

Civil Society in Longitudinal and Comparative Perspective: Voluntary Associations, Political Involvement, Social Trust and Happiness in a Dozen Countries

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Abstract

There is no shortage of worried studies that warningly point at discomfoting trends within the Western world with regard to community life and citizens' social and political involvement. Probably the most important of these publications in recent years is Robert Putnam's book *Bowling alone. The collapse and revival of American community* (2000). Putnam's main message is that Americans have in the last quarter-century become increasingly disconnected from their families, friends, neighbours, communities, social institutions, and public life. The political scientist Robert Lane expressed similar concerns in his *The loss of happiness in market democracies* (2000), though from a somewhat different angle, focussing on individual happiness rather than on civic community. Many such concerns of these (and other) American authors have been held to be applicable to other Western countries, if not by the authors themselves, then by others following in their tracks. So far, however, this was done without due systematic international 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 connect these characteristics with social trust, political involvement and happiness.

Several issues are addressed. After a short theoretical exposé, we address trends in involvement in voluntary organizations, social trust, political involvement and happiness in the 1981-2000 period. Has the general decline taken place in all these countries? Then we turn to a more detailed analysis of patterns of volunteering and of types of voluntary organizations. Finally, we analyse how political involvement, social trust and happiness are correlated to involvement in voluntary associations.

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1. Civil Society, the Collapse of Community and the Loss of Happiness

Two recent American studies, *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam (2000) and *The Loss of Happiness* by Robert Lane (2000), address two important 'real life' issues: community at the social and happiness at the individual level. Both authors deserve credit and respect for taking up these two vital issues, as their studies contributed to a much-needed narrowing of the gap between issues raised in the sociological debate on the one hand and the concerns voiced in the public debate on the other.

Having said this, however, raising relevant issues should not too easily be mistaken for giving the right interpretations. This paper challenges the longitudinal and comparative assertions made in (relation to) both studies: Putnam's vision on the collapse of community and Lane's vision on the loss of happiness.

It does so from a longitudinal and comparative perspective on civil society. Why these perspectives were chosen and what we mean by civil society, begs some explanation.

The longitudinal perspective is the most obvious. Both authors depict changes through time. Any assessment of such changes requires a longitudinal perspective.

The comparative perspective, secondly, is needed to obtain a view of whether and to what extent the changes in American society described by Putnam and Lane possess a wider applicability to Western societies in general. This is not to say that either author claims his description to hold for the Western world. Still, it is of interest to assess whether they describe specific American trends (if at all) or trends in the Western world at large. For this purpose, both the collapse of community described by Putnam and the loss of happiness depicted by Lane are taken here as observations that might or might not hold for market democracies in general. Note in this respect that both authors have hinted at or implied the possible international applicability of the trends they described. Although Putnam in *Bowling alone* modestly speaks of a collapse of community in America, he mentioned Western Europe elsewhere, though cautiously remarking that trends in Western Europe might differ somewhat from those in the USA (Putnam 2001, Putnam et al. 2000). Yet, though perhaps in different degrees, the driving forces Putnam mentioned in America – high time pressure, heavy TV use – surely are not altogether absent in other Western nations. In the case of Lane, the broad notion that it is market democracy that causes the loss of happiness at least carries the broader implication that such might be the case in all nations with like economic and democratic institutions. Whether implied by Putnam and Lane themselves or not, this paper addresses the international applicability of their observations.

Why then, thirdly, do we introduce the popular but also somewhat vague concept of civil society? We do so because the sphere of voluntary associations and of voluntary involvement, at some distance to the state, to the market and to the intimate sphere of family and other close ties, appears to be the area where most developments depicted by the two authors take place. This sphere of voluntary associations, which has been the object of empirical civil society research for several years now, might help to link concerns about civil society to concerns about the collapse of community and the loss of happiness.

With respect to Lane, one cannot fail to observe that the harm caused to happiness by the market as the economical sphere and by democracy as the political sphere is central to his observations. Those two spheres hamper happiness. In between them, it can be inferred indirectly, there is the sphere of civil society, which may go some way to counterbalance the detrimental effects of the market and of democracy. One might expect nations with higher levels of involvement in civil society to reveal higher levels of happiness, and, dynamically, nations where involvement in civil society did not decline to fare better in terms of happiness than nations where this involvement dropped). Within nations, people that are involved more in civil society, as an alternative to market and democracy, might be expected to report higher levels of happiness.

