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Author:
Wilkinson, Jennifer; Bittman, Michael

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VOLUNTEERING:

THE HUMAN FACE OF DEMOCRACY

by Jennifer Wilkinson and Michael Bittman

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VOLUNTEERING: THE HUMAN FACE OF DEMOCRACY

Jennifer wilkinson
and Michael bittman

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Jennifer Wilkinson is a Lecturer at Cumberland College of Health and Sciences. Michael Bittman is a Senior Research Fellow at the Social Policy Research Centre. This paper was first presented at the Social Policy in the City Seminar, Mission Australia, 2 August 2001.

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Abstract

Since the mid 1990s, following the reception in Australia of Robert Putnam's theory about social capital, volunteering has been seen as a means of expanding democracy. Social researchers have stressed the role of friendly social networks and informal civil associations in generating reserves of trust and social capital. The broad social benefits of trust are now widely recognised as having the potential to sustain and renovate economic and political institutions. Robert Putnam uses volunteering as an index of civic participation and argues that the immanent decline of volunteering signals a potential crisis for democracy. In this paper, we challenge Putnam's thesis from two directions, empirically and theoretically. Using information about time spent in volunteering from 1974 to 1997, it can be shown that, far from the decline in volunteering Putnam predicts, there is likely to be a significant increase in the total number of volunteer hours supplied. While this does give us some reason to anticipate an expansion of democracy in the future, we will argue that Putnam also underestimates the democratising potential of volunteering by ignoring the relationships of care in which volunteering is anchored.

1 Introduction

It has long been recognised that ‘democracy’ can either be defined substantively or procedurally. When defined substantively democracy means ‘rule by the people’[1], which suggests a process of self-rule where there is no distinction between the rulers and the ruled. It also implies that the ruled participate in ruling themselves. In contrast, procedural definitions of democracy concentrate on the procedures and institutions for determining decisions, such as universal suffrage, majority rule or secret ballots. Procedural democracy is also based on general liberal principles like tolerance of opposing views, freedom of association, freedom of information and the importance of human rights.

Since they deal with the qualities and processes of formal institutions, procedural definitions of democracy encourage the idea that democracy is a fairly abstract and remote idea, which has little connection with concrete social practices and the things real people do and care about. If our children think about democracy at all in a world where television competes for their attention, then it is as something that happens far beyond the social networks of family, friends, school and clubs which define the social context of their daily lives. The experience of most adult Australians is not very different. Democracy is what governments do ‘for the people’, often with what seems to be very little regard for what the people actually think is important. The government presumes, for instance, that what we really care about is finding the right mix of direct and indirect taxation. However, for many of us the importance of this issue is dubious when compared with safe street crossings, literacy, how well we care for our aging population or the problems arising from an education system which values competitive achievement and individualised success more highly than the ethics of compassion or being kind to others. There are countless examples like these of a widening gap between an increasingly abstract system of democracy and the concerns which now motivate ordinary citizens to move outside their private square and come together as a public.

Regardless of whether we are motivated by the desire to care for others or a more self-consciousness sense of our citizenship, we would argue that volunteering shows us a more inclusive and human side of democracy. It

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[1] Democracy comes from the Greek words *demos* meaning 'people' and *kratos* meaning 'authority' or 'power'.

suggests on the one hand that social participation can mean a lot more than a set of strategies for balancing the budget, and indeed, that democracy still has a connection to the classical idea of a *polis* whereby politics refers to a realm of civic participation.

But volunteering also reminds us that no matter how complex and distant some social institutions have become, that the roots of any just political system still lie deep in the ground in real social relationships based on trust and care. We suggest that it is here, in the webs of social connection and the compassionate impulses which support them that the potential to renovate democratic practices and renew our sense of citizenship really lies.

Volunteering, Social Networks and Social Capital

Since the mid-1990s, social capital has rapidly become the dominant framework in Australia within which volunteering has been interpreted. Zappala, for instance, notes that 'the first factor underlying the increased interest in volunteering is the growth and interest in debates surrounding "social capital and civil society"' (2000: 1). The initial impetus for these debates came from American researcher, Robert Putnam's thesis about social capital and civic engagement which was first broadly disseminated in Australia through the medium Eva Cox's Boyer lectures on ABC radio (Cox, 1995). Since then, other social researchers (Winter, 2000; Warburton and Oppenheimer, 2000; Lyons *et al*, 1999) and government agencies, both federal and state, have taken the idea up with alacrity.

However, the majority of Australian academic researchers have seized upon Putnam's most aphoristic statement about social capital, namely:

> By 'social capital', I mean features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 1995: 664-65)

Although the major Australian researchers and commentators – Lyons, Cox, Onyx and Bullen, Winter and Zappala – readily acknowledge that there are important links between volunteering, social capital and democracy, they use the concept of social capital primarily to emphasise the potential of voluntary organisations for building alliances and facilitating collective action (see for example, Lyons and Fabiansson, 1998: 15). While the formation of alliances is undoubtedly an aspect of social capital and a purpose which it serves, Lyons and these other

Australian commentators, are distracted by the external properties and practical utility of social networks and fail to notice other important features of social capital, which we will show can help to explain its democratising potential. Indeed, even Putnam himself has noted that it is through properties other than these utilitarian properties that social capital is intrinsically connected to civic virtue (Putnam, 2000:19).

The preoccupation with the external properties of networks blinds these theorists to some basic differences between social networks which have significant implications for democratic organisation. According to Robert Putnam there are two types of social networks – vertical and horizontal.

