Associations and associational involvement in Europe

Jan W. van Deth and William A. Maloney

Introduction

Democratic political systems of all shapes and sizes – cities, regions, nation-states, supranational organizations – face the simply articulated, but enduring and chronic, challenge of basing political decisions on the active engagement of citizens and citizens’ organizations. Contemporaneously, political and social disengagement is seen as a blight afflicting many advanced democracies. Beyond falling voter turnout and waning partisanship, declines in membership of numerous associations, clubs, groups and organizations – i.e. a shrinking civil society (and social capital stocks) – are seen as major aspects of a more general disengagement process. In his seminal work on the conditions for democratic government, Robert Putnam emphasized the centrality and pivotality of associationalism. Putnam famously argued that, ‘Good government in Italy is a by-product of singing groups and soccer clubs’ (Putnam 1993: 176). He subsequently extended his (civic erosion) analysis to include the US and his claims about the beneficial effects of a vibrant civil society with high levels of social capital grew exponentially. According to Putnam (2000: 290), social capital not only delivers ‘good government’, but it also, ‘makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy’. Even the most evangelical adherent of his approach would not consider it a magic bullet for all democratic ills. However, what is widely accepted is that modern democracies are dependent on an active and vibrant civil society and a healthy stock of social capital.

The democratic benefits transmitted by associations are numerous and include: enhanced and bespoke representation – securing public policy outcomes that better match citizens’ preferences; surrogates for those who lack expertise or the necessary political resources (e.g. children, animals, the socially and politically disadvantaged); vehicles for citizen participation; generators of pro-democratic and civic values and social integration; and as countervailing challengers to the power of big business and professional interests. Furthermore, they deliver a number of welfare services and assist in the provision of self-help support. The importance of these activities is underlined by Salamon et al.’s (2013) report which found that the non-profit sector was a major employer and made a significant contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) of several countries. It accounts for no less than 11.5 per cent of the Belgian workforce, 8.9 per cent in France, 8.2 per cent in Norway, 4.4 per cent in Portugal and 2.4 per cent in the Czech Republic.
As plausible as these benevolent consequences might be, a closer look at involvement and associationalism in Europe reveals various democratic impediments (cf. van Deth and Maloney 2012). On the demand side, it is clear that not all citizens have the means and resources to be civically and politically active and many lack the motivation or enthusiasm for associational membership. In addition to this, increasing numbers of citizens perceive passive (financial only) participation as the ‘optimal’ type of engagement and eschew organizations that seek to actively involve them in group activities. Consequently, much participation is ‘contracted-out’ to full-time policy-influencing professionals (Maloney 1999). On the supply side, numerous groups (and policy-makers) face the dilemma of reconciling democratic efficiency and greater participatory democracy. To be politically and organizationally effective groups need to adopt a professional and technocratic approach to organizational maintenance and advocacy/lobbying. Accordingly, the usual suspects – Schattschneider’s 1960 Heavenly Chorus – demand to be more actively involved and on the supply side associations offer these citizens greater participatory opportunities. Thus, the supply side can be seen as accentuating the demand side participatory deficit and exacerbating political inequality. Furthermore, policy-makers require effective policy-making partners who possess the necessary policy expertise and knowledge to assist in the delivery of workable policy outcomes. Accordingly, associations face the challenge of delivering valuable policy-relevant information to policy-makers – something their supporters/members lack. As Bosso (2003), Crenson and Ginsberg (2002) and Skocpol (2003) highlight, these informational demands/pressures mean that groups don’t actually need members to be effective in the policy-making process.

In this chapter we present a broad critical overview of the main theoretical perspectives, in particular the social capital model, and some empirical findings from research examining associations and associational involvement in Europe. We start this expedition with a concise overview of the development of various theoretical and conceptual interpretations moving beyond the Tocquevillian-inspired tradition towards more recent institutional approaches stressing the relevance of constitutional and political contexts (second section). In the third section, some major empirical findings are presented highlighting clear differences in associationalism in various regions (Scandinavia, North-western Europe, Central/Eastern Europe, Southern Europe and the UK). Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the theoretical, methodological and empirical challenges and controversies (fourth section).

