Lecture IV: Causes and explanations of the crisis of civic engagement in the United States – part II

Bennett, "The Uncivic Culture": It's the economy, stupid!

→ Key question that Bennett asks: has the decline in <u>group</u> participation, identified by Putnam and attributed mostly to television and electronic media, caused a real decline in <u>individual</u> participation and interest in politics, or rather created the conditions for the emergence of new forms of political interest and engagement?

→ The economy is the key factor in the changes and trends identified
The change from a regional to a national and global economy, and from a manufacturing-based to a service-based economy, has been accompanied by changes in working conditions that have created "continuing shock waves in job security and work time, and related disruptions of family life, group memberships, social roles, and individual lifestyles".

Key facts:
- Reduction in real wages for hourly workers since 1973.
- Significant parts of the population experienced income reduction.
- Women's earnings have increased, but almost only due to increased work hours. The same is true for working couples' income.
- 40% of families report additional member entering the workforce or taking extra jobs due to money pressures.
- Employment change more often means unemployment or displacement to other careers than it means promotion and pay rise.
- Part-time jobs have increased, but more part-time workers are looking for full-time jobs than in the past.
- Work instability affects many more people than in the past.
- Men who changed employers no more than once earned 75% more than men who changed employers more than four times. Job stability brings to economic security, not to boredom and monotony..
- Rsing household debt, credit card delinquencies, and bankrupt fillings (even over a period of sustained economic boom)
- **Feast and famine cycle**: people work as much as they can when work is available to compensate for shorter workweeks, temporary layoffs, or permanent job loss that may follow. Danger of schizophrenia?
- A recent book by Harvard professor Elizabeth Warren, *The Two Income Trap*, states that:
  - Individual bankrupts have increased by 400% over the last 25 years
  - This is despite the fact that the two-income families nowadays earn 75% more than the one-icnome families of the previous generation, even accounting for inflation
  - Increasing expenses are mostly due to education, housing, and health care, not voluptuary goods and services: those in danger of bankrupcy are not mere squanderers
  - 6 million US families will be in danger of bankrupcy by 2010
  - All these shortages involve middle-class families earning between 50.000 and 100.000 $ a year, not the poor working-class families.

→ "Social life has become unbalanced and stressful for the majority of Americans whose lives revolve around the increasing uncertainties of work". Moreover, the distress and dissatisfaction with work is not healed by group ties, solidarity and support because group membership and identification have declined. "The double circle of poverty".

→ On the other hand, "most individuals also reject the inefficiencies and costs of centralized, heavily regulated economies, meaning that social and economic insecurities are typically defined as personal issues for which governmental solutions are deemed ineffective, if not outright unwelcome". Citizens are dissatisfied with their democracies and institutions because they feel that they do not provide viable solutions for today's problems, but on the other hand changing these institutions gets people angry that the rules are changing in the middle of the game.
- Example: Social Security reform in Italy

→ Bennett's explanation of changes in political participation and civic engagement:
- Social and economic changes have most affected recent generations entering the labor force, disrupting social and family roles, flexibility in time budgets, and conceptions of self and society.
  o These changes affected all generations from the 1970s with the notable exception of retired people (who are from the Great Civic Generation): this may account for the generational effect Putnam argues for.
- Making money is considered the most important goal in life by more people than in the past.
  o However, contributing to the society is considered just as important as making money.
  o "Despite its greedy overtones, the increasing importance Americans place on making money may simply be a realistic response to an unpredictable economy defined by job and career instability and little loyalty between employers and employees. In addition, recent generations have faced this changing economic reality in a society that is less supportive, largely because the group structure has changed."
- Related shifts in values and interests feed widespread concerns about the relevance of traditional institutional politics.
  o People are withdrawing from the national public sphere because they feel that the national government no longer serves their needs well and that the real problems are much closer to home.
  o "Disaffection is specific to Washington and the politics within government institutions", but "interest in both national affairs and local politcs remain high".
- Despite the drop in formal group memberships, people continue to engage each other through **volunteer work and loosely organized networks**. U.S. citizens volunteer just as much as they did fifty years ago, with an average of four hours a week. Volunteer work does not require individuals to adjust to an organization's schemes and demands.
  o This is especially true for women, who have entered the workforce massively and who experience the highest declines in group membership, but not in volunteering.
  o "These data do not paint a picture of selfish Americans walled off from each other inside their electronic bunkers. Rather, they suggest that something has happened that makes structured groups less attractive to citizens leading increasing complex, individualistic lifestyles."
- Despite doubts about the role of government, people continue to be involved politically with **lifestyle issues** including environmental politics, health and child care, crime and public order, surveillance and privacy, job security and benefits, the organization of work, retirement conditions, morality in public and private life, the control and content of education, civil rights in the workplace, the social responsibility of corporations, and personalized views of taxation and government spending.