> Any society – modern or traditional, authoritarian or democratic, feudal or capitalist – is characterized by networks of interpersonal communication and exchange, both formal and informal. Some of these networks are primarily horizontal, bringing together agents of equivalent status and power. Others are primarily vertical, linking unequal agents in asymmetric relations of hierarchy and dependence (Putnam, 1993:173).

As Putnam explains, relations of dependency and need produce hierarchical organisations, e.g. the patriarchal family, the Mafia or the Catholic Church in southern Italy. He also explains that vertical networks are particularly ill suited to solving dilemmas of collective action, because they are unable to maintain a sense of trust among participants or promote cooperation (Putnam, 1993:175). Rather, within vertical networks: 'Defection, distrust, shirking, exploitation, isolation, disorder, and stagnation intensify one another in a suffocating miasma of vicious circles' (Putnam, 1993:177).

While Lyons and other Australian commentators assert that social networks give rise to collective action, they can't fully explain why this takes place because they ignore the distinction between horizontal and vertical networks. Putnam has also noted that although social capital can definitely contribute to the building of trust, cooperation and support, social capital is sometimes used for malevolent purposes as well. Racism, sectarianism, ethnocentrism and corruption are only a few examples of what the 'dark side of social capital' can achieve. (Putnam, 2000:22). Of course, others (Portes, 1998; Cox, 2000) have also noted that social networks can be used for purposes of good and evil. But for the most part, they have ignored the emphasis Putnam gives to the distinction

between vertical and horizontal organisation which helps us distinguish the democratic potential of particular social formations. It is plain to see that most of the examples given of the 'dark side of human capital' are instances of vertical organisation in which unequal relations of power and authority are institutionalised from the ground up.

Viewed from this perspective, it can come as no surprise that groups like the Klu Klux Klan are intent on mobilising destruction and exacting fear, or indeed, that political movements committed to ethnic cleansing have an internal structure which is hierarchical and authoritarian to the core. It can similarly be argued, as Putnam has shown, that the social groups which are most successful at building trust and civil awareness within communities, like the Green Bans of inner Sydney in the early 1970s, also have a democratic internal structure - which originates in relations between people who see themselves as equals and which is therefore able to foster trust among its members.

With this distinction in view, we can thus more easily understand the important differences between social groups and the sorts of relationships on which they are built. It is this insight into the structures of social capital and the reasons why some forms of social capital make it easier for trust to develop than others which will ultimately assist us in distinguishing the democratising potential of some social networks from those which are without it. However, in order to get the full picture of why this occurs, we now need to move beyond the mechanisms of alliance building - right to the centre of democratic alliances and the sociable practices which support them.

Sociability

Before any horizontal network is established certain social preconditions will have to be present. Sociability is the name we can give to those preconditions. As distinct from the emphasis on the outward features of social networks, sociability stresses the internal properties of social relations - our subjective 'experience of relating' if you like. Sociability recognises the need people have for each other's company and the pleasure people derive from it. Good friends try to spend time together because that is an end in itself. In other words, sociability also refers to the propensity we have for spontaneous association and in this respect it must be seen as an important precondition of democratic organisation.

Sociability also refers to the sense we get in a relationship that we feel the same about each other – that the relationship is mutual and that everyone

involved derives the same pleasure from it. Relationships based solely on dependency or patronage, as Putnam has helped us to understand, are not like that. They are not mutual, freely chosen or non-coercive - and they are not based on a sense that all members of the relationship are equals. This sense of being equal partners is another important aspect of sociability, which is why friendship is used as a model for explaining sociability (Misztal, 1996; 1998). We all know how hard it is to form a friendship with someone whom we perceive to be dependent upon us or indeed, with someone intent on dominating.

The general properties intrinsic to open friendly relationships we have just set out are the main features of what we understand as sociability. However, in order to see the relevance this has to democracy, we need to explain the link between sociability and the formation of a civic identity – the awareness that we are acting in concert with fellow citizens, strangers and people we have not met.

Reciprocity

Putnam argues that the touchstone of social capital is the principle of generalised reciprocity. According to Putnam, reciprocity is the close cousin of civility - which may be understood broadly to refer to our sense of fair play towards a 'generalized other' (Putnam, 2000:134). This idea of a generalized other is an important key to the argument as it directs our attention to the fact that with terms like *civility* and *generalised reciprocity*, we are actually talking about our treatment of people with whom we have no personal relationship. For want of a better description, they are ideas which explain a trusting attitude and a willingness to do things for people we do not actually know.

Reciprocity also explains why an individual is able to justify subjugating her own self – interest:

> I'll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favour (Putnam, 2000:134).

Reciprocity, then, is an explicitly sociable impulse, rather than an individualistic one since it is built on feelings of optimism and confidence about forms of social interaction involving the giving and receiving fair treatment from other members of society.

This emphasis on the way self interest can be mediated by trust in the fair play of other citizens acknowledges the debt Putnam's thesis about social capital owes to classical theories of civil society and to de Tocqueville's in particular. De Tocqueville had observed with some surprise at least one and a half centuries ago that many Americans were more likely to look out for their neighbours, than they were to look out for themselves. Perhaps we could argue on this basis that neighbourliness must involve something other than altruism, which de Tocqueville ultimately put down to something he called 'self-interest properly understood' (cited in Putnam, 2000: 134-135). Moreover, in this context, reciprocity is tied to the politically self-conscious experience of people who see themselves as citizens. This is crucial to understanding the democratic potential of social capital and the conditions which contribute to it because it shows that social capital is contingent on something called civic- mindedness or public spirit.

