

A History of Civic Engagement of Older People

By *W. Andrew Achenbaum*

From the very beginning our people have markedly combined practical capacity for affairs with power of devotion to an ideal,” declared Theodore Roosevelt (1902, p.17). “The lack of either quality would have rendered the possession of the other of small value.” This president was a central figure in the Progressive movement, which sought to institutionalize public-private partnerships to remedy social problems caused by modernization. Roosevelt’s pragmatic, idealist strategy has deep historical roots, grounded in at least three American traditions—(1) forming voluntary associations, (2) mobilizing political activism, and (3) advancing adult education. Let us examine the historical dynamics of each tradition in turn.

VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

Alexis de Tocqueville, arguably the most astute observer ever to gaze upon the American scene, declared in *Democracy in America* (1836) that people in this country surpassed those in all other nations in their proclivity for creating voluntary associations in order to accomplish pragmatic, idealistic, public goals:

Besides the permanent associations which are established by law under the names of townships,

*Roots in
American tradition.*

cities, and countries, a vast number of others are formed and maintained by the agency of private individuals . . . There is no end which the human will despairs of attaining through the combined power of individuals united into a society. (Volume I, pp. 198–9)

Voluntary associations, de Tocqueville discovered, often collaborated with public institutions; together they built tollways, for instance. Sometimes private organizations acted boldly to transform the body politic—they created employment opportunities for blacks after Reconstruction, something officials in the public sector resisted. At other times Americans joined together in voluntary associations to accomplish short-term objectives; once done, they disbanded. Still other agencies, like the Salvation Army, became national institutions, stretching to serve more and more needy people.

Alexis de Tocqueville’s critique of voluntary associations, written in the heyday of Jacksonian America, was not just a reflection of that era. Voluntary associations flourished throughout U.S. history. Colonists in seaport cities financed homes for orphans and for widows; private charities supplemented county almshouses that sheltered local residents in permanent or temporary

need (Trattner, 1994). An orator at groundbreaking ceremonies for a new canal in Ohio in 1825 stressed the intergenerational dimensions of certain ventures. Building a canal, however arduous, was essential to the region's economic development. Fortunately, the orator opined, the necessary resources were available: "all the vigor and firmness of youth, the strength and firmness of manhood, and the wisdom of age . . . your powers are equal to its completion" (quoted in Achenbaum, 1978, p.9).

After the Civil War, as the United States became more urban and industrial, voluntary associations empowered individuals to apply their talents through social service agencies. Religious congregations and secular institutions helped immigrants to learn English and skills essential for assimilation. Older people were instrumental in starting such voluntary associations. Consider Felix Adler, who headed the New York Society for Ethical Culture until his death at 82; Adler solicited the support of his adherents to sponsor visiting nurses (a program later added to the city's public health system) and a free kindergarten for the children of working parents.

Voluntary associations remain vital today. Their purposes are diverse. For more than seven decades Alcoholics Anonymous has used the stories and guidance of people over 50 to reach those who wish to remain sober and become more productive members of society. Some voluntary associations raise funds for science. To wit: Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1938 established the March of Dimes as a "national health charity" to support the investigations of virologists and polio researchers; the organization presently underwrites neonatal intensive care and folic-acid education. Contemporary voluntary associations, like ones that de Tocqueville described, share a pragmatic ideal: Their *raison d'être* is to mobilize the talents and resources of men and women willing to offer gifts of time and experience for the public good.

POLITICAL ACTIVISM

U.S. citizens who historically have engaged in civic activism through voluntary associations typically do so out of enlightened self-interest—and they have not come only from the ranks of

the young and middle aged. History texts extol the virtues of the "Young Men of the Revolution" like Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, but they also pay deference to sages like Benjamin Franklin and the Oneida chief Oskanondonha. Elders have been leaders in galvanizing voluntary associations. Many spokespersons of the abolitionist movement, who reached maturity before the Civil War, remained strong advocates of racial equality until they died. Noteworthy were John Brown (1800–1859), Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879), Gerrit Smith (1797–1874), and Harriet Tubman (1820–1913). Others, such as Wendell Phillips (1811–1884) and Robert Dale (1801–1877), moved on to advocate in behalf of Native Americans and women, respectively.

Activists such as Lucretia Mott and the Grimke sisters fervently denounced slavery. Older women in the period also advanced the first wave of feminism in the U.S.: Besides Mott (1793–1880), achieving prominence were Mary Lyon (1797–1849), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), and Emma Willard (1787–1870). Around the turn of the century, pacesetters such as Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906), Carrie Chapman Catt (1859–1947), and Charlotte Perkins Gillman (1860–1935) fought for women's political, social, and economic rights. Others followed the example of Jane Addams (1860–1935), organizing younger women in settlement houses, trade unions, women's temperance unions, and suffrage associations.

