

Civic Engagement

The Adaptive Challenge of Restoring Trust in Civil Society

Driven by a confluence of powerful secular trends, Americans' trust in civil society has declined to alarming levels. Without addressing these trends and reversing the loss of trust, the ideal of private action for the public good could be at risk.

By **Dan Cardinali** | Jun. 14, 2018

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Known by many names—including the charitable sector, impact sector, voluntary sector, and nonprofit sector—civil society is almost incomprehensively vast and diverse. In the United States, religious institutions foster and nurture a sense of purpose in millions of people every day. Education and health and human service organizations support and unleash individual and community talents, dreams, and capacities to contribute to the constant building and rebuilding of our nation. Museums and cultural institutions open up our imaginations, freeing our creative, innovative sentiments and challenging us to imagine and re-imagine our lives, our communities, and our country. And environmental organizations connect us to our natural world, enabling us to recognize our place in it and responsibility to it.

It all adds up to some 1.5 million organizations that employ more than 11 million professionals, mobilize more than 63 million volunteers each year, and take in more than \$390 billion in philanthropic donations annually, plus many hundreds of



Civil Society for the 21st Century

(https://ssir.org/civil_society_for)

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, explores important issues of civil society in the 21st century: its origins and evolution, its boundaries and blind spots, its values and

billions in government grants and contracts. Call it what you will, American civil society touches every aspect of our daily lives in profound—though often unnoticed—ways.

variety, its obstacles and opportunities.

When I speak of civil society, I ground it in a notion of *private action in service of the public good*—as opposed to public action for public good (which is government), or private action for private good (which is business). It was this instinct that so amazed Alexis de Tocqueville in the 19th century: Individual Americans were compelled to form voluntary communities in pursuit of causes that complemented—but often superseded—their own selfish needs and desires. Striking a tension between individualism and a commitment to common good, American civil society, he believed, had the foundational elements for a healthy democracy.

For decades, civil society flourished at this instinctive level where de Tocqueville first observed it, without much formal recognition by the federal government. It was only as the United States prepared to enter World War I that policymakers altered the tax code to recognize the essential role of civil society in promoting a healthy and self-sustaining democracy. Despite the cost, Congress enacted the **Charitable Tax Deduction in 1917** (<https://www.philanthropydaily.com/the-charitable-tax-deduction-turns-100/>), determined to ensure that even as the country focused its powerful human, technological, and financial resources overseas, everyday Americans would be incentivized through a tax deduction to care for the wellbeing of their neighbors and communities.

The Great Depression and post World War II years saw a growing partnership between civil society and government. Increasingly, government recognized that citizen-led civil society organizations were critical to ensuring that the common good was protected and promoted. Investing in civil society through grants and contracts, government became one of the biggest sources of financial support to civil society. Over the years, civil society evolved into a complex set of organizations, some of which are now multibillion-dollar enterprises while others remain completely volunteer-led local initiatives.

Even as government increased its formal relationship with civil society, institutional and corporate philanthropy also evolved a unique role in the common good ecosystem. From “big bets” to capacity building, philanthropy has been a primary engine of innovation for many of

America's most transformative programs and ideas. Without robust philanthropic organizations investing in a diverse set of nonprofits, civil society would be much compromised in its ability to partner with business and government in promoting and protecting the common good.

Nearly a quarter of the way into the 21st century, I have no doubt that de Tocqueville would be amazed at the size, scope, and institutionalization of American civil society. But even more surprising, I imagine, would be the sheer magnitude of the challenges facing civil society today. Whether it is growing income and wealth inequality, changing conceptions of community, or the deep political and cultural polarization of American society, the very idea of "private actions in service of public good" is taking on new meaning and manifestations. Revisiting America today, de Tocqueville would, I am certain, be concerned about how civil society is changing alongside national identity and wonder how it might evolve to ensure that a strong sense of the common good continues to drive the great experiment that is American Democracy.

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So how would de Tocqueville know—how can we know—whether American civil society is in fact helping individuals and communities flourish? If the purpose of civil society is to promote the common good, then it stands to reason that a general wellbeing index—a collection of societal measures of our wellbeing—is a powerful indicator of success. So by examining these measures, we can get a good sense of how healthy civil society is.

Every year, Gallup asks some 175,000 respondents to rate their lives based on five interrelated factors of wellbeing: sense of purpose, social relationships, financial security, relationship to community, and physical health. By analyzing individual responses and extrapolating to the broader population, researchers can quantify the percentage of the population that is *thriving*, *struggling*, or *suffering*.

The trends are not encouraging. Despite a generally good year economically, wellbeing saw an unprecedented drop in 2017—worse than 2009, in the depths of the Great Recession. Last year, there were significant, widespread drops in wellbeing among women, low-income households, Democrats, and political independents. Wellbeing among men and Republicans merely broke even, despite their perceived political ascendancy. Not a single state saw a year-

over-year increase in wellbeing. Meanwhile, communities of color reported statistically significant declines, led by blacks and Hispanics.

Apart from economics, what are the factors that contribute to or detract from a general sense of wellbeing? Research tells us that connection, community, purpose, and agency are all powerful predictors of wellbeing, while alienation, isolation, and powerlessness negatively correlate. By its very nature—participatory, voluntary, and communitarian—civil society ought to boost the positive drivers of wellbeing while mitigating the negatives. So, given the broad-based collapse in Gallup’s wellbeing numbers, it’s worth asking the question: What role does civil society play in all this?

It is clear to me that *trust* is one of the core elements of American civil society. Even in the 1830s, de Tocqueville recognized that Americans trusted one another enough to create civic spaces in which individuals could commit their private resources in service to community goods. Without such trust in those with whom we share our daily lives, civil society struggles and ultimately fails in promoting individual and communal wellbeing.