Reciprocity is also intrinsically linked to trust in so far as trust is generally taken to mean the presumption that our expectations will not be disappointed. Reciprocal expectations of others underpin many of our social exchanges in all kinds of relationships and this makes it possible to trust other people. Trust is most readily understood as something which grows out of relationships between intimates, but the originality of Putnam's argument lies in the suggestion that it also exists in exchanges between strangers. When viewed in these terms, where trust is recast in the guise of civility, we can see that although trust might well involve some calculation about the possibility of future returns from others, as Coleman (1990) suggests, there is no cynicism involved – only the assumption that one's trust in others will be reciprocated which is grounded in our sense of shared citizenship.

Sociability, then, refers to the general features of relationships that enable us to build trust and make connections with others. When we extend this conduct towards other people we don't know, we transform sociability into a capacity for democratic organisation – which is precisely what social capital means.

The public benefits of social capital are now widely recognised as having the potential to sustain and renovate economic and political institutions, but the democratic potential of social capital is frequently subverted by the instrumental purposes to which it is put. Governments have seized upon a discourse on social capital, in order to legitimise changes in welfare policy. This has happened in two ways. First, social participation, as we

know, is the leitmotiv of the McClure report which has ultimately guided the redesign of the Australian welfare system. This contributed to the federal government's welfare reform strategy – *Australians Working Together* extending the principle of 'mutual obligation' to new classes of claimants. Under the 'mutual obligation' regime the Federal government's the conception of welfare rights entails the acceptance of welfare obligations – in practice an obligation to work for a voluntary organisation. This situation has created a strong tension since what is being proposed here an apparent contradiction, namely, the obligation to volunteer.

Second, the Federal government and the State governments have sought to reorganise existing social services into preventative social networks under Federal and State government programs such as *The Stronger Families And Communities Strategy* and *Families First*. These are networks of service organisations dedicated to building social capital as a means of avoiding all manner of future social problems such as crime rates, drug addiction, under-achievement at school etc. Under the official banner of extending social participation, volunteers and community organisations are drafted into 'partnerships' to forestall these catastrophes through home visiting, community gardens, play groups.

We would argue that in these instances, the link between volunteering, social capital and democracy is pretty tenuous indeed. For although there is no doubt here that associations and alliances are being forged, we could question the impetus towards the formation of these groups, which comes from the government. Although many volunteers may well give their time and labour out of a desire to be civil, and in this sense can still contribute to the building of trust, the government's motives are inextricably tied to the need to balance the budget and the relations of power this involves. Not only is their interpretation of social capital purely instrumental, but their role in the networks is clearly a strategic one. For this reason, what might otherwise be a genuine potential within volunteering for expanding democracy through the extension of community and horizontal associations of citizens is replaced by a vertical alliance in which relations of power and dependency are institutionalised at another level.

Social Capital, Fungibility, Public Goods and Externalities

The instrumental value of social capital for governments arises on the basis of a quality that economists, following lawyers, call 'fungibility'. Fungibility refers to the way goods can be treated as interchangable, a particular unit of grain can be replaced by another other similar unit of

grain. This implies that an asset is redeemable in a number of different forms. One of the peculiar characteristics of paper money is that it is fungible and can be exchanged for other currencies, stocks, shares, goods

and services. Social capital is fungible because the networks, norms and trust built on the basis of one common purpose can be used for another. For example, a movement created to stage the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras can also be used to spread information about HIV/AIDS and safe sex. As this example shows, social capital represents a stock of fungibile social connections. This is the property of social capital which justifies the use of the word 'capital' in the term 'social capital'.

Economists also distinguish between private and public goods. A private good is the exclusive possession of a person or a corporation who can decide to sell it when the price is right. The goods found in most shops are like this; you can't purchase them unless you pay the appropriate price. Public goods, on the other hand, have some peculiar properties. First, they are non-rivalrous, so that one person's use of public goods does not deprive others of them. Second, it is impossible to exclude others from consuming them. Clean, unpolluted air is an example of a public good as my breathing does not deprive you of air. Nor can I exclude you from consuming it. Economists call the costs and benefits of public goods, which are not reflected in market prices, 'externalities'. As Putnam notes, the stock of social connectedness stored in social capital 'can have externalities that affect the wider community, so that not all the cost and benefits accrue to the person making the contact (2000: 20)'.

These two elements of social capital – their fungibility and their externalities – are what make a policy of building social capital so irresistible to governments. For not only do social networks represent a resource which can be redeemed at other levels, but governments are also able to 'free-ride' on their externalities, such as good health, a lower crime rate and a general improvement in social functioning in virtually all institutions. Building social capital is therefore a most attractive idea to governments - and an inexpensive policy – for it allows them to capitalise on the benefits of social connections by shifting the costs of providing services from the state to private individuals.

2 Putnam's Thesis of Civic Disengagement

It is precisely this instrumental interest in social capital which makes such a ready audience for Putnam's current claims about the decline in civic

engagement. If there are significant benefits in increasing the stock of social capital then there must be significant costs associated with dwindling social capital. Putnam's argument, in brief, is that social capital is generated by civic engagement. Because the civic engagement of Americans is in decline, social capital in America is decaying.

Putnam draws his evidence for the process of progressive civic disengagement from a variety of sources. To establish a general trend, he uses time-use research based on a survey of participants who kept a diary of every single activity they did during the day. On this basis, he argues that since 1965 time devoted to clubs and civic organisations has halved, and socialising, visiting has declined dramatically (by more than 25%). Membership records and surveys of political participation, such as attending a rally or a speech, or working for a political party are also used to support his contention of a significant decline in civic engagement (Putnam, 1995: 666). Civic disengagement has also affected trades unions, parents and citizens' organisations, the Red Cross, and not surprisingly, even bowling clubs. As the title of Putnam's latest book *Bowling Alone* suggests, the teams from America's bowling alleys have disappeared - and indeed, so has the team spirit. The camaraderie of local and works based ten-pin bowling teams, symbolised by the team name proudly embroidered on the satin shirt, is now a thing of the past, leaving only the private leisure of the lone bowler.