With respect to Putnam, one wonders whether the collapse of community (in terms of social trust and political involvement) is less prevalent among countries where more people are involved in voluntary associations (a between-nations comparison) and among individuals more involved in such associations (a within-nations comparison). Along these lines, then, the collapse of community may be expected to proceed more slowly, if at all, among nations with a vibrant civil society and among individuals firmly involved in civil society. Admittedly, however, there is considerable overlap between the notion of civil society and Putnam's notion of community, blurring the difference between independent and predicted variables. This most certainly is an issue that needs further attention.

Two concepts in the twilight between the notions of community and civil society were in the past distinguished as concepts that could be isolated from and studied in relation to civil society: social trust and political involvement.

Decades after Almond and Verba (1963: 356) concluded that '[t]he role of social trust and cooperativeness as a component of the civic culture cannot be overemphasized. It is, in a sense, a generalized resource that keeps a democratic polity operating', trust again is a core element in debates about social capital. Putnam offers what is today the most popular description of social capital among political sociologists. In his book about Italy, the concept 'refers to features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions' (Putnam 1993: 167). In his *Bowling Alone*, seven years later, it 'refers to

connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (Putnam 2000: 19). Voluntary associations are held to be of great importance for generating social trust, as it allows people to meet others from outside the narrow personal circle on voluntary basis and to learn how to cooperate with and rely on them (cf Anheier & Kendall 2002).

From the old Greeks, via De Tocqueville and up to Putnam (1993 more markedly than 2000), Skocpol (2003) and others, political involvement has always been considered to be part of civic community. There is much evidence that participation (membership as well as volunteering) in voluntary associations of a non-political nature is at least an important companion of political involvement. According to those daring enough to suggest a causal relationship, participation in non-political voluntary associations breeds political involvement. In that view, people learn ‘civic skills’ (such as to participate in meetings or to write letters), develop ‘civic virtues’ (such as to tolerate and to deal with diverging opinions), become informed about what is happening in their neighbourhood and in the wider community, get political information and are more likely to be politically mobilised by organisations (cf. Verba et al. 1995: 304-333; Warren 2001: 70-93).

Returning to Putnam, finally, it must be observed that he did not merely depict a quantitative decline in involvement in voluntary associations, but a qualitative one too, a wearing thin of this important texture of community life. One of his major concerns is a shift from active involvement in community life and in face-to-face mutual support organizations toward more passive and instrumental forms of ‘belonging’ to mailing list and service delivery organizations, often for a more directly personal interest.¹

Expectations like these, admittedly in need of further elaboration, guide the analysis of involvement in voluntary associations, political involvement, social trust, and happiness in this paper. As referring to them as hypotheses probably overstates our case, we set out to answer the following questions:

- whether there is a general decline in involvement in voluntary associations, political involvement, social trust and happiness in Western countries,
- whether there is a qualitative shift in involvement in voluntary associations, away from community embedded associational life toward more distant support of instrumental organizations, and
- whether levels of involvement in voluntary associations are related to levels of political involvement, social trust and happiness.

¹ See Wuthnow (1998) and Skocpol (2003) for other aspects of these changes, such as the growing dominance of professionals in organizing voluntary involvement and the organizational shift ‘from membership to management in American civic life’ (the subtitle of Skocpol’s book).

2. The Data

The data used are those generated by the European Values Studies (EVS) and the World Values Studies (WVS) in 1981, 1990 and 2000.² Though many more nations joined the project in the course of time, our analysis is restricted to twelve ‘Western’ nations in Europe and North America for reasons of compatibility through time.³ This suffices to address the above-mentioned questions and makes the analyses easier in terms of the number of nations and in terms of problems of international cultural compatibility.⁴

Dichotomies were constructed as indicators of the four basic concepts.⁵

Involvement in voluntary associations was measured in the survey by asking respondents about their ‘belonging to’ and their ‘volunteering for’ a great number of organizations and activities: ‘Please look carefully at the following list of voluntary organizations and activities and say which, if any, do you belong to?; ... and which, if any, are you currently doing unpaid voluntary work for?’. Regrettably, those lists differ somewhat between the years.⁶

Although some of the organizations and activities do not know formal membership, ‘belonging to’ is simply referred to here as membership. In those cases in which persons indicated doing unpaid work in a voluntary association that they had not mentioned as an association they felt they belonged to, their volunteering is interpreted as sufficient proof of membership of that association. Memberships and volunteering in a large number of organizations are first taken together as a general indicator of involvement in voluntary associations. Later in the paper, patterns of active membership and types of voluntary associations will be analysed separately.

