

Social Capital and Civic Society

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Since World War II developed countries have experienced an unprecedented era of economic growth, political stability and peace. It is safe to assume that the democratic constitution and the respective institutions of these societies are largely responsible for this phenomenon. These in turn are based on the willingness of citizens to participate in public life—not only in politics but also in other areas such as voluntary associations and religious organizations. In addition democracies require that citizens generally trust each other and that they trust the institutions on which their societies are built. Finally, democracies rely on a shared set of values and norms, especially on an orientation towards reciprocity and honesty.

Social participation, trust, as well as shared values and norms may be interpreted as the “Social Capital” of societies. Societies with much social capital prosper while societies that are short on social capital may face serious problems.

Robert Putnam (1995) was the first to point out that during the last three or four decades social capital has diminished considerably in the USA. Figure 1 shows that the number of citizens believing that most people are trustable declined from over 50% in 1960 to one third in 1999.

After Putnam published his thesis of declining social capital for the first time, researchers worldwide began to investigate if the social capital was declining in their societies as well. Two important results of these efforts are that social capital is not declining in all countries and that countries vary widely with respect to the degree of social capital. This is illustrated by the Figure 2 showing the correlation of rates of membership in voluntary associations and social trust (both measures are standardized).

Based on the above arguments, this session will address the following questions:

What problems emerge in defining social capital, does the meaning of the concept vary within different social contexts, and how is social capital distributed among people? (Jungbauer-Gans)

What levels of social capital can be found in European and non-European countries and what are the consequences of social capital for the “health” of societies? (Roßteutscher)

How does generalized exchange emerge among self-interested individuals? (Takahashi)

Why does the libertarian approach fail to explain trust-generating processes and how can a society in which people trust each other be formed? (Yosano)

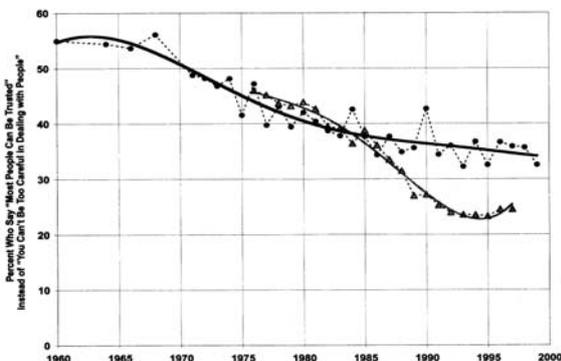


Figure 1: Trust in Others, Adults and Teenagers, 1960-1999

(Source: Putnam 2000: 140)

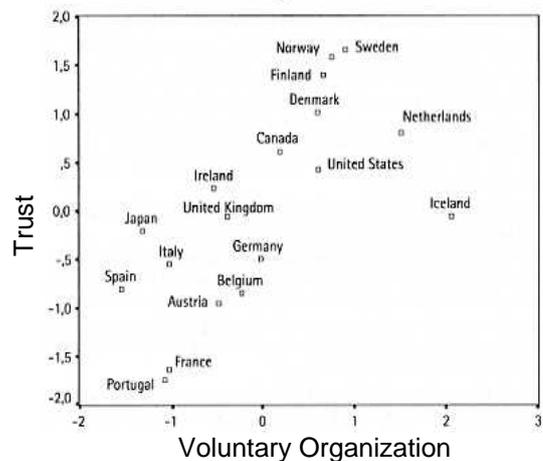


Figure 2: Membership Rate and Trust (Source: Gabriel et al. 2002: 35)