The decline in genuine participation in voluntary associations, argues Putnam, has been masked by the growth of empty forms of civic connections – paper memberships of organisations (such as Greenpeace) which depend on being registered on a mailing list, having your name on email broadcast network or signing a cheque.

It is Putnam's view, then, that America has recently witnessed the passing of a ' long civic generation' born between 1910 and 1940. 'The culmination point of this civic generation', he says, 'is the cohort born 1925-1930, who attended grade school during the Great Depression, spent World War II in high school (or on the battlefield), first voted in 1948 or 1952, set up housekeeping in the 1950s, and watched their first television when they were in their late twenties' (Putnam 1995, 675). When this generation was first exposed to television is, perhaps, the most significant feature in the biography of this generation because Putnam goes on to argue that it is television which is largely responsible for the destruction of social capital.

> Even though there are only 24 hours in everyone's day, most forms of social and media participation are positively correlated. People who listen to lots of classical music are more likely, not less likely, than others to attend Cubs games. Television is the principal exception to this generalisation - the only activity that seems to inhibit participation outside the home. TV watching comes at the expense of nearly every social activity outside the home, especially social gatherings and informal conversations... In short, television privatizes our leisure time. (Putnam 1995: 678-79).

Television arrived later in Australia. The first broadcasts took place in 1956 (although it took until the mid-1960s before it was in a majority of Australian households). Therefore the generation of Australians who were first exposed to regular television watching in their late twenties, were born corresponding later (shortly before the end of World War II) than the generation Putnam identified in the United States of America. So the obvious question that is: Will Australia also experience a delayed version of the same television induced decline in social capital? The empirical analysis described below, seeks to answer this question. It assumes, like Putnam, that volunteering (broadly defined) is an index of social capital. This means that when the supply of volunteers (and hours of labour they contribute) is high then the stock of social capital is high. Conversely when volunteering is in decline, social capital decays.

Projections of Volunteer Supply

Broadly speaking, there are two possible sources of changes in the supply of volunteers: first, the changing age structure of the Australian population, and second, trends in the propensity to volunteer among various groups. In what follows, the contribution of each of these sources is examined by developing a scenario for the future based on a set of key assumptions.

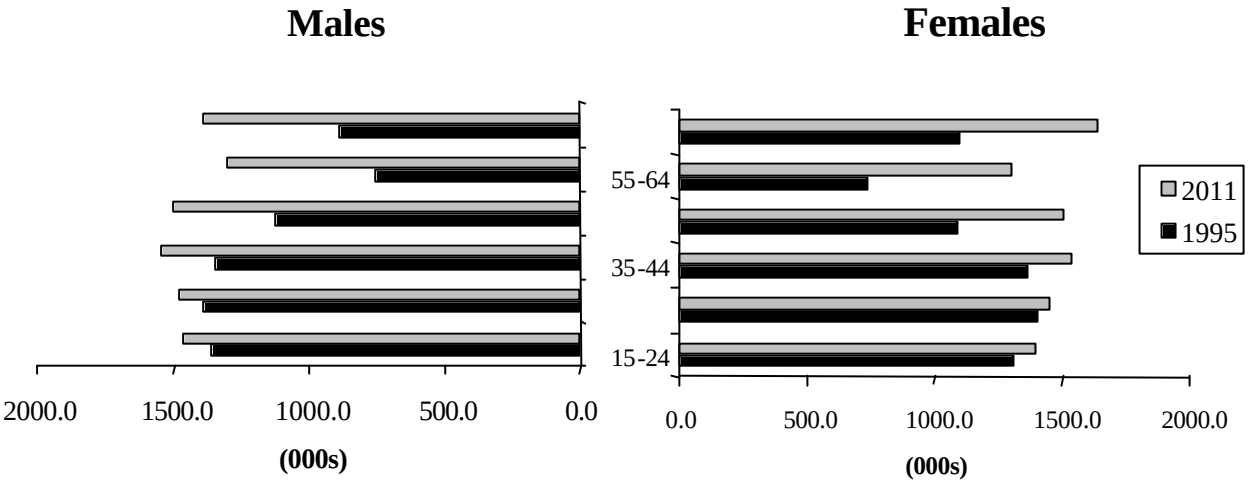
The Effect of the Changing Age Structure of Australia (Assuming Everything Else Remains Unchanged)

Drawing on information about fertility, mortality and net migration, it is possible for demographers to make relatively accurate projections of the likely age composition of the Australian population in the next few decades. The ABS (2000) has generated and published three main series of population projections – 'high', 'medium', and 'low' – based on different assumptions.

The following analysis (Table 1) is based on medium projections[2].

Figure 1 illustrates the projected change in the age composition of the Australian population over the period between 1995, the year of the first official survey of volunteers, and 2011. The age groups are arranged vertically and the numbers of male and females are displayed along the horizontal axis. The darker shading represents the population numbers in 1995. The lighter shading represents the projected population in the various age categories in the year 2011.

Figure 1: Projected Age Distribution of the Population by Age Group and Sex, 2011



Source: ABS (2000), *Population Projections Australia 1999 to 2101*, Catalogue No. 3222.0, ABS, Canberra.