In the twentieth century, particularly after World War II, we tend to associate political activism and civil disobedience with college protesters and minorities demanding essential civil rights. During the same period older people took charge. Samuel Gompers (1850–1924) spent the second half of his life making the American Federation of Labor (AFL) a formidable champion of benefits for skilled laborers. George Meany was 60 when he merged the AFL with the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Frances Townsend inspired millions of desperate older people to demand relief in the Great Depression, thereby affecting the timing and scope of the 1935 Social Security Act. The Gray Panthers, founded by Maggie Kuhn (1905–1995) when she was in retirement, remained a politi-

cal lightning rod a generation later. Two octogenarian senators, Wayne Morse and Ernest Greuning, after casting the only votes against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (1965), lent their voices to protests against the war in Vietnam.

ADULT LEARNING

Giving children and youth the requisite skills and values to assume roles as productive workers and responsible citizens has always been a national priority. Over time, a complex educational network took shape in the United States. Students in the antebellum period attended classes when they did not interfere with harvest or industrial time. Now, possessing a high school diploma (or its equivalent) from a public or private school is a requirement for entering the job force. A majority of high school graduates (more young women than men) attend college though not all complete their degrees.

Independent of schools for the young rose institutions that catered to mature learners. Benjamin Franklin, this country's Father of Adult Education, formed the Junto (1727), "a school of good manners and good works"; offered readers aphorisms and practical information in *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1733–1758); founded the American Philosophical Society (1743); and helped to charter the first public library in the colonies.

During the nineteenth century, craft entrepreneurs built mechanical institutes, based on models in London and Glasgow, for the urban working class. Josiah Holbrook brought Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes to rural communities through his Lyceum Movement (1826). The Chautauqua Assembly (1874) was originally designed to provide life-long learning for Methodist Sunday School teachers; offshoots sprung up in several states. (The Ku Klux Klan created its own version, Klan Tauqua.) Women, generally afforded less access to higher education than men, formed reading clubs to broaden their intellectual horizons (Achenbaum, 2005).

Yet adult education never really caught fire in America. Except for agricultural programs, universities typically suspended extension programs because of costs and lack of interest. As late as 1925, only 37 percent of all Americans had access

to libraries. The prevailing sentiment, based on then available "scientific" data, was that older people were unable or unwilling to learn. "There is now no socially organized means by which the aged have (or at least are supposed to have) even the *knowledge* which is relevant to the conditions of social life, much less the opportunity for applying it," lamented John Dewey (1939, p.xxv).

Thanks to hundreds of investigators since Dewey, we now recognize that older men and women have the cognitive capacities and social capabilities to master new subjects. Surveys indicate that senior citizens pursue knowledge that matters to them. Many wish to share their expertise and experiences with others. Adult learning promotes vital aging, and vice versa.

Yet structural lags persist, and these have circumscribed the roles accorded older Americans in voluntary associations and limited their contributions to political activism. Colleges and universities rarely invest much capital (financial or intellectual) in continuing education. Corporations, which train more mature students than any other institutions, design curricula to fit their priorities. Even Elderhostel, one of the most innovative types of adult education, finds it hard to reach men and women over 55—"lack of overheads received, low levels of earnings retained and absence of public funding attached to what is, in effect, a voluntary movement" (Moody, 1996, pp.20–1). That said, some progressive voluntary associations are harvesting untapped talents and potentials of older people in order to improve the commonweal.

ELDERS AS ENGAGED VOLUNTEERS

Were he writing today, Alexis de Tocqueville would surely acknowledge the vital roles that older Americans play in civic engagement. Dedicated to the betterment of society, voluntary associations tap the wisdom, experience, and dedication of older men and women eager to acquire skills and knowledge so that they can do new things. Older adults participate in literally thousands of faith-based ventures, political organizations, interest groups, and a wide array of government-sponsored initiatives. Among other causes, elders help the needy here and abroad, advance environmentalism, and revitalize their local communities. Many of these

voluntary associations, still so integral to the American fabric, are age-based. Volunteerism is structured: national agencies have local chapters; neighbors organize. Two examples—a voluntary association created by citizens and others in the public sector—illustrate the point.

In the private sphere, OASIS is a prototype. The group was conceived in 1982 by Marylen Mann and Margie Wolcott May and conducted two-year demonstration projects in St. Louis, Baltimore, Cleveland, and Los Angeles to develop intergenerational tutoring programs and to launch wellness programs with hospitals and health providers. The May department stores donated space. Support came from various foundations and public agencies, with the U.S. Administration on Aging providing seed money. Over the past twenty-five years, OASIS piloted initiatives on mentoring, underwrote humanities projects, and used the Internet to nurture transgenerational connections. OASIS now serves more than 350,000 mature adults in twenty-six cities “to continue their personal growth and provide meaningful service to the community” (OASIS, 2006).

The federal government has sponsored public-private voluntary associations that utilize older people in civic enterprises. Senior Corps (2006) oversees three important programs. The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) has recruited nearly half a million men and women over the age of 55 to serve in 65,000 nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and faith-based institutions. Foster Grandparents provides positions for 30,000 low-income older Americans to help young mothers and abused children and to work in drug treatment and day-care centers as well as Head Start. A spin-off of Foster Grandparents, the Senior Companion Program assists homebound and frail elderly on a one-to-one basis.

