Voluntary Associations and Volunteering in a Comparative Civil Society Perspective

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We witness a significant growth of studies on trends in citizens’ civic virtues, political participation, volunteering, and involvement in informal social networks, which recently accumulated in Robert Putnam’s both much applauded and criticized book *Bowling alone. The collapse and revival of American community* (2000). Putnam’s main message is that in the last quarter-century Americans have become increasingly disconnected from their families, friends, neighbors, communities, social institutions, and public life. Other American social theorists have expressed deep concerns with the loss of civil society, i.e. the private commitment with the public cause through collective participation in a wide array of voluntary associations. Many of these concerns have been applied in other Western countries, so far however without due systematic investigation.

This paper provides a comparative and longitudinal analysis of civil society. Our focus is on membership of voluntary organizations and on volunteering in such organizations. We address three issues. First, we explore patterns of involvement, by juxtaposing passive membership and active volunteering, in an attempt to disclose categories of organizations and/or clusters of countries.

Secondly, we address trends in involvement in the period 1980-2000. Has the much discussed decline taken place in almost all sorts of organizations and countries, or only in a few? Here we also take up the related issue whether changes took place along generational lines. Moving beyond the mere generational mechanism, we search for more substantial causes of change, such as increasing female participation in the labor force and decreasing religiosity.

Thirdly, we turn to an analysis of social trust and political involvement, virtues often assumed to be correlated to involvement in voluntary associations.

Our analyses will be based on the three waves of the large scale population surveys of the European Values Studies (1980-2000), complemented with (results from) the North-American World Values Study and time budget studies for a selection of