Over the coming decade the proportion of the population aged less than 45 years of age will decline, whereas those aged 55 years and above will increase. The most dramatic change is the percentage increase in the proportion of the population above 54 years of age. Between 1995 and 2011, the proportion aged 55 to 64 years increased most rapidly (38 per cent), while those aged 65 years or more increased by 20 per cent. The decline in proportion of the population aged less than 45 years is less

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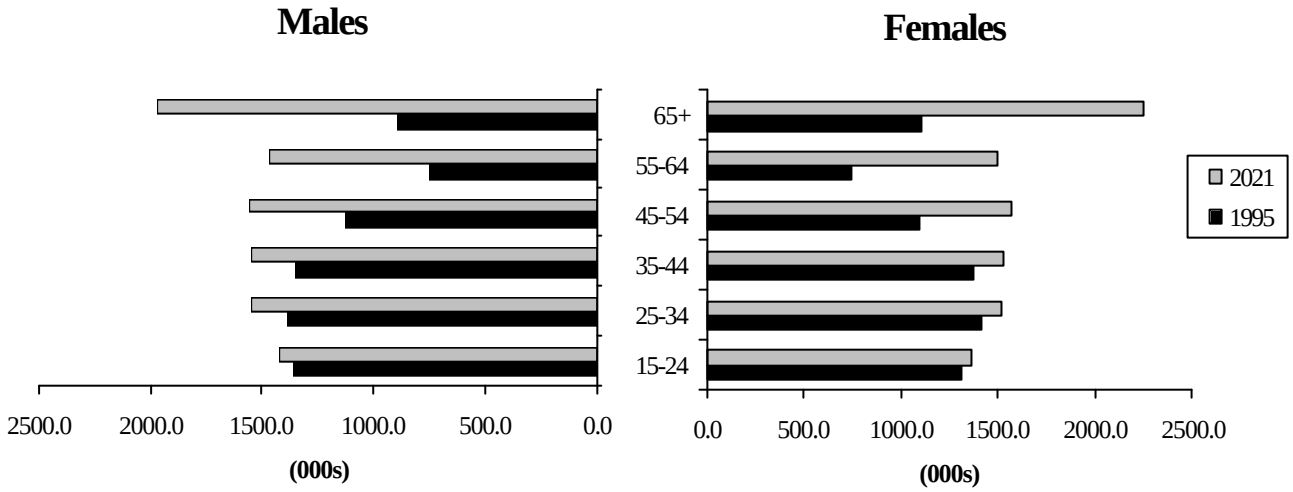
[2] The assumptions underpinning this particular projection are:

- The total fertility rate will drop from 1.75 to 1.6 between 1999 and 2008 and then remain constant for the remainder of the projection period;
- The rate of improvement in life expectancy remains at 0.30 per year (males) and 0.33 per year (females) for first five years then declines until 2051; and
- A net overseas migration gain of 90 000 from 2001-02.

dramatic but still very marked. The three youngest age groups all decline, as a proportion of the population by between one-tenth and one-sixth over this time period. The group aged 45 to 54 years remains a relatively constant proportion of the population over this period.

Figure 2 is in a similar format as the previous figure and shows the projected population numbers by age category in 2021. Once again, the darker shading represent the population numbers in 1995. However, in this case the lighter shading represents the projected population in the various age categories in the year 2021.

Figure 2: Projected Age Distribution of the Population by Age Group and Sex, 2021



Source: ABS (2000), *Population Projections Australia 1999 to 2101*, Catalogue No. 3222.0, ABS, Canberra.

Over the quarter century period under consideration, the proportion of the population aged less than 45 years of age will continue to decline, whereas those aged 55 years and above increase even more conspicuously. Again, the most dramatic change is the percentage increase in the proportion of the population above 54 years of age. Between 1995 and 2021, the proportion aged 55 to 64 years will increase 43 per cent; however, those aged 65 years or more outstrip this increase, growing by a weighty 52 per cent. The decline in proportion of the population aged less than 45 years is less dramatic but still very marked. As a proportion of the population, the three youngest age-groups decline even more noticeably, over this time period at a rate of between 18-25

per cent. Only the group aged 45 to 54 years remains a stable proportion of the population.

Table 1: Per Capita Annual Hours of Volunteering

Year	*1995*	*2011*	*2021*
Males	27.3	28.5	28.9
Females	35	36.8	37.4
Persons	31.2	32.7	33.3

Having described the projected changes in the age composition of Australian society, we now need to examine the likely effect of these changes on the supply of volunteer hours. Assuming that the rate of volunteering (or the propensity to volunteer) for each age group does not change, this projection (based purely on the changes in age structure of the Australian population over this period) predicts that the supply of hours of volunteering can be expected to increase**.** The rapid projected growth in the proportion of Australia's population aged more than 54 years allows us to predict a substantial increase in the supply of hours of voluntary work. These increases are only slightly offset by a projected marginal decline after the year 2011 in the hours provided by the proportion of the female population under 45 years[3] and the male population below the age of 25 years. Compared with 1995, it appears that in the year 2021, every adult Australian will volunteer on average for an extra two hours per year.

Is the Propensity to Volunteer Changing Over time?

Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the Australian Bureau of Statistics had conducted surveys of volunteering on only two occasions – 1995 and 2000. Deducing a trend from sample surveys at two points in time five year apart is a precarious undertaking. Fortunately, there is another source of information about volunteering in Australia – time use surveys.

There have been four time use surveys conducted in Australia[4], with a sample size sufficient to make some generalisations possible.

