movements discovered, and practiced, this truth for themselves.
Since 1995, for example, a reenergized American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), under the presidency of John Sweeney, combined staff-led lobbying with grassroots organizing in workplaces and during election campaigns. Along with some (though not all) of its member internationals, the AFL-CIO now welcomes and nurtures unconventional activists devoted to organizing new workplaces and activating minority and women workers, who historically were marginalized in union bureaucracies. Some of these new organizer-recruits come from blue-collar and professional workplaces; others come from college campuses, from other social movements, and from religious seminaries. AFL-CIO training efforts include innovative efforts, such as “Union Summer” and “Seminary Summer.”

Local volunteers remain detached from national centers of power.

Taking heart from such already existing models of popular civic mobilization, as well as from America’s long civic history, contemporary activists have various strategies open to them as they launch new associations, reorient existing ones, or take part in multigroup movements for social and political change.

Civic activists (and the patrons who help them to get started) can consider building networks of chapters, holding recurrent representative meetings, and raising ongoing resources through dues from members—or affiliated groups. Since the 1960s, America’s “civic entrepreneurs” have rarely proceeded in these ways, because it seems so much easier to open central offices with media people, lobbyists, and computerized mailing lists. But taking longer and asking for a greater commitment may result in a greater payoff. Sustained infrastructure building—provided it is not just local but translocal—can generate greater influence than centralized efforts focused on Washington, D.C., or ephemeral plays for attention in the national media. It takes time to connect leaders and members to one another across places or institutions, yet this is the only way to draw large numbers of people into a movement and the best way to generate sustained leverage to make a difference beyond one issue battle or election.

Interestingly, there are signs that some Washington, D.C.-based advocacy groups are becoming more interested in federated chapter building. In recent years, the AARP has hired organizers to work full time at developing new state and local chapters. And Jonah Edelman, son of the leader of the professionally run Children’s Defense Fund, has been working for some time now to develop networks of dues-paying chapters in an associated organization called Stand for Children. The hallmark of such approaches is leadership training and steady recruitment through...
an outward radiating network of contacts. In turn, leader-organizers have to be given an ongoing stake in the associational effort through shared and representative decision making.

Professionally run advocacy groups and research institutes can also learn to form persistent partnerships with membership associations. Not every civic association, old or new, needs to become a full-fledged membership network. Advocacy groups, research institutes, and other memberless kinds of civic organizations can continue to do the professional tasks they do best, simultaneously forming partnerships with membership groups or institutions. Planned synergy of this sort fueled many of the most successful social movements and legislative drives in American history, and there is no reason why Washington, D.C.-based advocacy groups cannot seek out unlike (as well as like) partners in contemporary coalitions. “Inside the Beltway” ought to become an outdated phrase for advocates—especially for those who care about causes not favored by the most powerful established interests. Of course, people who want democratic changes should continue to work for and with Washington, D.C.-based groups. But citizen advocacy groups should always be looking for ways to cooperate with—and stimulate and learn from—organizations that themselves have widespread, interactive memberships.

Finally, we come to the need for reforms in government and politics. It may seem perverse to wind up a book about civic transformation by talking about changes in government and electoral politics, but this historical tour has taught us that representative government and politics serve as both models and opportunity structures for associational activities. Americans became a civic people in the first place by building voluntary associations that imitated the routines of representative government—and voluntary federations often, in turn, sought to influence and work with government. Not coincidentally, recent shifts toward management rather than membership have coincided with a turn toward regulatory politics in Washington, D.C. And recent civic changes have unfolded in parallel with shifts toward professionally managed and television-oriented electoral campaigns. As long as centralized and professionally managed institutions and advocacy groups retain special access to government and the media, and as long as advocacy groups and pollsters have more to offer office-seeking politicians than other kinds of actors, American civic democracy will not become much more inclusive—and local voluntary efforts will remain detached from national centers of power.

To achieve civic revitalization, therefore, we must also modify the workings of politics and government. Yet currently touted approaches to “political reform” may not be what we need. Too many liberal reformers have gravitated to the notion that getting big money out of electoral politics is the master key to civic improvement. Elections are currently as much about raising money as about mobilizing voters. Candidates and public officials spend high proportions of their time talking to rich people at fundraisers. And a horde of money-dispensing special interests swarm around every congressional legislative battle in Washington, D.C. So it is easy to see why Common Cause and other “good government” groups obsess about money in politics. But the problem is that good-
government reform strategies, while unlikely in practice to succeed at reducing the political advantages of the wealthy, could easily undermine what remains of organized, popularly rooted political mobilization. In the name of limiting big money, a number of current good-government reforms would limit the ability of unions and popular groups to raise issues during elections; and some may greatly weaken political party efforts to mobilize new voters.