**Social capital, associations and democracy**

**Social capital and democracy**

Late twentieth-century social science research witnessed a renaissance of the work of Alexis de Tocqueville and in particular his attractive solution for solving collective decision-making ‘problems’ in democratic systems. The primary contention in Tocqueville’s work was that political systems would remain democratically healthy through the (continued) participation of citizens in a wide and diverse variety of voluntary associations. Within these associations citizens develop social and political networks and pro-democratic and pro-civic orientations that facilitate the effective and proper functioning of democracy. The Tocquevillian revival began with Coleman’s work in the late 1980s and was developed in two different directions by Putnam and Bourdieu in the 1990s (emphasizing social integration and social inequality, respectively). Bourdieu defined social capital as ‘made up of social obligations (“connections”)’ and his research focused on relations between individuals within specific groups or categories (Bourdieu 1986: 243). Coleman’s and Putnam’s definition of social capital focused on functional aspects.
For Coleman, different understandings of social capital ‘all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure’ (Coleman 1990: 302), while Putnam referred to social capital as ‘features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks’ (Putnam 1993: 167). In other words, social capital comprises both structural aspects (connections between people or networks) and cultural aspects (obligations, or social norms and values, and particularly trust) (cf. Putnam 1993; Fukuyama 1995; Inglehart 1997).

Clearly working in the spirit of Tocqueville, Putnam and others assumed that membership and participation within voluntary associations are crucially important for the generation of a minimum level of civic virtue. Consequently, the strength of democracy rests on the existence of a wide variety of associations. Thus when Putnam (1995, 2000) provided empirical evidence that pointed to a decline in membership of many types of associations, clubs, groups and organizations in the US, he concluded that a decline of civil society had also occurred – i.e. Putnam’s civic erosion thesis. In the early 1970s, Olsen (1972) linked social involvement in organizations to the political engagement of citizens. Like Verba and Nie (1972), he concluded that the opportunities provided by voluntary associations to develop individual skills and competence play an important role in the mobilization of citizens for political purposes. Olsen summarized the available interpretations as follows:

involvement in voluntary, special-interest, nonpolitical associations will in time activate individuals politically . . . There are many reasons why such participation can increase individual political activity: (1) It broadens one’s sphere of interests and concerns, so that public affairs and public issues become more salient for him. (2) It brings an individual in contact with many new and diverse people, and the resulting relationships draw him into public affairs and political activity. (3) It increases one’s information, trains him in social interaction and leadership skills, and provides other resources needed for effective political action.

(Olsen 1972: 318; original emphasis)

Such argumentation follows a clear Tocquevillian line of reasoning: while it is the case that most voluntary associations are not politically active, they are nevertheless expected to function as ‘schools of democracy’ by increasing the levels of social trust and the number of social connections. Consequently, higher participation levels imply larger stocks of social capital that will engender higher levels of political engagement. The strength of this line of argument is its focus on non-political organizations as the main source for the development of politically relevant orientations and behaviour.

Putnam (1993, 2000) undoubtedly captured – and helped create – the Zeitgeist after the end of the Cold War. Unsurprisingly, subsequent research exposed several cracks in the neo-Tocquevillian armour. First, conceptual ambiguities were identified from the outset (cf. Portes 1998; Woolcock 1998; Lewis 2010; McCulloch et al. 2012). Lewis (2010: 14) argues that Putnam’s analysis conflates social capital at three distinct levels – ‘individual, organizational and societal’. McCulloch et al. note that social capital has been criticized for combining its causes and consequences . . . trust has been interpreted as a cause of social capital, a component of it, and as an outcome that results from it.

(McCulloch et al. 2012: 1132)

Second, the Tocquevillian thesis appears to have limited empirical substantiation outside the US, and causality and measurement issues remain unsolved (cf. Hall 1999; van Deth 2003;
Rothstein and Stolle (2008a). Hall (1999: 457) maintained that there was no evidence of any significant decline in ‘aggregate levels of social capital’ in Britain since 1945 and that civic engagement levels remained relatively high. He concluded, ‘the erosion of social capital that Putnam and others find in the American case is not a uniform phenomenon across the industrialized democracies’. Rothstein and Stolle (2008a: 442) note that several empirical studies have challenged the link between voluntary association, participation and trust. Trust is highest among citizens who join organizations, but this is related more to self-selection than their activities and experiences within groups, which actually do very little to enhance these positive attributes (cf. Mouw 2006). As Rothstein and Stolle conclude:

The use of membership in adult voluntary associations as a measurement of social capital should be handled with great caution, and its use as a producer of social capital is in all likelihood misplaced.

(Rothstein and Stolle 2008a: 443)

Third, the extent of the beneficial effects of social capital has been challenged, including the well-rehearsed argument about the ‘dark side’ of social capital that can contribute to anti-democratic behaviour (van Deth and Zmerli 2010). In practice, social capital can facilitate the continuation of social and political inequality and the exclusion of ‘outsiders’. As Rothstein and Stolle (2008b: 276) note, ‘[m]any voluntary organizations and networks are actually built to instil distrust’. In a similar vein, McCulloch et al. (2012: 1132) remark that ‘social capital may be used both to form groups which are exclusive and separate from society and to create and maintain social inequalities’.