Of course, we know that trust in American institutions—including Congress, the presidency, big business, big labor, and even the media—has been declining for years. Through it all, civil society has largely managed to buck the trend—that is, until 2017, when Americans’ trust in civil society dropped by nine points to stand just below the halfway mark, **according to the Edelman Trust Barometer** (http://cms.edelman.com/sites/default/files/2018-02/2018_Edelman_TrustBarometer_Executive_Summary_Jan.pdf) . In other words, ask the average American today whether they believe in the nonprofit sector, and the answer comes down to a coin flip. This is perplexing, because civil society is not the “other;” it’s not some external institution that affects our lives from afar. Instead, civil society is us. It’s how we associate and organize and interact with those around us. So when Americans tell pollsters that they don’t trust civil society, they are saying, in effect, that they don’t trust their fellow Americans, their neighbors.

While there are many factors driving the deterioration of trust in American life, I believe that three play a disproportionate role. First, America is experiencing a significant increase in the concentration of wealth among the so-called one percent. According to the Pew Charitable

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Trust, wealth gaps between upper-income families and lower- to middle-income families **are at the highest levels ever recorded** (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/01/how-wealth-inequality-has-changed-in-the-u-s-since-the-great-recession-by-race-ethnicity-and-income/>) . Exacerbating this situation is the persistent fact that structural racism **acts to maintain, or even increase, the wealth disparity** (<http://apps.urban.org/features/wealth-inequality-charts/>) between white households and households of color. In this environment, private action in service of public good appears increasingly futile.

A second factor driving the deterioration of trust in civil society is a shift in how we define “community.” The civic institutions that Robert Putnam wrote about in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (<http://bowlingalone.com/>) were based largely on proximity—all the clubs and societies and organizations that brought people face to face with neighbors in their physical community. Increasingly, however, technology is changing every aspect of our lives, including how we associate and how we define community. Virtual connections extend our sense of community well beyond place, and technology expands the potential scale of civic action even as it changes the nature of that action. This is what Claus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, calls the “**fourth industrial revolution**” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xUkIF7dyvI>) —neither bad nor good in and of itself, but a challenge that civil society must learn to manage. Until virtual communities inspire the same kind of trust that physical communities once did, it may be harder to pursue private action in service of the public good.

A third major reason why trust in civil society is diminishing is the sharp increase in political and cultural polarization. Rather than seeking commonalities with their neighbors, Americans are self-selecting into communities that reinforce existing viewpoints, interests, and beliefs. As journalist Bob Bishop points out in an interview about his book, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (<http://www.thebigsort.com/book.php>) :

[O]ur political differences are really just the tip of what has been a social and economic transformation. The nation has sorted in nearly every way imaginable ... Not only have demographic groups sorted themselves into particular places, we've also constructed our social lives so that we spend more time around like-

minded others. Over the last thirty years, our civic clubs, our neighborhoods, and our churches have all grown more politically homogenous.

America has always been a nation of rich differences. Over the last 30 years, however, this “great sort” has eroded our connection to those who diverge from our beliefs, experiences, and worldview. As a result, private action on behalf of the public good is increasingly circumscribed by what one considers her or his community. When community is limited to those with whom you share a worldview, then American civil society is deeply compromised in its ability to build a common good that extends beyond any limited, self-selected group.

Because it springs from a disparity between values and circumstances, eroding trust presents an “adaptive challenge (<http://cambridge-leadership.com/documents/Ch-2-Theory-Behind-the-Practice.pdf>) ,” to borrow from the work of Ronald Heifetz, founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School. Adaptive challenges are notoriously difficult to solve because stakeholders often find it hard even to agree on the nature of the problem. In this case, however, many leaders of civil society identified the issue of declining trust—and its attendant drivers—well before I did. It was a theme we heard constantly as far back as 2015, when **Independent Sector** (<https://independentsector.org/>) partnered with more than 80 organizations to conduct a nationwide “listening tour” known as **Threads** (<https://independentsector.org/resource/threads/>) . More than 2,000 participants across 13 communities took part in Threads, often sharing profound concerns about declining trust, pervasive inequality, social fragmentation, and low civic engagement. Even then, as we **shared in our report on the project** (https://independentsector.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ThreadsReport_April16.pdf#page=8&zoom=auto,-68,724) , the message was clear:

As organizations strive to achieve ambitious missions, each must decide how they will respond to a complex environment changing at unprecedented speeds. The options are to attempt to influence it, adapt to it, or ignore it. For most organizations, the first two options require significant change; choosing the last would risk receding into irrelevance over time.

Irrelevance is not an option. With this blog series, our hope is that American civil society can begin to write the next great chapter in its story. Professional communicators often use a well-known narrative framework called SOAR, which stands for situation, obstacle, action, and results. With this series, we hope to take a deep dive into the first half of that framework. We will examine the origins, definitions, and boundaries of civil society, in addition to the values and strengths that have allowed it to thrive for so long. We'll also confront some of the blind spots, weaknesses, and political critiques that could represent obstacles to continued success—if not an outright existential crisis.

In the end, however, situation and obstacles are merely the prelude to what really matters: action and results. For centuries, American civil society has proven capable again and again of taking the actions that produce results for the common good. In every instance, we have risen to the challenge by searching deep within our nation's soul and finding renewal grounded in a conviction that the American democratic experiment was worth struggling for.

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Dan Cardinali is president and CEO of [Independent Sector](#), the only national membership organization that brings together nonprofits, foundations, and corporations seeking to advance the common good. Known for his commitment to performance management and measurable



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