

Terms and Ideas

- Civil society
- Social capital
- Civic community
- Norms of reciprocity
- Amoral familism
- Horizontal vs. vertical network
- Associational vs. everyday engagement
- Bridging vs. bonding ties

Questions

Q: What is civil society?

A: Civil society refers to the sphere of voluntary associations and social networks that operate between the levels of the family and the state. Varshney emphasizes that this definition includes both formal associations (such as unions and non-profits) and everyday interactions that connect individuals and communities. Civil society provides a space for cooperation and collective action that is independent of the state.

Q: How does social capital make democracy work?

A: Putnam defines social capital as the trust, networks, and cooperative norms that arise from participation in civic life. It is a collective resource produced from repeated social interactions. This allows for spontaneous cooperation and makes it easier for communities to solve collective action problems and to coordinate to pursue shared goals. Putnam argues that this citizen participation is crucial for government to be effective and for democratic institutions to function well.

Q: What does Putnam argue about Italy?

A: Putnam argues that the differences in institutional performance between northern and southern Italy are the product of historical patterns of civic engagement. Northern regions developed strong horizontal associations that generated trust and cooperation, while southern regions were characterized by vertical patron-client structures that weakened collective action. Thus, in the north, citizen participation created behavioral expectations that were absent in the south and which led to good governance. The argument is one of path dependence; long-standing civic traditions have shaped how citizens interact with their governments in modern times.

Q: What is Berman's critique?

A: Berman challenges the assumption that civil society inherently strengthens democracy. In the case of Weimar Germany, civic associations were strong and abundant but democracy nevertheless collapsed. Berman argues that because political institutions were weak and parties lacked legitimacy, civic groups became substitutes for (rather than complements to) national political engagement. These fragmented networks provided organizational resources that extremist movements such as the Nazi Party could exploit. Her critique is that civil society strengthens democracy only when it is situated within strong political institutions. Otherwise, these social networks can deepen polarization and undermine the stability of democracy.

Q: How does Varshney connect civil society to ethnic violence?

A: Varshney shows that the structure of civic networks can influence whether ethnic divisions escalate into violence. In Indian cities with strong interethnic associational networks, Hindus and Muslims cooperated in organizations and created channels for resolving tensions before these could spiral. However, in cities with intraethnic networks, communication across groups was weak and politicians could better mobilize for violence. The main insight is that bridging social capital, as opposed to mere civic activity, produces peace, while its absence makes ethnically plural societies vulnerable to escalating conflict and violence.

Takeaways

This week, we provided a brief overview of the academic literature on civil society. These works interact with a number of other topics that we have discussed in the course thus far: modernization, the state, democratization, collective action, and ethnic identity and conflict. Civil society can be seen as a force that is not uniformly democratizing but contingent instead. It therefore fits well into one of the central themes of this course that political outcomes depend not only on single variables but on the interactions between them. Social structures, institutions, and elite behavior all seem to matter in what the effects of civic engagement are.

This week also sets the stage for next week's comparative focus on the United States. American political life has been shaped by both strong civil society participation and growing political polarization in recent decades. In the readings, consider how the frameworks examined this week can help us understand the current political climate and whether the United States is experiencing democratic backsliding.