Fourth, the presumed causal effect of engagement in voluntary associations on democracy has been questioned. Do associations strengthen social capital or are citizens with relatively high levels of social capital more willing and likely to be active in associations? This self-selection argument is based on the understanding of social capital as an individual property. Many authors, however, depict social capital as a feature of society as a whole; that is, as a collective good, in principle available to all citizens (cf. Rahn et al. 1999: 113; Newton 2001: 207). Accordingly, a citizen does not even have to be a member of an organization or show a minimum level of trust in other people to benefit from the fact that in her/his society transaction costs are low for every contact or contract. Following such argumentation, several authors stress the relevance of institutional and political contexts for associational involvement and social capital. Maloney et al. criticized the Putnam (1993) model for neglecting ‘the role played by political structures and institutions in shaping the context of associational activity and hence the creation of social capital’ (Maloney et al. 2000: 803; original emphasis). While Rothstein and Stolle make the bolder claim that ‘government policies and political institutions create, channel, and influence the amount and type of social capital in their respective societies more than the other way around . . . social capital rests on the quality of government institutions’ (Rothstein and Stolle 2008b: 279, 293; original emphasis). Moving from (neo–Tocquevillian) ‘society centred approaches’ towards ‘institutional approaches’ (Stolle and Hooghe 2003), the presumed causality between social capital and ‘good governance’ is reversed. This is especially relevant in consolidated democracies characterized by a strong emphasis on the rule of law and non-partisan civil services.

Several scholars have developed their arguments along these lines. For Sztompka (1998), ‘good government’ depends on ‘institutionalized distrust’, whereas Offe argues that institutions ‘provide normative reference points and values that can be relied upon’ (Offe 1999: 70). Following her careful empirical analysis of the 2000 World Values Survey, Rolfteutscher questioned arguments emphasizing the pivotal nature of trust for democracy, concluding:
whilst social trust fosters support for democratic ideals in democracies, in autocracies it suppresses democratic beliefs... Social trust is a system-stabilizing force, provoking trust in government and support for dominant regimes. Whilst these are democratic ideals in the case of democracies, they are non-democratic ideals in the case of autocracies. In short, there is nothing intrinsically democratic about trust!

(Roßteutscher 2008: 235)

**Associations and democracy**

European democracies support a wide variety of associational types that have been variously labelled – e.g. voluntary associations (broadly construed), non-profit organizations (NPOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), non-state organizations (NSOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), social movement organizations (SMOs), organized interests, interest groups, etc. Many of these categorizations overlap, some significantly and others less so, and at times the labels are carefully and deliberately selected by scholars for specific reasons. For some the use of terms such as ‘interest groups’ or ‘new social movements’ is an attempt to provide theoretical accuracy, while for others it is simply intended to signal a normative standpoint. Some scholars choose to label the associations they study as NGOs as a means of indicating some normative desirability (or pathology). Categorizing an association as an NGO as opposed to, say, an organized interest or an interest group may be an attempt to confer on it a more normatively desirable status.

As Grant (2002: 3) highlights, using the term ‘civil society’ – of which NGOs are a key component – may confer greater legitimacy on what might otherwise be perceived as an interest group system. Thus organized interests or interest groups might be characterized as pursuing selfish, sectional or special interests and as democratically flawed organizations. In contrast, NGOs and NSOs seek to secure collective goods for disadvantaged citizens or under-represented causes and are perceived as making a much higher quality contribution to the civic and democratic health of a nation. Empirical research examining key associational characteristics and activities shows a blurring of some categorizations and less diversity than the labels imply. Friedrich quotes Nanz and Steffek’s (2005) definition of a civil society organization as

a non-governmental, non-profit organization that has a clearly stated purpose, legal personality and pursues its goals in non-violent ways. Apart from activist organizations this definition includes social partners (i.e. trade unions and employers associations), consumer associations, charities, grass roots organizations and religious communities.

(Friedrich 2007: 11)

As Friedrich (2007: 12) argues, ‘[o]n purely empirical grounds there seems to be no reason not to call these organizations “interest groups” as pluralists would probably do’. An important distinction, however, concerns the use of the term ‘civil society’ not for a specific type of organization, but for a collection of organizations. In this approach civil society ‘occupies the middle ground between government and the private sectors’ and is characterized as being ‘public without being coercive, voluntary without being privatized’ (Barber 1995: 281). The benevolent consequences for democracy rely on the existence of civil society as ‘dynamic webs of interrelated nongovernmental institutions’ (Keane 1998: 6) – not on the properties of single associations.