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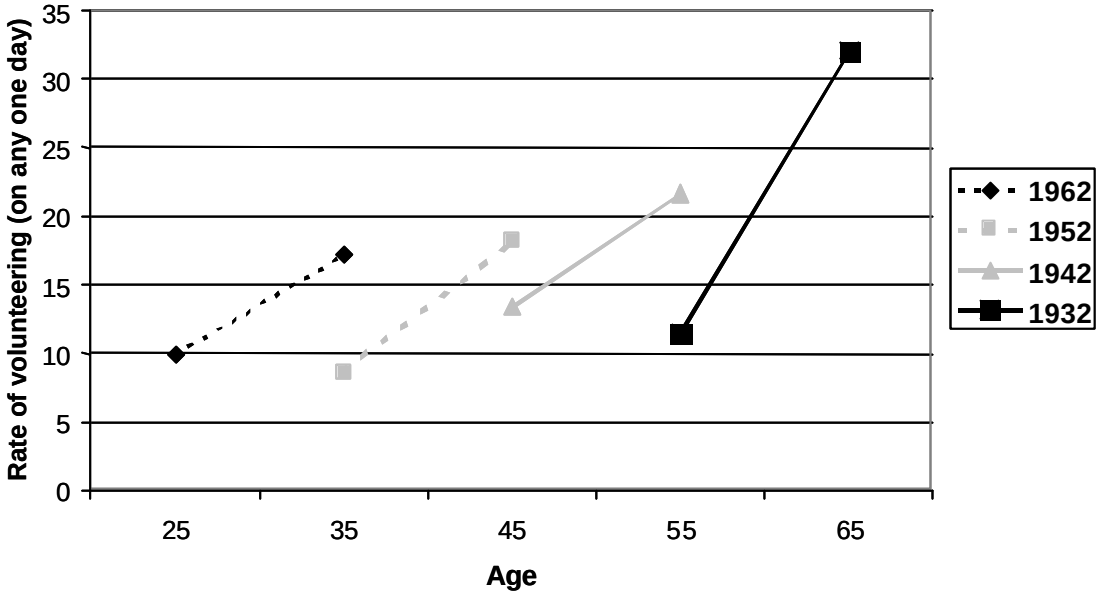
[3] The exception is women aged 25-34 years, who are projected to marginally increase the hours of voluntary work supplied.

[4] The first large scale time use survey in Australia was conducted in 1974 by the Cities Commission in Albury-Wodonga and Melbourne. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) conducted a pilot survey in the Statistical District of Sydney (which takes in the Central Coast) in 1987 and collected national time use data for the first time in 1992. The national survey was repeated, as part of a five-year cycle, in

The time use surveys provide us with information on activities undertaken on any particular day. On any given day only some of the people who provide annual hours of voluntary work will actually be engaged in voluntary work. Estimates derived from the time use survey show what proportions of people were engaged in volunteering on an average or 'typical' day. These rates will naturally be lower than the estimates derived from the question in the ABS survey of *Voluntary Work*, which asks respondents whether they volunteered in the last year.

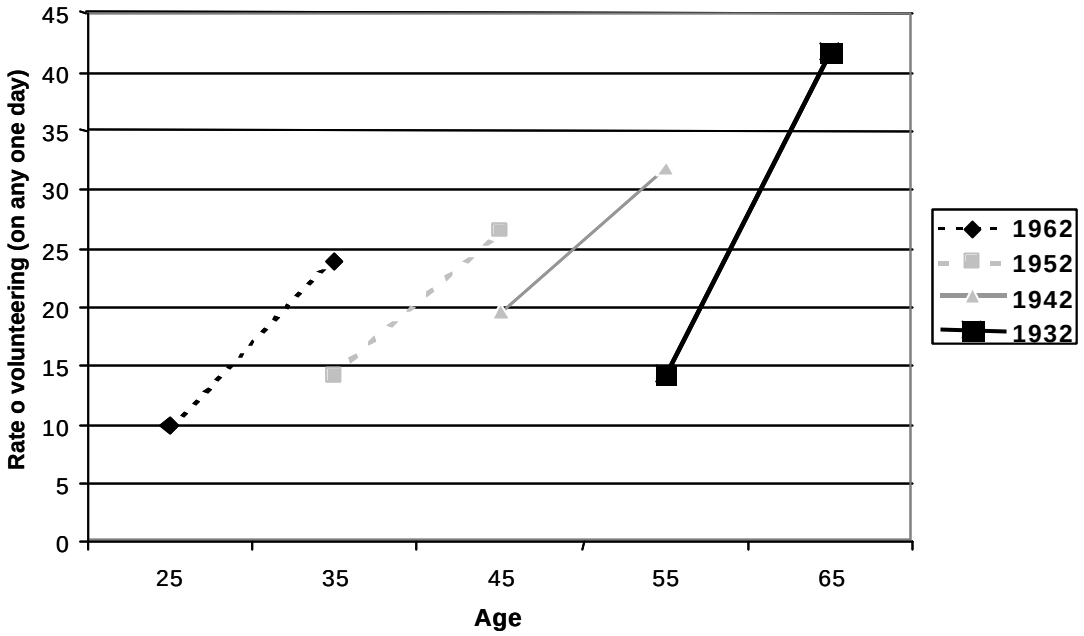
Figure 3: Cohort Analysis of Men's Rate of Volunteering



Putnam's thesis of civic disengagement of the baby-boomers relies on differences between birth cohorts. Figures 3 and 4 show the behaviour of different birth cohorts of Australian men and women. The thesis of civic disengagement suggests that those born between World War II and the 1970 should show a lower propensity to volunteer than earlier generations.

1997. The national survey is collected over the whole year, capturing regional and seasonal effects. This information can be used to calculate and correct for regional and seasonal effects (Bittman, 1995). Using these corrections it is possible to compare time use data from all four surveys. The only remaining constraint on comparing the four surveys centres around the difference in the age range in the 1974 survey. Whereas the ABS collected time use diaries for a sample of all persons living in a household over the age of 14 years, the Cities Commission collected data for only one individual aged between 18-65 years in the sampled households. While analysis of data collected after 1987 and later is relatively unrestricted there are some restrictions on analysis of the data before 1987.