² See <http://www.europeanvalues.nl/>, <http://wvs.isr.umich.edu/>, Halman (2001), Inglehart et al. (2004). We want to thank the principal investigators for their work on these surveys and for making the data available to other researchers.

³ See Curtis et al. (1992) for an analysis of the 1981 data, Curtis et al (2001) as well as Schofer and Fiorcade-Gourinchas (2001) for the 1990 data, and Inglehart and Hodginson (2003) for the 2000 data. These authors all focus on patterns of membership or volunteering and on explanations of differences between countries.

⁴ Although it participated in all waves, the United Kingdom is missing from our analyses, as the UK-data lack an identical measurement of trust in 2000 (and because of highly unlikely results for belonging to sports associations in GB in 2000; cf. Dekker et al. 2003: 223); Norway participated in EVS 1981 and 1990, but not in 2000, it was part of WVS 1996, but with a different question on voluntary associations).

⁵ In some cases variables only admit dichotomies, in other cases distributions are so skewed that dichotomies are the best representation. For the remaining indicators we prefer dichotomies to ordinal measurements for reasons of simplicity, in particular for a surveyable presentation of interaction effects.

⁶ See the Appendix table. See Morales Diez de Ulzurrun (2002) for the consequences of different wordings and for other problems of the (longitudinal) measurement of associational membership in population surveys.

Involvement in politics is measured by asking about the frequency of discussing politics with friends: ‘When you get together with your friends, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally or never?’. In most countries, the answer ‘occasionally’ turns out to be the most frequent answer by far. It is difficult to decide whether to count it as involvement or non-involvement. Both possibilities will be tried out.

Discussing politics as such admittedly is not a strong measure of involvement, but it is the best option available in these data. Alternatives are a self-assessment of political interest and ‘political action’ questions biased towards activist participation.⁷

Social trust is measured by the illustrious generalized social trust question ‘Generally speaking, would you say that people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?’, which has been used in numerous studies about social capital and civil society in recent years. For comparative purposes it is a relevant indicator, even though one can question its validity as a measure of the kind of trust that, according to social capital theories, is generated in social networks (cf. Edwards et al., 2001; Dekker, 2003).

Happiness is measured by asking ‘Taking all things together, would you say you are ... very happy, quite happy, not very happy, not happy at all?’. As with the question about discussing politics, the distribution of answers makes it difficult to decide at what point to make a difference between happiness and unhappiness, and again we will look at two possible dichotomies.

3. General Trends in Volunteering, Social Trust, Political Involvement and Happiness

To assess whether there is a general decline in belonging to voluntary associations, in political involvement, in social trust, and in happiness in Western countries, according to these data and these measurements, it suffices to observe the trends in Tables 1 and 2. Only changes of 5 percentage points or more are coded as changes in the ‘trend’ columns in the tables and mentioned in the text.

As regards *belonging to voluntary associations*, we lack an ideal measurement over time. Instead, three measurements of belonging to voluntary associations are presented in Table 1.

⁷ See Dekker et al. (2003) for relationships between these alternative indicators and involvement in voluntary associations.

Table 1: Involvement in voluntary associations and social trust, 1981 – 2000

		Associations 1 ^a				Associations 2 ^b				Associations 3 ^c				Social trust ^d			
		81	90	00	trend	81	90	00	trend	81	90	00	trend	81	90	00	trend
USA	us	72	71	91	.	72	67	85	+	44	45	72	+	39	50	36	∩
Canada	ca	59	64	77	.	59	54	66	+	44	43	56	+	48	51	39	-
Iceland	is	84	90	94	.	83	84	91	+	77	76	80	0	41	42	40	0
Sweden	se	70	85	96	.	69	76	93	+	62	73	81	+	57	66	64	+
Denmark	dk	62	80	84	.	62	68	76	+	59	65	72	+	46	56	64	+
Germany (west)	de	50	67	53	.	50	49	35	-	41	39	24	-	26	31	31	+
The Netherlands	nl	64	84	92	.	61	74	86	+	46	64	81	+	38	50	59	+
Ireland	ie	53	49	58	.	53	38	41	-	35	30	31	-	40	47	35	∩
Belgium	be	43	58	69	.	42	47	54	+	37	43	49	+	25	31	30	+
France	fr	28	39	40	.	27	27	22	-	25	24	20	-	22	21	22	0
Italy	it	26	33	43	.	26	26	35	+	18	19	28	+	25	33	32	+
Spain	es	36	23	30	.	36	17	22	-	26	13	17	-	32	34	35	0

^a Belongs to or volunteers for at least one of the organizations presented in each year. See appendix table.