Finally a healthy and vibrant civil society is not simply comprised of numerous voluntary associations; it should also contain a wide and diverse range of organizations. It should be able to accommodate and facilitate the existence of: large, medium-sized and small bodies; affluent and less resource-rich groups; directly representative and surrogate organizations; groups that
offer opportunities for supporter activism and those that pursue organizational goals on the basis of professional activism; self-help, humanitarian and charitable associations; promotional and sectional groups; advocacy and service delivery bodies; organizations dependent on public money for survival and others that can survive largely on private sources of income; and organizations that represent a wide range of citizen interests and concerns, etc. In short, the associational universe within civil society should be truly multifaceted, and democracy is strengthened by such representational and participatory diversity. Such density and diversity within the associational universe would be praised by scholars of a pluralist leaning because there are large numbers of organizations – some seeking to represent broad interests and others focusing on specific niches – delivering better (and more effective) representation. These scholars also believe that such a system would be characterized by competition and contestation, and that democracy and democratic systems are strengthened by such a struggle. For example, Skocpol (2003: 235) argued that ‘[c]onflict, tough argument, and close competition are good for democratic civil society and for electoral democracy’.

**Patterns of associational involvement in Europe**

Reliable and detailed aggregate information about citizens’ associational involvement and associations and civil society is difficult to find. For example, there have been numerous surveys of members of specific organizations and population surveys that ask citizens about participation generally, but (understandably) very few cover the vast associational field either nationally or comparatively. In addition to this, in many countries the formal associational registration system is restricted to the local or regional level and no statistics exist at higher levels. Furthermore, these registers tend to lack up-to-date or accurate information – e.g. they include disbanded and defunct organizations and large numbers of clubs and associations actually fail to register. As Ladd wryly notes,

> If you want to know a major league baseball player’s batting average against left-handed pitchers in games completed after 11:00 p.m., you can get it in a flash. But if you want to document what’s been happening to associational membership, be prepared to spend a lot of time assembling the material yourself.

(Ladd 1999: 15–16)

There are some notable exceptions that have attempted to construct systematic comparative data on associations and associational involvement, including the Johns Hopkins’ *Center for Civil Society Studies* (2014) for the ‘nonprofit sector’ and the *Civics* (2014) project, which has collected information about ‘citizenship’. However, a lack of comprehensive comparative data on the entire voluntary associational universe compels us to rely heavily in this chapter on the analyses provided by the *Citizen, Involvement, Democracy* (CID) project – an extensive and comprehensive empirical study of associational involvement in Europe (Maloney and Roßteutscher 2007a; van Deth *et al.* 2007).

Empirical evidence on associational involvement is usually based on straightforward questions in large-scale surveys of representative samples of populations in various countries. These questions ask citizens about ‘membership/supportership of’, ‘belonging to’ or ‘affiliation to’ a number of broad categories of voluntary associations presented to respondents in list form. (In some studies additional information is collected by enquiring about spending, volunteering or personal contacts.) The results of a number of cross-national surveys are summarized in Table 45.1. The entries in this table show the percentages of respondents indicating that they were involved in
at least one voluntary association in each country. The results corroborate previous findings that associational involvement differs considerably between countries and points in time (Curtis et al. 1992; van Deth and Kreuter 1998; Norris and Davis 2007; Adam 2008). All these studies confirm that, broadly speaking, Europe can be divided into three major areas. First, we find exceptionally high levels of associational involvement in the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands – averaging 80+ per cent across all the surveys listed in Table 45.1. In these well-established democracies large majorities of the populations are engaged in voluntary associations. Apparently, high levels of state intervention and the provision of welfare-state arrangements do not reduce the willingness of citizens to become active – ‘crowding-out effects’ are absent (Rothstein and Stolle 2003; van Oorschot and Arts 2005). A second area consists largely of Western European countries such as Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Britain and Switzerland, where considerable parts of the populations are engaged in voluntary associations. However, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Slovakia have average associational involvement levels over 50 per cent. Finally, the relatively young democracies of Southern and Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Portugal and Spain) show consistently low levels of associational involvement ranging between 24 and 36 per cent. It is also interesting to note that Italy’s average involvement level (43 per cent) is below that of Latvia and Estonia (50 and 44 per cent, respectively) and just above Croatia’s (42 per cent). Explanations for these remarkably low levels of engagement in Eastern Europe centre on a general distrust of associations, a strong emphasis and heavy reliance on personal networks, and disillusionment with post-Communist institutional and economic developments (Howard 2003). The living memory of enforced participation during Soviet times is also a major contributory factor that has dampened enthusiasm for associational involvement (Plagnol and Huppert 2010).

