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June 20, 2004

# A nation of bystanders: An increasing number of Americans no longer participate in the democratic process

**By Pauline Arrillaga**
**The Associated Press**

Forward story

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PHOENIX - They used to gather in a cavernous hotel ballroom, tables packed with bankers and shopkeepers rubbing elbows with politicians. Those were the days when downtown Phoenix was booming, and the Downtown Lions Club boomed right along with it.

In the 1970s, it wasn't unusual for 150 members to show up at the weekly lunch meetings to catch up with colleagues and friends. Nor was it unusual for a boss to pay his employee's dues, since the club bred leaders and, sometimes, more commerce.

Amid the camaraderie, issues were discussed, ideas debated, referendums rehashed - a proposed highway project, perhaps, or ways to keep litter off the streets. Lions Club luncheons were an arena for political engagement, one that drew dozens of ardent participants.

Now, in 2004, Meredith Stam gets ``flak for coming here. Totally.'' Stam, a 26-year-old paralegal, is completely out of place at a 21st century Lions Club lunch.

The group meets now in a cramped conference room. Its membership has plummeted to 30, though on a recent afternoon only a third of them congregated over fish and fruit

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plates to hear a spiel against a proposed light-rail project.

Stam was one of four without white hair or wrinkles.

Her friends roll their eyes at her Lions affiliation. When they come together, it's more likely to be for a game of volleyball or flag football. Civic involvement, Stam observes, isn't much of a national pastime anymore.

``We're sitting on the sidelines,'' she says.

Twenty-first century America is not the nation of joiners that amazed Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s; it is not a place where citizens engage constantly to assemble democracy's quilt. The very groups that once promoted citizenship have seen their membership rates dwindle, groups such as the Grange, Masons, American Legion, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.

``Bowling Alone,'' is what Harvard University political scientist Robert Putnam calls it - a reference to an intriguing statistic that finds Americans bowling as much as ever but participation in leagues down sharply.

``There has been, at least over the past 40 years, a pretty strong downward movement in most forms of political participation,'' he says.

He cites Roper Polls that indicate the number of Americans who worked for a political party fell 42 percent between 1973 and 1994; who attended a public meeting fell 35 percent; who wrote to a representative fell 23 percent; who signed a petition fell 22 percent.

In America today, many of us sit back and watch others do the grunt work that was once widely regarded as a citizen's duty and privilege.

We have become, it seems, a nation of bystanders.

**An unbalanced society**

When ordinary citizens are not engaged in civic life, a democratic society becomes unbalanced. The minority that speaks out is heard; the majority that doesn't is ignored. For example, older Americans tend to be more outspoken than younger Americans.

The result? ``We're not having the same kinds of debates about student loans and national service and training for a first job as we are about Social Security and Medicare,'' says William Galston, director of the University of Maryland's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

``If a lot of citizens drop out of the system then the ones who stay in will have disproportionate influence. Some issues get debated actively and taken seriously, and others not,'' he says.

Historically, this was not an issue in a nation where civic participation was once as much a part of the landscape as its mountains and plains.

Organizations, some as old as the country itself, brought citizens together to solve problems locally and press issues nationally; political parties recruited the masses to help spread their message; civil protest was a viable means to political and social change.

Everyday Americans had a voice, and the nation's leaders listened because they depended on them - whether as citizen soldiers, taxpayers or volunteers.

For government leaders, ``popular support was the currency of power,'' write political scientists Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg in their book ``Downsizing Democracy.''

Somewhere along the way, Americans grew less interested in being active citizens. What happened? The ``old-timers'' of the Phoenix Downtown Lions offer some ideas:

• ``The problem,'' says 71-year-old Gene Hardin, ``is people die.''

One factor is the loss of the ``long civic generation'' - those who came of age during the Depression and World War II, spurred into action by hard times (and not yet distracted by television and the Internet). They were more inclined to vote, attend a meeting, join a group.

• ``Things change,'' suggests 82-year-old Helen Tibken, ``and we change with it.''

Putnam points to social and technological developments. Over the past 50 years, as the golden age of civic engagement lost some sparkle, suburban sprawl brought lengthier commutes; women, once a backbone of organizations, entered the workplace; television went from a diversion to a fixation; and the Internet made face-to-face contact unessential.

• ``People say they're just too busy,'' adds Allen Nahrwold, 65, ``and they really are.''

Roderick Hart, director of the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Participation at the University of Texas, agrees that a lack of time - whether perceived or real - is partly to blame. Today, with single-parent households or two-parent families in which both mom and dad must work to make ends meet, civic duties

can become expendable.

For many, some experts say, check writing has replaced active political participation. It takes less time and energy to write a check to the Sierra Club than to hoist a picket sign protesting oil drilling in Alaska.

``Civic participation and efficiency don't go well together,'' says Hart, ``and we crave efficiency more than anything else.''

**Professionals lead discourse**

Political scientist Theda Skocpol has another theory: Too many organizations are dominated by managers who can, and do, succeed without members doing anything.

Between 1959 and 1999 the total number of national organizations listed in the Encyclopedia of Associations grew almost fourfold, from about 6,000 to nearly 23,000. But membership rolls didn't. One study found that in 1962, the median size of groups listed in the index was about 10,000 members. In 1988, it was 1,000.