Figure 4: Cohort Analysis of Women's Rate of Volunteering



Figures 3 and 4 show participation in volunteering by age for four birth cohorts. According to Putnam the earlier two cohorts (born circa 1932 and 1942) belong to the civic generation and the later two cohorts (those born circa 1952 and 1962) belong to the post-war baby-boom generation that are supposedly disengaging from civic participation. Generally, the rate of volunteering increases with age. However, each successive birth cohort appears to have a higher rate of volunteering than the earlier cohorts. Most crucially the rate of volunteering among the allegedly disengaged post-war generation is higher than among their allegedly more civic predecessors. For example, at age about forty-five, the rate of volunteering among men and women born in 1952 is actually higher that of the war-time cohort born in 1942. Indeed, the rate of volunteering among those born post-war appears to be at a higher rate than the allegedly civic generation, even at early ages.

Trends in Per Capita Hours of Hours of Volunteering

In addition to investigating the numbers of persons participating in volunteering over historical time, it is interesting to examine trends in the time participants typically spent volunteering on a daily basis.

In Figures 5 and 6 below, time spent volunteering has been annualised, that is to say, it is expressed in hours per year.

Figure 5: Males: Number of Volunteering Hours Per Capita by Age Group

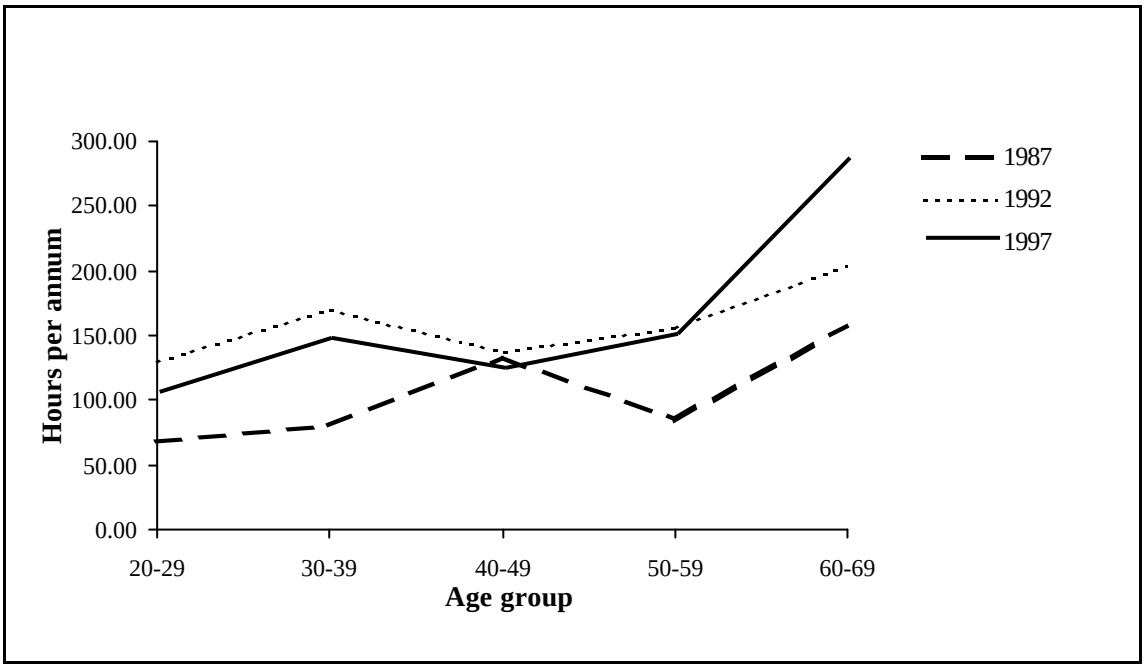


Figure 6: Females: Number of Volunteering Hours Per Capita by Age Group

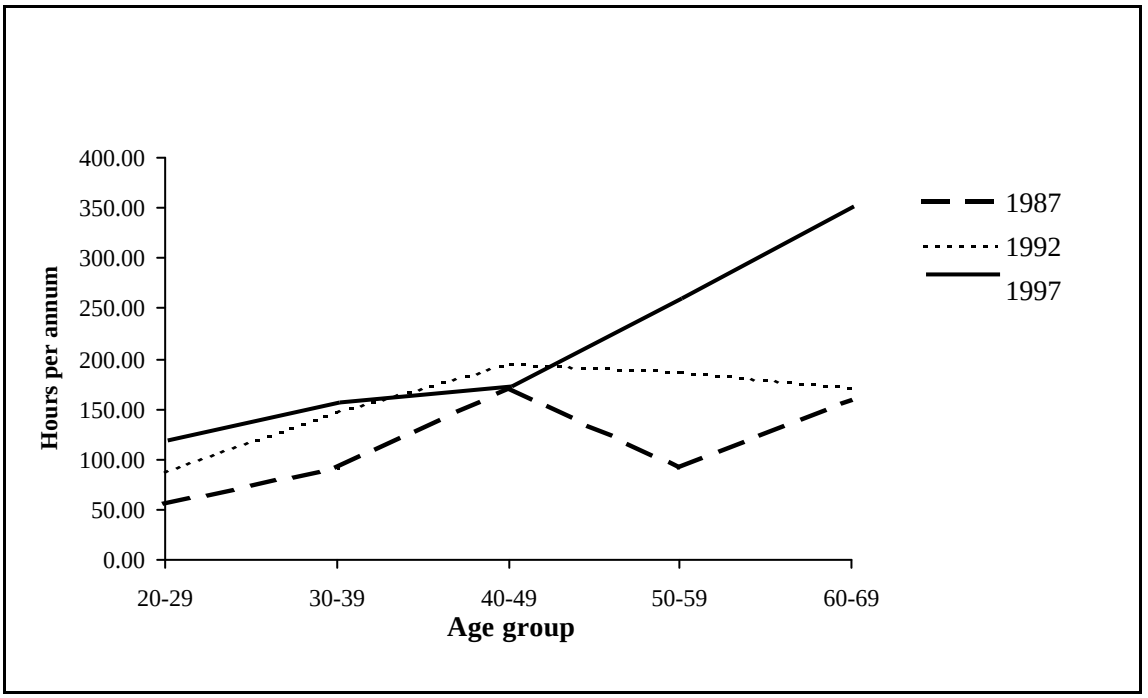


Figure 5 shows that over the whole decade, male annual per capita hours increase among older aged groups, but change very little among those aged 40-49 years. It also shows a more complicated pattern of change for the younger aged groups. Taking these trends singly, it is clear that in all three survey years there is an obvious tendency for per capita hours of volunteering to increase steeply at around 55 years. This trend is most marked in 1997.

Figure 6 shows that in contrast to men, the women's per capita hours of volunteering are lowest at the youngest ages and exhibit an historically changing peak. In 1987 and 1992, the peak hours are found among women aged 40-49 years but in 1997 the peak is found among women aged 60-69 years. Moreover, the per capita hours reach unprecedented high levels among women of this age group, levels which exceed those of comparable men by 19 per cent. In 1997 a new turning point (at around age 35 years) appears, signalling a lowering of the level of per capita volunteer activity for middle years, making women in the age 40-49 the only category of women with lower per capita hours in 1997 than in 1987.

3 Some Tentative Conclusions

Predicting the future is a risky but necessary enterprise. The projections presented above are based on explicit assumptions and should always be treated with caution because these assumptions may turn out to be incorrect.

However, the information presented here suggests that both the number of volunteers and the hours of voluntary work that these people supply are likely to increase in 2011 and 2021. The changing age structure of Australian society is leading to a disproportionate growth among persons aged over 55 years. It is precisely among people at this stage in the life course that the propensity to volunteer is highest and the average hours of voluntary work undertaken are greatest. This is also the group displaying the most pronounced increases in per capita hours of the last decade. If this tendency toward increased commitment to volunteering continues among this age group, the supply of hours of voluntary work looks set to increase.

There are some countertendencies likely to limit to the growth of hours of voluntary work. The coincidence of work and family pressure on women in their middle years has led to an emerging pattern of reduction in the average hours of voluntary work they will be able to supply to the