The figures presented in Table 45.1 show quite remarkable – and highly dubious – fluctuations of associational involvement within individual countries. For example, the 2004/6 ISSP survey records associational involvement levels in Denmark at 98 per cent, France 86 per cent, Poland 82 per cent and Hungary 70 per cent, while the 2006 EB survey reports Danish involvement levels at 49 per cent, French at 39 per cent, Polish at 19 per cent and Hungarian at 18 per cent. These variations are predicated on considerable numbers of measurement errors caused by using different lists of voluntary associations in each study, and variations in both questions and question wordings – i.e. using phrases that are interpreted differently by respondents in various countries (van Deth and Kreuter 1998: 138–40; Morales 2002; Gesthuizen et al. 2013). Notwithstanding these variations in research object specification and measurement, the patterns of involvement (of three major groups of European countries) remain similar. For instance, irrespective of which survey instrument we examine, Sweden always exhibits a higher level of involvement than Britain and Britain is always ahead of Romania or Portugal. The results of the cross-national studies in Table 45.1 plausibly demonstrate regional variations in Europe precisely because this differentiation is not dependent on the qualities of each study.

Examining associational involvement comparatively leads us to rely on research carried out in the CID project. Morales and Geurts’ (2007: 138) analysis of association involvement (broadly defined) uncovered considerable variation in associational membership and the pattern of donations made to these associations. Associational involvement ranged from 90+ per cent in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland to 49 per cent in Spain and 28 per cent in Russia (see Table 45.1, CID column). Associational membership was highest in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland (85+ per cent) and lowest in Portugal, Spain and Russia (43, 42 and 25 per cent, respectively). Furthermore, Morales and Geurts’ (2007) and Pattie et al.’s UK research of similar data (Pattie et al. 2004) uncovered significant levels of chequebook participation (Maloney 1999), where citizens’ involvement is characterized by
Table 45.1  Associational involvement in Europe (1990–2010, percentage of people living involved)

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Sources: compiled by the authors using the following data sets: EVS: European Value Study; WVS: World Value Survey; EB: Eurobarometer; CID: Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy Project; ESS: European Social Survey; ISSP: International Social Survey Programme
financial contributions. Citizens who make donations peak at 66 per cent in Norway and Switzerland (Denmark and Sweden lag some 20 percentage points behind), and again Spain and Russia are bringing up the rear (23 and 6 per cent, respectively). Pattie et al. (2004: 78), looking specifically at political participation, found that donating money was the most common form of involvement in the UK – 62 per cent of their respondents said that they had donated money to an organization and 75 per cent said that they would be prepared to do so. Morales and Geurts (2007: 144) showed that involvement via donations was heavily concentrated in humanitarian aid, human rights, traditional charities and social-welfare organizations. In general their data demonstrate that more citizens are ‘involved in associations without being members’ and that research should not simply look narrowly at volunteering ‘as an indication of active forms of involvement’ (Morales and Geurts 2007: 137, 139).

Morales and Geurts (2007: 144) found that the most popular type of association in Europe is sports clubs. In Scandinavia approximately 50 per cent of adults are engaged in sports clubs in some way. Trade unions have large numbers of members in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, while lodges, service clubs and immigrant organizations mobilize the smallest number of citizens. There are of course some variations: involvement in humanitarian aid and human rights groups is widespread in Norway; residents associations are very popular in Scandinavia and the Netherlands; and environmental and animal rights organizations benefit from strong support in Switzerland and the Netherlands. Finally, when they examined activity patterns Morales and Geurts (2007: 144) found that, unsurprisingly, the sports clubs are organizations where citizens are most active, and other recreational, cultural and hobby associations also generate relatively high activity levels. In their (CID) study of associations active at the city level in Europe Maloney and Roßteutscher (2007c) found a similar pattern to Morales and Geurts (2007). While associations are engaged in a wide range of areas, the most common fields of interest are leisure and welfare.

Morales and Geurts (2007: 145) also discovered some interesting cross-national variations in involvement patterns. Youth associations were characterized by high levels of active involvement in Northern and Central Europe, while New Social Movement groups (e.g. environmental, human rights and humanitarian aid organizations) attracted a large share of donations across Europe. In Norway, Switzerland, Sweden and the Netherlands donors ‘outnumber members in almost all of these organizations’. In contrast to such minimal levels of involvement, East German and Portuguese citizens were more likely to volunteer in organizations supporting medical patients and the disabled than simply become members. Morales and Geurts (2007: 147) split the organizations in their study into those that primarily seek to secure private goods and those that seek public goods. They found that private good oriented bodies were marked by high levels of membership involvement in most countries and that public good organizations tended to have relatively low involvement levels – chequebook participation was dominant. Morales and Geurts (2007) concluded that

Associations that primarily seek private goods tend to promote active involvement to a higher degree . . . [and] countries in which the overall level of involvement is high tend to have a greater proportion of passive involvement. Apparently, it seems difficult to get large proportions of citizens involved and active at the same time.