^b Organizations that are more or less common in all three years (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9 and 10 in Appendix).

^c Same selection without religious and church organizations (2) and political parties or groups (5).

^d 'Most people can be trusted' (not: 'cannot be too careful' and 'don't know').

The first is a simple count of belonging to (at least one organization of) all the types of voluntary organizations in the various years. However, whereas the 1990 and 2000 lists of organizations (and activities) hardly differ from each other, the 1981 list deviates markedly (see the first column in the Appendix). This clearly prohibits us from comparing 1981 with 1990 and 2000, so the trends column is left blank.

Looking for alternatives, we secondly identified those types of voluntary organizations that were included in the questionnaires in a reasonably compatible fashion over the years. Thirdly, we excluded those organizations related to church and politics, the former because we know from prior analyses that church membership is interpreted differently in different countries, the latter because we later want to connect involvement in voluntary associations with political involvement. Neither of these two counts reveals a general decrease in involvement in voluntary associations over time.

Social trust does not reveal a general decline. With one exception, the situation in 2000 is either compatible to that in earlier years or reveals an increase.

Political involvement, measured as discussing politics, does not reveal a general decline either (Table 2). Irrespective of whether discussing politics 'occasionally' is or is not regarded to indicate political involvement together with doing so 'frequently', political involvement was predominantly either stable or somewhat on the rise. In both cases, only Spain reveals dropping levels. The former of these two counts will be applied in later analyses.

The trend in *happiness* depends on whether or not ‘quite happy’ is regarded to indicate happiness. If so, the level of happiness was generally high and stable. If we are more strict and only accept the answer ‘very happy’ to indicate being happy, the overall level of happiness is not only markedly lower, but also reveals more development over time. This suggests the latter to be the more sensitive measurement, which will therefore be used in later analyses. In even clearer opposition to the expectation of a loss of happiness derived from Lane, however, happiness then predominantly turns out to have been on the rise.

Table 2: Involvement in politics and happiness, 1981 – 2000

	Politics 1 ^a				Politics 2 ^b				Happiness 1 ^c				Happiness 2 ^d			
	81	90	00	trend	81	90	00	trend	81	90	00	trend	81	90	99	trend
USA	11	15	17	+	66	72	75	+	32	40	39	+	91	90	94	0
Canada	10	19	12	∩	69	75	64	∩	36	30	44	U	96	79	96	U
Iceland	9	14	14	+	74	78	78	0	44	41	47	0	97	97	97	0
Sweden	11	18	19	+	76	79	80	0	29	41	37	+	96	96	94	0
Denmark	23	24	25	0	80	79	80	0	31	43	45	+	96	94	95	0
Germany (west)	23	25	22	0	79	84	83	0	11	16	19	+	86	89	87	0
The Netherlands	16	15	16	0	73	75	80	+	34	46	46	+	97	93	95	0
Ireland	8	12	12	0	51	58	60	+	40	44	42	0	96	94	96	0
Belgium	5	9	13	+	44	53	63	+	33	40	43	+	93	92	93	0
France	12	12	12	0	62	65	65	0	20	25	31	+	90	92	91	0
Italy	12	12	13	0	51	58	68	+	10	16	18	+	77	85	80	∩
Spain	16	9	9	-	70	52	55	-	20	21	20	0	80	85	88	+

^a Discusses political matters with friends ‘frequently’ (not ‘occasionally’ or ‘never’).

^b Discusses political matters with friends ‘frequently’ or ‘occasionally’ (not ‘never’).

^c ‘Very happy’ (and not ‘quite happy’, ‘not very happy’ and ‘not happy at all’).

^d ‘Very happy’ or ‘quite happy’ (not ‘not very happy’ and ‘not happy at all’).

In these terms, there clearly was no general decline in belonging to voluntary associations, in political involvement, in social trust and in happiness, not in the Western world, nor within the USA. Contrary to trends as depicted by Putnam and Lane, these data suggest higher or similar levels of community (belonging to voluntary associations, social trust, discussing politics) and of happiness in 2000 compared to 1981.

4. Qualitative shifts in associational involvement?

The above analyses did not substantiate the idea of a quantitative shift away from involvement in voluntary associations. Beyond counting numbers of people belonging to such associations, these quantitative data allow a somewhat more qualitative look at developments. In this section, two questions with regard to belonging to voluntary associations will be looked into: whether the proportion of actively involved people

dropped and whether a shift from one type of voluntary association to another can be discerned.