Long traditions of American political reform stretch back to the Mugwumps and the elite Progressives of around 1900. These reformers hated 19th-century political party machines, which they saw as promoting corruption. So the reformers worked for measures that would emphasize an unemotional, educational style of politics—and measures that would, ideally, give “every individual citizen equal voice.” However, the highly competitive, well-organized party networks, so hated by the Mugwumps, were also very adept at organizing and inspiring voters and turning them out on election days. Voter participation in the United States has never been so high—as a proportion of all those legally eligible to vote—as it was when the party machines held sway.

The United States has now had more than a century of experience with what I will call “neo-Mugwump” reforms, which promise to revitalize democracy by elevating the thinking individual over all kinds of group mobilization—and the results are not happy. With renewed vigor in recent times, Americans keep passing laws designed to get money out of politics, only to see each new round of “reforms” quickly circumvented. Of late, we have also passed tax laws to keep civic associations and institutions from engaging in partisan activities. In practice, such laws merely encourage professionally managed groups to proliferate, especially groups that can claim to be involved in “research” and “educational” lobbying while eschewing direct popular political mobilization. Intentionally or not, late-20th-century neo-Mugwump reforms have pushed our polity away from true popular mobilization in politics—and probably in other associational realms, as well. If 21st-century Americans continue down the neo-Mugwump reform road, by passing laws that make it still harder for all kinds of groups to draw people into politics, the results will further the tilt toward the rich and those with advanced degrees. Instead we need to envision and enact reforms designed to get broadly organized groups of people into politics.

After the 2000 presidential election culminated in a series of tawdry legal and judicial maneuvers, there was an understandable resurgence of interest in how U.S. elections are conducted. Reforms have been proposed by various groups, including the National Commission on Federal
Election Reform cochaired by former presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford. National discussion is certainly healthy, but arguments are overly focused on how to count votes already cast rather than on ways to draw many more Americans into politics. After all, only about half of eligible American adults bother to vote at all, even in closely contested national contests. Unfortunately, the reform ideas getting the most attention are technical or regulatory fixes, while too little attention has been paid to one of the most promising recommendations of the National Commission on Federal Election Reform, the proposal to make federal election day a national holiday.

National elections enhance civic engagement, researchers have shown, because they encourage popular involvement and build national solidarity. We should take note of this fact and do all we can to build drama, group efforts, and collective effervescence into National Election Day. Interestingly, Puerto Rico is the one part of the greater United States where contemporary voting turnout is unusually high—averaging 83 percent in presidential election years, and 70 percent in “off years,” up to 35 percentage points above turnouts on the mainland. Economist Richard Freeman has investigated the Puerto Rican phenomenon. He argues that institutional rather than personal factors must be involved, because when Puerto Ricans migrate to the mainland, they vote at a depressed rate like other Americans. In Puerto Rico itself, off-year elections are held on Sundays, and presidential-year elections occur on holiday Tuesdays, when the highest turnouts are recorded. “By reducing the cost of voting and making voting day a dedicated event,” Puerto Rico has increased turnout significantly, Freeman suggests. “Citizens with time constraints find it easier to vote on the Tuesday holiday or Sunday off-day,” and “citizens who would otherwise not vote are induced to vote by making the voting day a special event, which galvanizes political parties and their activities.” In effect, with its voting holiday, Puerto Rico has reinvented some of the entertainment, drama, and collective solidarity characteristic of 19th-century U.S. elections.

Like Puerto Rico’s Tuesday holiday every presidential election year, a new U.S. Election Day should not just be “time off”—for experience has taught us that removing obstacles to individual registration and voting is not enough to raise turnout. We need “motivated voters,” as Marshall Ganz explains, and much of the motivation must come from social example and organized mobilization. Twenty-first-century Americans should aim to make elections fun and compelling. The increased visibility of a holiday election day could, in itself, encourage more individual citizens to vote. But the holiday should also be an occasion for group involvement by unions, churches, institutions, civic associations, and all manner of other organizations. Politically active groups could use the holiday time to deploy poll watchers and get-out-the-vote activists, yet there might be additional ways to make Election Day an occasion. States, for instance, could declare contests, so that the localities doing the best job of raising their voting rates would get bonus grants for locally designated public projects. Workplaces and
associations could also stage contests, to see which units or chapters can achieve high turnouts. Institutions and associations can encourage people to go to the polls and throw after-the-vote parties to celebrate. Anything that enhances the social side of citizenship would help turnout—and an important side effect would be to strengthen associational bonds for groups that get involved.