(Morales and Geurts 2007: 149; original emphasis)

Finally, Maloney’s and Roßteutscher’s (2007b, 2007c) data found significant variations in the density and diversity of associations active at the local level across several European cities. The largest number of associations (5,002) and the highest density (15.6 per 1,000 inhabitants)
were found in the German city of Mannheim. In Aalborg (Denmark) and Aberdeen (Scotland, UK) the number of groups was circa 2,000, with densities of 12.6 and 8.9 (per 1,000 inhabitants), respectively. Bern (Switzerland) and Enschede (the Netherlands) had fewer associations than Aberdeen but higher densities (9.7 and 11.0), while the Spanish locale of Sabadell had the fewest associations and the lowest density (6.1). Both the number of organizations and the density structure found at the local level in Europe follow a broadly similar pattern to that identified in the range of organizational involvements at the national level (summarized in the previous sub-section) – i.e. the Danish city (Aalborg) had the highest density levels and the Southern European area (Sabadell) had relatively low levels.

Challenges and controversies

As argued above, there is a paucity of reliable comparative empirical information on associations and associational involvement. Notwithstanding this empirical Achilles’ heel, the (presumed) causes and consequences of associational involvement have generated some spirited and vigorous academic discussions and debates. Two key developments over the last 30 years or so have had a significant impact on the associational universe: the retreat of the state and the professionalization process.

Retreat of the state

Starting in the 1980s, governments throughout Europe (and beyond), of all ideological persuasions, have increasingly looked to the voluntary sector to provide goods and services previously delivered by the state (‘the retreat of the state’ or ‘state failure’). For example, in the UK the prime minister, David Cameron, attempted to galvanize these ideas under the umbrella of the Big Society. Cameron argued that communities needed to be empowered and that (local) volunteering efforts should be focused on a wide range of areas – providing some local services (libraries, housing, education, transport, recreational and leisure facilities, neighbourhood watch schemes, etc.). In short, the tenet of his argument was against Big Government that drained the energy and civic enthusiasm of communities. Government ‘has turned lively communities into dull, soulless clones of one another. So we need to turn government completely on its head. The rule of government should be this: if it unleashes community engagement – we should do it; if it crushes it – we shouldn’t’ (Cameron 2010). These ideas are not wholly the preserve of Conservative thinkers. The previous (UK) Labour administration was also enthusiastic about the contribution of the voluntary sector. When he was finance minister (Chancellor of the Exchequer) Gordon Brown outlined numerous areas where the voluntary sector could take a greater role: education, the environment, communication technology, business and service overseas:

I believe there is a strong moral basis for the principle of voluntary action. Voluntary action is an outlet for our natural altruism. It is an expression of an active community and as such a central ingredient in civic society. It is part of a protective shield for the individual against the might of the state. It is a source of social cohesion.

(Brown 2001: 20)

In this age of austerity these arguments can easily be presented as a way to justify significant public expenditure restraint and cuts and as clearly signalling the retreat of the state. As Kisby (2010: 488) argues, the state ‘seems to be regarded as part of the problem, rather than part of
the solution’. However, in an argument analogous to that advanced by Rothstein and Stolle (2008b) with regard to social capital and the state, Keck and von Bülow (2011: 285) argue that ‘[r]olling back the state did not necessarily generate a stronger civil society . . . There is considerable evidence to show that citizens’ action is most likely to be meaningful in the context of more effective government, not less’ (original emphasis).

With public finances likely to be under restraint for the foreseeable future, the demands on voluntary associations are likely to grow and may present some significant challenges. Voluntary associations may find themselves dealing with the consequences of welfare retrenchment, they may have to provide some goods and services previously delivered by the state, and they may find state and private funds more difficult to access because the pool of resources is shrinking. These very same processes can be described in a much more critical way by focusing on the ideological nature of social capital. For example, Fine (2010) depicted neo-Tocquevillian approaches as being part of a ‘neo-liberal’ or ‘capitalist’ response to ‘failures’ of the modern state. Accordingly, associational involvement and volunteering are perceived as instrumental to concealing the weaknesses of the state’s ability to regulate capitalism effectively. Therefore, a ‘new spirit of capitalism’ based on an ‘ideology of activism’ is required which ignores the various interests behind these processes.