The proportion of the actively involved is calculated both as a percentage of the whole population and as a percentage of those that belong to at least one voluntary association. The former relates to a culture of volunteering in general, the latter to a culture of volunteering among those somehow involved in voluntary associations. Again, no picture of general decline emerges (Table 3). The trends in the proportions of volunteers in the population at large as well as those among ‘members’ of voluntary organizations were a mixed bag that, taken together, by and large, point at stability if anything, in the sense that the number of countries where volunteering was on the decline was in balance with the number of countries where it revealed an increase.

Table 3: Volunteering in the population and among members, 1981 – 2000

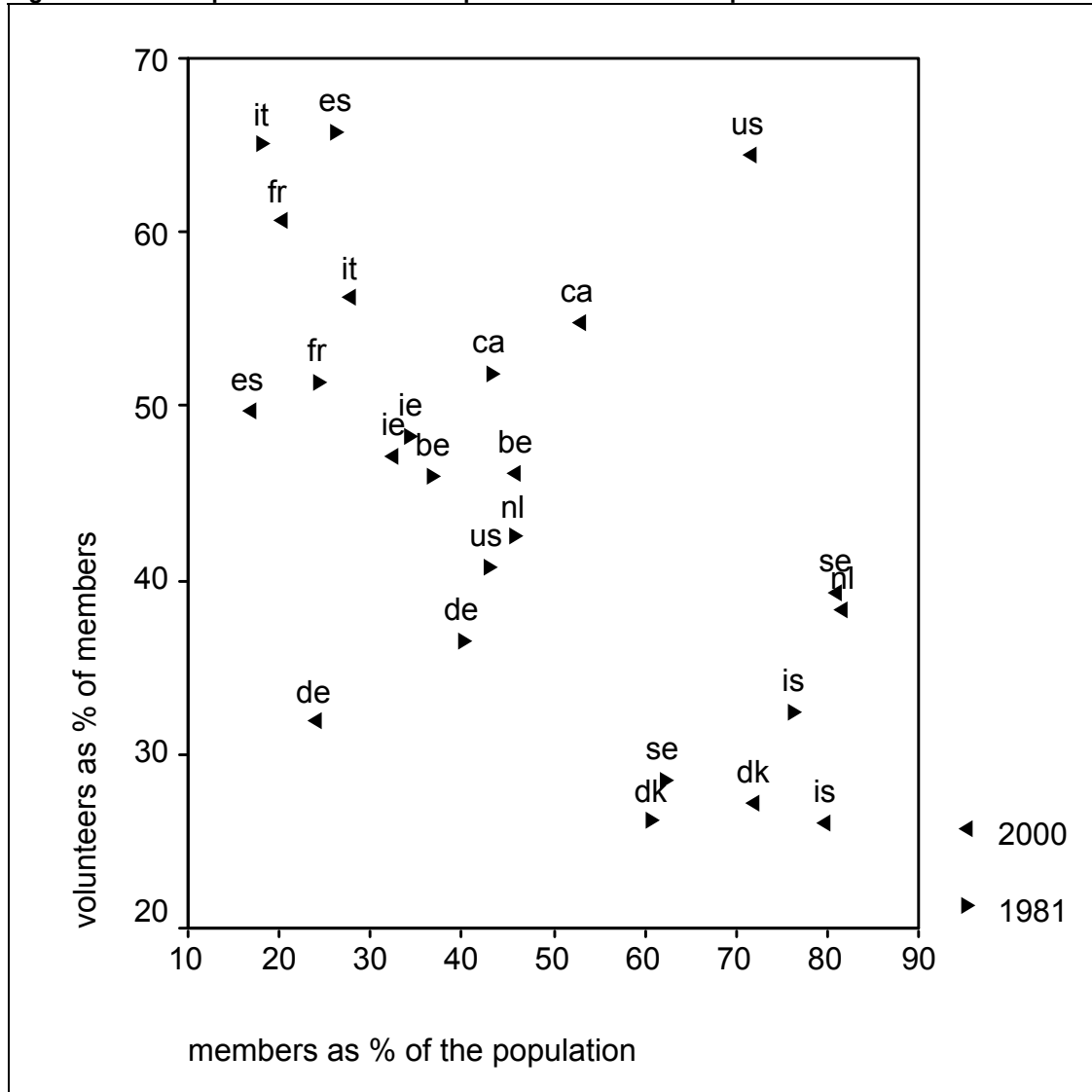
	% of all				% of members ^a			
	1981	1990	2000	trend	1981	1990	2000	trend
USA	18	24	46	+	42	53	64	+
Canada	23	23	30	+	52	53	54	0
Iceland	26	20	21	–	34	26	26	–
Sweden	18	20	31	+	28	28	38	+
Denmark	15	12	20	+	26	19	27	U
Germany (west)	14	13	8	–	34	32	32	0
The Netherlands	19	21	31	+	40	33	38	U
Ireland	17	16	14	0	48	52	45	∩
Belgium	17	19	21	0	46	45	43	0
France	13	14	12	0	53	58	60	+
Italy	12	11	16	0	64	57	56	–
Spain	17	6	8	–	65	50	50	–