The list can be extended, of course. Many grassroots voluntary associations, like Neighborhood Watches, are informal. Not all succeed—they fail because of internal politics or lack of funding. But TR’s commitment to civic engagement born of pragmatic idealism endures. As Pearl Bailey told a reporter in 1965, “We are a great heart people.” And pathfinders seek new ways to synergize America’s infrastructure.

Consider, for instance, the San Francisco organization Civic Ventures, which calls itself an “incubator of ideas” capitalizing on the potential of older people. It is wildly successful, highly visible, soundly managed, and very generously supported by philanthropies. Besides forging partnerships with such organizations as AARP, the American Society on Aging, the National Council on Aging, and the Gerontological Society of America, Civic Ventures thinks out of the box. Rather than fuel fears about ageism, Civic Ventures stresses older people’s invaluable contributions to voluntary associations. Adopting language rarely used by gerontologists, it emphasizes the need to generate “social capital” for the health of individuals and for the sake of community renewal.

CIVIC VENTURES: A MODEL FOR TRADITIONAL INNOVATION

The octogenarian John Gardner (educator, cabinet secretary, president of the Carnegie Corporation, and instigator of Common Cause, the Independent Sector, and other innovative endeavors) sketched the vision of Civic Ventures in a three-page memo arguing that people in the “third age” had much to give. The Commonwealth Foundation invited Marc Freedman, a self-described “social entrepreneur” who wrote *Prime Time* (1999) in response to “jeremiads” about the graying of America, to work with Gardner in fleshing out an action plan. Initially the pair launched Experience Corps, training older Americans to be tutors and role models in classrooms.

Since then, Civic Ventures has been established as a nonprofit organization that offers expertise to community groups helping older adults determine future initiatives. Civic Ventures recognizes older social innovators by giving them money and networks to continue their ventures in engaged retirement. Civic Ventures aids academics who want to retool for new careers. Disseminating ideas and offering workshops for adult learners are critical to spreading the best practices of the evolving enterprise.

The timing was right. Gardner and Freedman agreed with Robert Putnam’s assessment in *Bowling Alone* (2000) that involvement in voluntary associations declined rapidly since the

late 1960s: “By century’s close the massive post-war boom in membership rates in these organizations had been eliminated . . . slightly less than halved between the peak and 1997” (p.55). Gardner and Freedman looked to baby boomers, better educated and healthier than any previous cohort, to fill the gap. In a society uncomfortable with the connotations of terms such as aging and elders, the pair documented the assets and experiences of mature individuals willing to serve others.

The architects of Civic Ventures investigated how various social structures and communications systems could be adapted amidst population aging. Gardner and Freedman actualized the principle of Robert Bellah and his associates (1991, pp.6, 15) that “only greater citizen participation in the larger structures of the economy and the state will enable us to surmount the deepening problems of contemporary social life . . . We must create institutions that will enable such participation to occur, encourage it, and make it fulfilling as well as demanding.”

Reframing traditional concepts animated new ways of institution building. Civic Ventures does not talk about “retirement” in conventional ways; publicists stress the physical and social advantages of staying engaged, producing a society that benefits all generations. They likewise discuss “work” distinctively. Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd claimed that money explained “Why Do They Work So Hard?” in *Middletown* (1929, p. 80). Instead, Civic Ventures cites surveys indicating that fully half of those between ages 50 and 70 mentioned education and social services as two of their top three choices for future work. Many boomers want to be trained to work part time to assist the poor and older people. So Civic Ventures offers organizations ten ways to realize an “experience dividend”—such as raising expectations, being flexible, paying to play, and learning more (Civic Ventures, 2006).

Critics downplay the accomplishments of Civic Ventures by arguing that there is nothing really new in its notions about how structural and cultural lags affect individual development and societal aging. Yet like the new wave of environmentalists, who insinuate spiritual values and appeals to global justice into their statistical reports, Civic Ventures draws insights from

many domains. Note how its leadership talks about “social capital.” The phrase was popularized by Jane Jacobs in urban renewal, Robert Putnam in community revival, James Coleman in education, and Pierre Bourdieu in social theory (Smith, 2005). Social capital is the bonding (networks, norms of reciprocity) that holds institutions together. Informal education (such as adult learning) promotes those conversations and commitments necessary to cultivate working environments that sustain democracies. Thus the Civic Ventures claim that it incubates programs that rely upon and benefit older Americans, as they foment the constructive transformation of basic relationships, individual and institutional.

In updating de Tocqueville’s vision of American mores, John Gardner blazed the path for Civic Ventures: “At the age of eighty-eight, I know that there are bumps in the road, some of them really bad. But what I want for those youngsters in their forties and fifties is several more decades of vital learning and growth . . . What I want for them is long youthfulness of spirit” (Gardner, 2003, p. 51). In the tradition of antebellum bridge builders and the spirit of Teddy Roosevelt, Civic Ventures taps the talents of maturity in order to reap the gifts of individual and population aging. ❧

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