community. However, the overall effect of this trend among women in their middle years is small. It cannot cancel out the substantial rises in volunteering due to increases related to the aging of the population.

If we accept that volunteering helps to build social capital, then these projections about a significant increase in the future supply of the number of volunteer hours give us reason to feel hopeful about the state of health of Australian democracy in the future. Earlier we showed that at an institutional level, volunteering might easily be caught up in vertical alliances of power structured around the statist objectives of service delivery networks. However, we also argue that volunteering still has the potential to expand and renovate democratic institutions in a way that challenges the traditional division between public and private. Whereas large-scale organisations like the state and economy are driven by power and are relatively closed, voluntary organisations are – by comparison – driven by sociable impulses and have an open, porous quality. On the one hand, this porousness can make voluntary organisations vulnerable to other programs which may subvert their potential for democratisation in the course of harvesting the social capital within voluntary associations for different purposes. However, it is also the porous quality of these institutions, which springs from their roots in social interaction, that holds the key to democratising and opening up smaller areas of the state and economy – for as long as the partnerships being forged with business and government are being entered on equal ground.

For those who choose freely to give their time and labour to those in need, there is a readiness to extend to people they do not know the principles of sociable relating which would otherwise be experienced only within mutually pleasing personal relationships. At the heart of this show of civility is the promise that the positive experiences of companionship and the bonds of mutual regard can be transformed into forms of civic engagement. This is why volunteering is such a rich source of institutional renewal – because it has the potential to build friendly alliances and forge bonds of fraternity well beyond the private sphere of kin and personal companions, thereby bringing sociability to the realm of our public interaction.

The question we wish to raise at this point, though, is whether the capacity for civility is the only thing volunteering can offer democracy? On the one hand, we think Putnam is right in assuming that civility contributes so much to democracy. But as we argued elsewhere (Wilkinson, 2001), the extension of sociable impulses towards strangers in the form of trust,

albeit impulses which are made in the context of recognising our shared citizenship and the possibility of reciprocity, ignores the key relationship volunteering has to caring values and practices. In his recent trip to Australia, Putnam argued that the strengthening of modern democracies ultimately depended on building new connections between strangers which he called 'bridging social capital'. Although the stocks of bonding social capital (links between people with some commonality) were good, it is the capacity for forging links across socio-cultural differences which is at stake. It is true to say that volunteering does have the capacity to build bridges between strangers and there is no doubt that this new source of social capital can enrich public participation. However, we suggest that the source of this enrichment is not sociability per se or even being civil as it is defined above. There is more at stake in the volunteering experience than a sense of delivering and receiving fair treatment from strangers. Rather, what counts here is the capacity for compassion, kindness and caring. In bringing these human qualities into the human domain, volunteers are developing new ways to relate to strangers. By expanding our understanding of civility to include caring for 'generalised others', volunteering shows democracy's human face.

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