^a In at least one of the organisations of ‘Associations 3’ in table 1,

In a prior publication (Dekker & Van den Broek 1998), juxtaposing the 1990-data on belonging to voluntary association and on being active in such associations served us to distinguish three patterns of membership and volunteering, which we labelled ‘parochial’, ‘active’ and ‘broad’. The parochial pattern, typical of Southern Europe, combines small membership rates of (at least one) voluntary associations with high percentages of volunteers among the members (= ‘active members’). The active pattern, on the other hand, is characterized by both high proportions of involvement among the population and high proportions of volunteering among the involved. This pattern was found to be typical of the USA and Canada. In between in character, and situated in Scandinavia, West Germany and The Netherlands, was the broad pattern, consisting of high levels of membership and modest levels of volunteering among members.

Figure 1 visualizes the national combinations of membership and active membership in 1981 and 2000. The patterns we revealed for 1990 (this year is left out now to read the game well) are recognizable in both years, although there are some substantial shifts (Spain getting more ‘parochial’, the USA more ‘active’ and the Netherlands ‘broader’).

Figure 1: National patterns of membership and active membership 1981 - 2000



Our second somewhat more qualitative look at developments, though still firmly based in quantities, centres on possible shifts in belonging to ‘kinds’ of voluntary associations. Apart from a drop in numbers, Putnam also argued that the intensity of community and of associational life declined, in terms of a shift from face-to-face involvement to involvement by mailing-list or check book. Ideally, this is tested with reference to the characteristics of the type of involvement in organizations. Do people actually meet,

how do they communicate, how often do they communicate, etc.? This we do not know, we have to make do with referring to type of voluntary organization instead.

Here we assume with some degrees of freedom that involvement in some types of voluntary associations imply more face-to-face contacts (viz. in the fields of education, local community, youth work and sport), whereas involvement in other associations is more likely to have the mailing-list and check-book character (viz. in the fields of third world, profession, trade union, peace). These are second bests, of course, for belonging to voluntary associations dealing with local affairs or with youth work might be a matter of passive membership at a distance while belonging to voluntary associations concerned with the third world or with world peace may involve meeting many people.

Table 4: Changes in involvement in types of organizations in 1981-2000^a

	us	ca	is	se	dk	de	nl	ie	be	fr	it	es
Face-to-face												
Education	+	+	+	+	+	0	+	0	+	0	+	0
Local community	+	0	0	+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Youth work	+	0	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sports	+	0	0	0	0	0	+	0	+	0	0	0
Mailing-list / check-book												
Third world	0	0	+	+	0	0	+	0	+	0	0	0
Profession	+	+	+	0	0	0	+	0	+	0	0	0
Trade union	0	0	+	+	+	-	+	0	0	-	0	0
Peace	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

^a See appendix table.

As clearly shows from an eyeball test of Table 4, measured in this respect there is no sign of a shift away from face-to-face to more distant types of involvement. Within both types of voluntary associations, the number of plusses (14/13), minuses (1/2) and zeros (33/33) is about exactly the same. With due reservations as to whether type of organization is a proxy for type of involvement, this, at least, does not support the view of a decline in volunteering in more qualitative terms.

5. The correlates of associational involvement

Whether social trust, political involvement and happiness go hand in hand with involvement in voluntary associations (leaving the question of causality aside), can be assessed by comparing of countries as well as by comparing individuals within countries. Comparing countries implies taking the percentages mentioned in Tables 1 and 2 for the year 2000 as country-variables. Despite the small number of cases (n=12 for each year), some relationships and some trends can be discerned (Table 5).

As regards the level of involvement in voluntary associations throughout the years, this was positively related to both social trust and happiness, but unrelated to political involvement. This emphasizes the importance of civil society in relation to such concerns as voiced by Putnam and Lane, without, however, easily leading to causal relationships, let alone remedies.