Call it the great irony of modern-day citizenship.

``America's organizing groups like never before,'' says Skocpol, author of the book ``Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life.'' ``They just aren't joining them.''

Whereas mobilizing citizen supporters was once the most effective way to bring visibility and clout to an organization and its concerns - consider the boycotts, marches and sit-ins of the civil rights era - today's advocacy groups have found other, oftentimes more expedient, avenues.

Member organizations have been superseded by professionally managed groups with paid staff members focused on drafting policy rather than people. They hire researchers to write legislation, lobbyists to sway congressional staffs, and public affairs specialists to pitch to the media.

Putnam illustrates the difference this way: Many of the nation's older member organizations are headquartered in places such as Irving, Texas (Boy Scouts); Tulsa, Okla. (Jaycees); and Oak Brook, Ill. (Lions) - where they are close to their participants.

Dozens of today's advocacy associations (Common Cause, the National Organization for Women, and the Wilderness Society, among them) do business from Washington, D.C. Even AARP, the advocacy group for older Americans, is located only blocks from the Capitol rather than somewhere like Arizona or Florida, where many of the nation's retirees live.

These groups do have members. AARP is one of the biggest, with some 35 million dues-paying constituents. But these ``members'' don't meet weekly to devise policy strategies; they pay $12.50 annually to hire someone else to do it and receive newsletter updates by mail.

The group's own data show that most Americans who join AARP do so for the benefits they can receive by flashing their membership card.

That's not to say there aren't some ``chapters,'' where group members can come together for some old-fashioned, face-to-face fellowship. But those are few and far between. Arizona, with 720,000 AARP members, had 31 local chapters eight years ago. Now there are 19.

The community groups ``are having difficulty staying afloat,'' says Curtis Cook, an associate state director for AARP Arizona. ``It's just not a thing that people care to do very much in today's modern society, with all of the attractions and allurements elsewhere.''

**Legislation by litigation**

But the decline of mass political participation is not simply a consequence of the decay of civil society brought on by TV, suburbanization and busy lives, argue Crenson and Ginsberg in ``Downsizing Democracy.''

Starting in the Progressive Era of the early 20th century, they write, the government established regulatory commissions to serve as watchdogs on special interests. The outcome, Crenson and Ginsberg suggest, was twofold: Citizens became less vigilant and involved, and interests such as the banks and railroads came to control the very commissions that were supposed to work on behalf of the public good.

Another recent change: statutes and judicial rulings that made advocacy by litigation commonplace, taking them out of the political arena. Name your issue: smoking, the environment, gay marriage - with only one name under the heading ``plaintiff,'' a lawsuit can effect change for millions of Americans through the action of but one.

Consider the decade's most infamous court case: Bush vs. Gore.

There were no mass demonstrations as the case that would decide the 2000 presidential election wound its way to the Supreme Court, Crenson and Ginsberg note. Neither candidate went out of his way to elicit public support.

``The absence of political ferment was said ... to indicate the maturity of American democracy and Americans' profound

respect for the rule of law,'' write the authors.

Instead, they argue, ``Americans failed to become agitated because most knew the political struggle they were witnessing did not involve them.''

If Americans are to experience a civic reawakening, experts insist, the nation's leaders need to sound the alarm.

As recently as 1960, John F. Kennedy famously challenged Americans to ``ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country.''

But somewhere along the way, leaders became less enthusiastic about challenging the citizenry. After Sept. 11, 2001, George W. Bush urged Americans to ``get about the business of America'' by shopping and traveling.

Skocpol notes that the Sept. 11 attacks caused a surge in patriotism and feelings of community connectedness, but those attitudes weren't often accompanied by action ``because there weren't a lot of places to go to do things.''

``It's tempting to think everything's changed because people have changed. If there were more organizations asking us to do things,'' she says, ``my guess is a lot of people would respond to that.''

**Some still get involved**

Some see reason to be hopeful about a revival of American civic life.

Suzanne Morse, executive director of the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, is one of them; she touts survey upon survey showing that citizens recognize the value of their role in community and country.

She sees Americans coming together socially in new ways - sports clubs, Internet meet-ups. Homeowners associations are thriving. Corporations - though perhaps not paying club dues anymore - are organizing food-drives, walk-a-thons and other charity fund-raisers.

Not much of this is overtly political, however.

As always, some citizens continue to get involved. A lot of it has a distinctly ``not-in-my-back yard'' flavor: Students in Honolulu protesting drug use after crystal meth is found in an apartment building; citizens in San Mateo, Calif., flooding the City Council with e-mails and letters about cultural sensitivity to force revocation of a ban on private booths in karaoke clubs.

And then there's Heather Herman. At 15, the Denver high school freshman is making her first foray into civic life by pushing a measure that would ban wild animals in city shows such as circuses or carnivals.

Working with her parents, friends and animal rights activists, Heather spent last summer going door-to-door and staking out supermarkets to collect more than 6,000 signatures to get the proposal on Denver's Aug. 10 ballot.

``I was like: `I'm so young, could this really make a difference?' '' she says.

Her answer: ``If you believe in it you have the power to do it.''

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