**Professionalization**

The ongoing process of professionalization permeates the width, depth and breadth of the voluntary association universe and has a significant impact on the shape and structure, and the *modus operandi*, of many voluntary associations. In particular, large-scale groups have taken a specific organizational form, structuring themselves according to hierarchical business principles aimed at maximizing operational efficiency. The key characteristics of professionalized organizations include employing a highly educated, professionally trained and accredited staff in a wide range of areas (e.g. finance, management, administration, communication, marketing, media, science, law, etc.). Many of these employees have previous work experience in the public and private sectors (e.g. government administration, private companies, lobbying organizations, other voluntary organizations). Accordingly, these organizations are structured in line with these professional competences and there is a scientific and technocratic approach to all organizational activities and functions (recruitment, marketing, lobbying/campaigning/advocacy, etc.). This organizational transformation is also reflected in organizational discourses. For example, in their interviews with Austrian civil society organizations, Maier and Meyer (2011) identified *managerialist* and *professionalist* discourses. The managerialist discourse – focused on ‘effectiveness, efficiency, resources, and strategy’ – argued that the decision-making process should follow a rational cycle; and characterized other CSOs as *competitors*, funders as *investors* and all sorts of actors as *customers* (Maier and Meyer 2011: 738, 742). Under the professionalist discourse educational attainment and aptitude were emphasized as ‘the central selection criteria’ for staff. The work of staff was

guided by ideals and standards that originate from their profession . . . A key distinction is the one between experts and laypersons. Professional identity is strong; the members of a profession have a shared understanding of their work that is grounded in shared knowledge and a common educational background. Organizational identity, in contrast, is often weak.

(Maier and Meyer 2011: 745–6)
Turning to the policy-making process, Grundy and Smith (2007) argued that advocacy organizations are ‘abandoning traditional templates of activism and advocacy to participate as legitimate experts in policy discourse’ (quoted in Onyx et al. 2010: 46–7). In their survey of advocacy groups Onyx et al. (2010: 52–3) found that many organizations sought a mature, professional relationship with policy-makers – a solutions campaigning, rather than a confrontational approach to influencing policy. The successful campaigns that Onyx et al. (2010: 57) observed largely ‘complied with the tacit rules of professional conduct’ and were largely non-confrontational. Finally, institutional patronage (governmental and corporate) has become a crucial income source in the associational sector. Salamon et al. (2013) showed that a large proportion of non-profit organizations’ income comes from institutional sources. In Belgium 68 per cent came from government and 4 per cent from philanthropy, and in the Czech Republic it was 65 per cent and 13 per cent. Greenwood (2007: 343) notes that at the European Union (EU) level ‘the Commission spends approximately 1 per cent (€1bn) on funding groups and almost the entire (300) citizen interest group universe (excluding Greenpeace) mobilized at the EU level receives some EU funding’. While Sanchez Salgado (2011: 9–10) showed that the EU is a bigger funder of national NGOs than some national governments; 45 per cent of the total public patronage of Humanitarian and Development NGOs in France comes from the EU, which is significantly more than these groups receive from local or national government. Indeed, in the 1980s and 1990s over 80 per cent of humanitarian NGOs in France and the UK received some funds from the EU, as did approximately 50 per cent of Spanish humanitarian NGOs. Numerous organizations throughout Europe (and elsewhere) have become heavily dependent on patronage, with up to 80–90 per cent of their operating budgets coming from such sources (see Greenwood 2007; Sanchez Salgado 2011).7

All of these professionalization-related developments have significant implications for associations, associational supporters and members, and the quality of democracy. Organizational structures, the division of labour and organizational discourses tend to dichotomize organizations between a professional staff that is actively engaged in the political process and the passive amateur supporter/member, who is largely a spectator – making the occasional fleeting appearance and providing some of the necessary financial support. The political and technocratic demands of the policy-making process further reduce the active involvement of citizens because many citizens lack such expertise and knowledge. The political opportunity structures and political access channels also lead organizations to interface in specific ways with policy-makers and to configure their organizations to match these structures. As Saurugger notes:

the organizational structures of civil society have reformed to match better the perceived access structure of the European political system . . . Organized civil society – organized as groups or social movements – has a tendency to become increasingly professionalized to represent the interests of their constituency in an efficient way.