As regards relations between the three ‘independent variables’, political involvement was never related to either happiness, but it became related to social trust in 2000. Reversely, 2000 was the only year in which happiness was not related (significantly) to social trust.

Table 5: Relationships of country-variables (Pearson correlations)^a

	Social trust			Political involvement 1			Happiness 1		
	1981	1990	2000	1981	1990	2000	1981	1990	2000
Associations 3	0.70*	0.68*	0.75**	0.07	0.47	0.43	0.63*	0.71*	0.75**
Social trust	.	.	.	-0.02	0.42	0.62*	0.59*	0.64*	0.45
Political involvement 1	-0.46	-0.02	0.12

Significance: * p<0.05; ** p<0.01 (two-tailed)

Are similar relationships and trends found within countries, in that case referring to individuals rather than nations? In order to assess this in a shorthand format, we assessed the ‘statistical’ effects of belonging to voluntary associations through time. Within each three-line sub-set within Table 6, the first line gives the effect of belonging to a voluntary association on the variable in question (social trust, political involvement and happiness respectively) as opposed to not belonging to such an organization. Odds ratio’s which (significantly) exceed 1 indicate that belonging to a voluntary organization relates to higher levels of social trust, political involvement or happiness. The second line gives the effect of being in 2000 rather than in 1981, (again) revealing possible trends in the levels of these variables. The third line gives the interaction effect, i.e. being involved (as a member and/or volunteer) in 2000. The latter relates to possible changes in the strength of the relationship of associational involvement with social trust, political involvement and happiness.

Table 6: Statistical effects of associational involvement and of volunteering on social trust, political involvement and happiness in 1981-2000: adjusted odds ratio's^a

	us	ca	is	se	dk	de	nl	ie	be	fr	it	es
Social trust												
▪ involved in associations	1.7**	1.8**	1.1	1.6**	1.2	1.5**	1.4**	1.4**	1.6**	2.4**	1.8**	1.6**
▪ 2000 (instead of 1981)	0.9	0.7**	0.9	1.0	1.6**	1.5**	1.8**	0.8	1.0	1.1	1.2*	1.2**
▪ interaction: involved in 2000	0.7	0.8	1.0	1.3	1.4	0.7*	1.3	1.1	1.4*	0.7	1.3	0.8
Political involvement 1												
▪ involved in associations	2.0**	1.7**	1.6	3.0**	1.5**	1.9**	1.7**	1.9**	2.3**	3.3**	2.9**	2.7**
▪ 2000 (instead of 1981)	1.0	1.1	2.0*	3.5**	1.1	1.0	0.7	1.6*	2.6**	1.2	1.1	0.6*
▪ interaction: involved in 2000	1.5	1.1	0.7	0.4*	1.0	1.1	1.2	1.0	0.8	0.7	0.7	1.1
Happiness 1												
▪ involved in associations	1.3**	1.0	1.0	1.2	1.1	1.3	1.1	1.9**	1.3*	1.4*	0.7	1.0
▪ 2000 (instead of 1981)	1.3*	1.3*	1.0	1.2	1.6**	2.1**	1.5*	1.3*	1.4**	2.1**	1.9**	0.9
▪ interaction: involved in 2000	1.0	1.2	1.2	1.1	1.2	0.8	1.1	0.6**	1.0	0.7	1.3	1.4*

^a Effects of Association 3 (table 1); significance: * p<0.05; ** p<0.01 (two-tailed)

Within nations, belonging to voluntary associations is generally related to social trust and to political involvement, but only occasionally to happiness (as revealed by the first lines). Out of the twelve countries, positive relations of belonging to a voluntary association were observed for social trust in ten countries, for political involvement in eleven countries and for happiness in four countries. Not a single (significant) negative effect (odds ratio smaller than 1) was found.

Turning to the effect of year, basically the earlier observations that in 2000 social trust, political involvement and happiness were either at the same or a higher level than in 1981 are found. The purpose in including year in the equation was not to again assess this, but to be able to assess interaction effects between belonging and year.

Such interaction effects are few. This means that there is little difference in the effect of belonging to a voluntary association in 2000 compared to that effect in 1981. In other words: the 'statistical' effects of belonging to a voluntary association on social trust, political involvement and happiness persist largely unaltered through time. With a few exceptions only, those effects did not become weaker or stronger over the years.