Just as important as election reforms are measures to encourage political organizing and associational involvements in politics. “Reform” in the neo-Mugwump tradition often treats politics as if it were something dirty and implicitly holds up the ideal of an educated elite safely above and outside of politics. Ironically, although liberal advocacy politics grew out of the popular movements of the 1960s and 1970s, much of it has ended up reinforcing the Mugwump disdain for popular involvement in politics. Expertise and “public education” are often favored by advocacy leaders—which is understandable, because these reflect their special capacities as professionals. U.S. tax rules also push associations toward reliance on expertise and educational strategies. But it is not clear that this style of politics has the passion, heft, or social reach to pull regular people in, let alone to enable majorities of citizens to exert true political leverage.

As matters now stand, many associations in America have to go through convoluted and legally risky maneuvers to engage in politics. Election regulations and tax rules erect barriers between “partisan” and “nonpartisan” activities, and both liberals and conservatives use these rules (and advocate new ones) to demobilize their opponents. When conservative Republican Newt Gingrich was Speaker of the House, he was investigated and reprimanded for running a political education operation designed to train and mobilize conservatives to (horror of horrors!) win elections. Liberals applauded this reprimand and were equally pleased when the Internal Revenue Service investigated the mass distribution of voter guides by the Christian Coalition (on the grounds that it violated rules preventing tax-exempt religious associations from engaging in partisan politics). At the other end of the partisan spectrum, right-wingers are constantly agitating against political expenditures by the AFL-CIO and the American Federation of Teachers, calling on Congress to pass so-called paycheck protection legislation that would prevent union expenditures on politically relevant activities without first asking each union member whether he or she wants a portion of individual dues spent in these ways.

All of these measures are equally perverse. As small-d democrats, all Americans should be happy when politicians engage in training other leaders and mobilizing voter bases—that he did this so effectively was one of Gingrich’s enduring contributions to U.S. public life. We should also be delighted when civil associations get involved in politics, especially groups, such as the Christian Coalition and the AFL-CIO, with large memberships that enjoy some representation in associational governance. Whatever one may think of any given group or its issue positions, political education and mobilization by popularly rooted federations enhance leadership capabilities and prospects for organized democratic leverage in

We need to get broadly organized groups of people into politics.
America. And organized group efforts also make it much more likely that individual citizens will be personally contacted, actively invited into political and civic participation.

I conclude that the United States should repeal or modify all kinds of rules designed to create fire walls between partisan and nonpartisan activities. This does not mean that campaign finance reforms cannot proceed. In fact, the best reforms have been enacted at the state level and involve voluntary adherence to rules of the game by candidates who, in return, gain access to public funding. Election reforms in the future can follow the example of the Maine Clean Elections Law, which limits fundraising and expenditures on advertisements by candidates who accept to run under its rules but allows associations to use their internal newsletters and communication mechanisms to distribute materials to voters. Such intraassociational expenditures do not count against the legal spending limits—and this, of course, can have the effect of strengthening membership-based electoral contacting on right, center, and left alike.

At the national level, reformers should work for both election reforms and tax incentives that would deliver the biggest advantages to associations that derive relatively high proportions of their funding from membership contributions and actually have interactive members who enjoy rights to participate in associational decision making. Some degree of tax exemption can still go to nonprofits and professionally run advocacy groups engaged in research and education. But more could go to groups with members who enjoy rights to participate in decision making, including the selection of associational leaders. Old-style chapter-based associations are not the only ones that could qualify if such rules were properly designed.

Tomorrow’s associations will figure out ways to use new technologies to encourage membership participation, contributions, and interaction. Why shouldn’t our electoral rules and our tax systems encourage exactly that?

The way politicians govern after their election also has a profound impact on civic life. Elected officials and political party leaders often feel beleaguered by clamoring interest groups and overwhelmed by the need to court wealthy donors. They easily forget that political leaders have considerable ability to influence the mix of groups in their environment and some ability to shape the strategies used by actors who want to influence them. When public officials hold hearings or bring groups together to advise about policy agendas and options, they understandably include experts and advocates with established records in a given policy area. But when they want to learn what constituents think, they often turn to pollsters—or the expert staffs of nonprofit institutions or professionally run advocacy groups. Devising policies
becomes bifurcated from selling them. Associations and movements with large numbers of popular supporters—but few lobbyists or experts stationed in Washington, D.C., or the state capitol—get the message that they don’t count for much in setting agendas or choosing policy options.