- o **Culture Wars**: people (especially young people) increasingly see aspects of personal life as political: attitudes toward religion, abortion, affirmative action, civil rights, conformism, gay rights, promiscuity, marriage, violence, women's role.
  - o These cleavages are not well represented under the definitions of "liberal" and "conservative": *a different kind of Democrat* (Clinton), *a different kind of Republican* (Bush), Schwarzenegger…

The new political culture is not an "antipolitical culture": Bennett terms it "uncivic" to signify that it is a culture in which uncertainty, social dislocation, and anger that are characteristics of change can coexist with high levels of political engagement and interest, and the search for new political forms. One dilemma that this new, more fragmented and fluid environment poses is the possibility of a "governing crisis": publics that emerge from shifting lifestyle groups are harder to represent and to satisfy politically.

- The "mass society" created institutions through which conflicts could be compensated and resolved more or less quietly and peacefully through compromise.
- On the other hand, "lifestyle issues" that have become popular after the 1960s, "are issues about which publics are either uninterested or unalterably divided. Either way, the impossibility of compromise has undermined support for many institutional remedies".
- Therefore, "the new patterns of political engagement may not be particularly polite". First, because "it is not surprising that people get personal about issues that are increasingly close to home". Second, because there are no lively institutions through which such issues can be channeled and compromise facilitated. Third, because the decline of groups and the increase of individualism gets most of us to think that problems and solutions arise from individuals' personal failures and capacities, not from structural and social conditions.

→ Consequences on politics
- **Lifestyle politics is identity politics**: politics for individuals who feel more and more distant from groups and collective endeavors. "Because personal identity is replacing collective identity as the basis for contemporary political engagement, the character of politics itself is changing… Where parties and elections were once the primary mechanisms for interest aggregation and mobilization, these functions are increasingly shared by direct marketing, issue advocacy campaigns, and action networking. As a result, elections and everyday issue and image campaigns all use similar marketing strategies to construct networks of individuals whose attentions and loyalties are reassessed and reassembled in the next campaign".
- **Changes in political communication and civic life depend on social fragmentation, which in turn depends on economic change**: Bennett argues that, even if there is an interaction between society and technology, still technologies, and communication technologies, mostly respond to society's demands: "the economic fragmentation of social structures and identities also constitutes strong demand characteristics pushing the technological sophistication of communication."
- **Personalized political communications and the decline of traditional institutions occur when traditional forms of communication and participation are no longer sustainable**: "Arguing that social change is as much the producer as the product of the current state of political communication does not mean that the resulting negative, dramatized, and often populist content is either what people want, or, much less, what they need. However, it does follow that the spiraling expenses and human efforts devoted to contemporary communication campaigns would not be necessary if simpler, cheaper, and broader social appeals were effective in delivering audiences, customers, or voters."
  - o If groups have lost much of their significance in mediating information from the media (*two-step flow*), and if parties are no longer stable sources of identification and

valuable shortcuts for decision by voters, then professionals have to resort to other resources to assemble audiences of targeted individuals.

- o "The evidence for substantial levels of political engagement challenges the popular fear that a withdrawal into private life will shrink the public sphere of democracy. The more relevant worry may be a proliferation of disconnected public spheres flooded with personal concerns."

→ Identity and quality of life
- Critics of the mass society and of nation states feared that collective institutions, especially the nation (consider totalitarian regimes) could damage their members' identity by asking them to identify completely with them and to devote most of their energies to their activities.
  - o Examples: George Orwell, *1984*, Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*.
  - o Eric Fromm on the authoritative state: "The individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be"
- Today, we face the opposite dilemma: too weak collective identities leave people alone: "Collective identifications in many societies appear to be weakened to the point of jeopardizing the social support and recognition that contribute to secure identities and self-images. In most cases, feelings of personal insecurity or loss of control come in the form of vague anxieties that have boosted the sales of designer tranquilizers and mood toners. For many, the psychological distress is even more severe, as registered in an alarming rise of clinical depression and other severe psychiatric disorders throughout the industrial world."
  - o Depression vs repression
  - o Anxiety vs neurosis
  - o Shame vs guilt.