(Saurugger 2007: 397–8)

Finally, there is evidence that patronage affects organizational policy priorities. Cisař (2009: 25) argues that institutional patronage directly affected the agenda demands of the Czech advocacy sector; it was ‘shaped by Western donors who made them focus on the issues typically pursued by public interest groups in their countries of origin’. Nownes and Cigler (1995: 397) found that such monies tend to go to ‘issues and groups that are “hot”’. Patronage may directly influence organizational tactics – i.e. groups may be less willing to employ confrontational strategies or demand more radical policy changes. As Onyx et al. (2010: 43) put it, associations may engage in ‘advocacy with gloves on’ (original emphasis).
Conclusions

The collection of robust comparative information on associations and associational involvement has proved to be a major challenge in the last few decades. Information about associational involvement appears to be mainly restricted to (population) surveys, including basic questions on membership and various modes of engagement. The results obtained with these instruments seem to rely heavily on the list of associations presented and the exact wording of the questions. Although several attempts to construct equivalent measures have been made, cross-national and longitudinal comparisons remain severely hampered by substantial variations and fluctuations caused by problems of measurement. Besides, very few empirical studies go beyond simple self-reporting of associational engagement, and thus far only one study has systematically combined information from citizens, associations and volunteers (Maloney and van Deth 2010). The lack of reliable data is even more evident if we look at the changing position of associations in democratic societies and the features of civil society. Formal registration data and official statistics are of limited (rough guide) use. The need for more reliable and comparable data on associational involvement and associations is undisputed and presents a continuing challenge for scholars in this field.

Notwithstanding the criticisms above, current empirical information provides a few consistent findings. First, associational involvement in Europe varies widely, with very high levels in North-western Europe, much more modest levels in Central European countries and low levels of involvement in Southern and Eastern Europe. These differences are also visible when other specific modes of engagement are compared across Europe. Second, associations all over Europe continue to face changing demands and expectations due to state retrenchment and the professionalization process. Associations may find themselves increasingly acting as a ‘safety net’ for those who fall through the cracks of state provision. These bodies also face ongoing pressures to professionalize their operations to increase their advocacy and lobbying effectiveness and to ensure organizational survival. Whether these developments can be depicted as the ‘healthy improvement of private initiatives’ in times of state direction or as a neo-liberal instrument to revitalize capitalism is a matter of ideological debate. Normative discussions of this genre highlight the relevance and saliency of these developments for the future of democratic decision-making processes.

The quality of European democracies has never appeared to depend on associational involvement in the ways suggested by American findings and neo-Tocquevillian devotees. Nevertheless, associations – and not individual associational engagement – are central to arguments regarding the quality of democracy in Europe. As Wollebæk and Strømsnes remark, the importance of associations ‘lies not in socializing individual active members but in institutionalizing social capital’ (Wollebæk and Strømsnes 2008: 250). In turn, institutional social capital offers citizens opportunities to be involved in associations without being threatened by the consequences of free-rider behaviour. Marginalized social groups create and perpetuate alternative institutions as a mode of social capital to resist and oppose mainstream ideas and interests. In this way, associational involvement has the potential to offer a corrective to many problems and challenges facing European democracies – not by re-socializing people but by providing a context for trustworthy behaviour.

Notes

1 A similar line of reasoning from a radical-democratic perspective is presented by Evans and Boyte (1992) with their plea for ‘free spaces’ in order to provide people with the opportunity to develop the skills and civic virtues.
2 Even in clearly nonpolitical organizations ‘exposure to political communications . . . is not frequent, but neither is it rare’ (Verba et al. 1995: 373).

3 Careful comparisons of these results with other studies showed that World Value Surveys and European Value Surveys have underestimated the level of active citizen involvement in voluntary associations because ‘those who take part in activities organized by associations far outnumber those who engage in voluntary work’ (Morales and Geurts 2007: 139).

4 Aalborg (Denmark), Aberdeen (UK), Bern (Switzerland), Enschede (the Netherlands), Mannheim (Germany) and Sabadell (Spain).

5 Maloney and Roßteutscher (2007c: 58) identified variations between the cities they studied. For example, associations in Aberdeen exhibited a heavy emphasis on welfare issues, in Sabadell leisure activities were popular, in Bern it was culture, music and health. The areas of concern that were among the least well represented included in the six cities were Environment, Animal Rights, Peace, Humanitarian Aid, Women and Human Rights.

6 Maier and Meyer (2011: 738) identified five discourses: ‘managerialist, domestic, grassroots, professionalist, and civic’.

7 In 2010 Climate Action Network-Europe received almost 92 per cent of its €862,744 annual budget from patronage: 4.5 per cent from members’ fees and contribution, 8.6 per cent from European governments, 28.3 per cent from the European Commission and 54.8 per cent from foundations.

Bibliography


Jan W. van Deth and William A. Maloney