Institutions, movements, and associations with large memberships could be assigned more prominent roles in congressional hearings and consultations by congressional staffs—not just symbolically, but in ways that could build public understanding and involvement in legislative decision making. This could happen when party leaderships in Congress are deciding how to frame agendas for entire legislative sessions; it could also happen when decisions must be made about how to approach a major policy concern, such as reforming health care. What I have in mind is more than just asking associational leaders to come to a hearing one day and take a position on a policy question. Associational leaders could be asked to pose questions to their memberships and gather a range of responses from state or regional meetings, from local chapter discussions, or maybe through Internet sessions with members. Congressional committees and staffers could make it clear they would value learning about the full range of responses and the reasons people give for them. At a later point, when actual legislation is being debated, elected representatives might return to groups that favor the options in question and ask for their help in explaining legislation and mobilizing broader public support.

Involving membership-based associations more directly in setting policy agendas and developing policy designs could produce better legislation—in closer touch with citizens’ everyday concerns and more likely to be successfully implemented. Experts are not the only ones who have useful things to say about, for example, the kind of health insurance patients and doctors need, or the sort of Patients’ Bill of Rights that Americans really prefer. If broader consultations with popularly rooted groups had occurred during the 1993-1994 national debates about health insurance reform, not only would reform legislation have been more likely to pass Congress, the proposals at issue would probably have been much better designed and more widely understood than the arcane plan designed by the advocates and experts who dominated the official planning process. Involving membership associations in the effort could only have produced better results—just as it did back in 1944 with the G.I. Bill.

Better policies would not be the only result of involving membership networks in governmental policy deliberations. When the word gets around that discussions at the PTA, or the union hall, or the local environmental club will formulate ideas to be fed into a report to Congress (or the city council or state legislature), people will find it more worthwhile to join the
discussion. If public officials raise the visibility and clout of popularly rooted associations—putting them at least on a par in policy planning with business lobbies, pollsters, and expert-dominated think tanks and advocacy groups—then the popular associations seem more relevant to the very people those associations hope to attract and involve. If membership associations are obviously part of the action as authoritative governmental decisions are made on issues of broad popular concern, they will quickly become more attractive to potential joiners.

I have argued that Americans must find ways to strengthen the links between democratic governance and representatively governed civic associations capable of involving large numbers of citizens. The specific strategies I have outlined may, or may not, be fruitful. In all likelihood, other thinkers and popular movements can come up with much better ideas. The process of civic revitalization must proceed by trial and error—and the more experimenters, the better. However, if I am not totally confident of the answers to our present dilemmas I have briefly outlined, I am much more certain of the diagnosis I have offered, inspired by a richer understanding of America’s civic past and a clear-eyed view of the startling civic changes of our time.

In classic civic America, millions of ordinary men and women could interact with one another, participate in groups side by side with the more privileged, and exercise influence in both community and national affairs. The poorest were left out, but many others were included. National elites had to pay attention to the values and interests of millions of ordinary Americans.

Over the past third of a century, the old civic America has been bypassed and shoved to the side by a gaggle of professionally dominated advocacy groups and nonprofit institutions rarely attached to memberships worthy of the name. Ideals of shared citizenship and possibilities for democratic leverage have been compromised in the process. There cannot be any going back to the civic world we have lost, but we Americans can and should look for ways to re-create the best of our civic past in new forms suited to a renewed democratic future. To accomplish this, we will need to go beyond moral exhortation and local do-goodism; and we certainly should avoid extending professional tendencies and patronage-based funding to our religious institutions, which have heretofore flourished through congregational fellowship and membership contributions. New strategies for translocal
association building must be devised. And we must reform our national institutions to encourage and unfetter civic leaders who organize large numbers of their fellow citizens.

America has gained in important ways as professional management has displaced membership in our recently refashioned and enlarged civic life. But we need to be clear about the good things we have lost—about the diminished democracy and losses in fellowship across class lines that contemporary transformations have, often inadvertently, wrought. Taking lessons and inspiration from our nation’s rich civic history, we must find ways to fashion again for our own times the sorts of great voluntary combinations that long ago impressed Alexis de Tocqueville with the extraordinary capacity of Americans for the vigorous practice of civil and political democracy.

Theda Skocpol is the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard University. This essay is drawn from her book, Diminished Democracy. © 2003, and published here with permission of the University of Oklahoma Press.