6. Conclusions and discussion

A look at the work of Putnam on the collapse of community and of Lane on the loss of happiness led us to three questions about possible developments in the USA and in other Western countries:

- whether there is a general decline in involvement in voluntary associations, political involvement, social trust and happiness in western countries,

- whether there is a qualitative shift in involvement in voluntary associations, away from face-to-face community oriented associations toward mailing-list and service delivery organizations, and
- whether levels of involvement in voluntary associations are related to levels of political involvement, social trust and happiness.

Trends in the data of the European and the World Values Studies (EVS/WVS) did not reveal a general decline in involvement in voluntary associations, political involvement, social trust, and happiness in Western countries. In contrast, that evidence rather suggests either stability or increase.

Trends described by Putnam and Lane did not show up within the USA either. As in the West at large, levels of community (belonging to voluntary associations, social trust, discussing politics) and of happiness in 2000 were higher than or similar to those in 1981.

Two aspects of involvement in voluntary associations were looked at more closely: patterns of active membership (i.e. volunteering) and types of organizations. As regards active membership, again the time series did not point at less active involvement in such organizations. Neither did our (admittedly rather rough) assessment reveal a shift from face-to-face to mailing-list voluntary associations. In the USA, the data even suggest trends reverse to what might be expected on the basis of our reading of the literature.

Finally, we turned to an assessment of the relation of involvement in voluntary associations with community life (social trust, political involvement) and individual life (happiness). Between nations, belonging to voluntary associations is related to social trust and to happiness. Within nations in general, and in the USA in particular, belonging to such associations is related to social trust and to political involvement.

In both respects, then, belonging to voluntary associations is related to social trust. The causality of this relation, or the possibility of a spurious relationship because of third factors affecting both, are, as yet, food for further thought and analyses. The same applies for the paradoxes (?) that belonging to voluntary associations is positively related to happiness when nations are compared but not when individuals within nations are compared, and that it is related to political involvement within but not between nations.

There are several reasons to question the comparability of our data over time and between countries. In particular, some extreme changes between 1990 and 2000 and the measurement of shifts from face-to-face to mailing-list organizations are open to doubt. Apart from problems of translations, sampling and non-response, a basic problem is the cross-national comparability of organizations in the same category.⁸ However, it seems

⁸ Belonging to an organization for 'nature and environment' can mean a regular gift for WNF or Greenpeace, a membership card that allows for a walk in a nature reserve, activity in a local advocacy group, and much more. There are different national traditions of organizing leisure and collective action.

highly implausible that these weaknesses in the data could misleadingly guide us to conclusions that are reverse to the actual developments.

To conclude, then, we consider these data and analyses sufficiently sound to seriously question, if not reject, general statements about the collapse of community in the West (or in the USA). This calls for alternative diagnoses of the developments in civil society. More, and more diverse, quantitative data would be helpful to give a better picture of trends, and more qualitative research is needed to discover the meaning and mechanisms of voluntary involvement in relation to feelings of community and happiness and to the quality of civil society and of politics.

A comparison, for instance, of people involved in environmental action in a Northern and in a Southern European country could in fact be a comparison of mainly donors with mainly demonstrators (cf. SCP 2001: 151-166). See also Morales Diez de Ulzurrun (2002).

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Appendix table: 'Belonging to' and 'volunteering for' in all categories of EVS/WVS 1981-2000 (%)

		us	ca	is	se	dk	de	nl	ie	be	fr	it	es
1. welfare services for elderly, handicapped or deprived people (1981: charities concerned with the welfare of people)	1981	12	15	21	9	5	13	15	11	6	5	4	11
	1990	10	9	16	8	6	7	20	9	12	7	5	4
	2000	19	15	18	21	7	4	21	7	13	6	7	4
		+	U	0	+	0	-	+	0	+	0	0	-
2. religious and church organizations (1981: churches and religious organisations)	1981	55	34	36	17	4	14	35	31	10	4	7	18
	1990	50	26	50	10	7	17	36	15	12	7	8	6
	2000	58	30	71	71	12	14	35	16	12	4	11	7
		0	0	+	U	+	0	0	-	0	0	0	-
3. education, arts and music and cultural activities (1981: education and arts groups)	1981	14	11	8	15	6	7	13	7	11	6	4	6
	1990	21	18	14	13	13	12	36	11	17	9	5	4
	2000	39	22	16	26	17	8	45	10	21	8	10	7
		+	+	+	+	+	0	+	0	+	0	+	0
4. trade unions	1981	13	11	53	46	41	16	16	14	16	10	8	6
	1990	9	12	60	59	49	15	20	9	16	5	6	3
	2000	14	15	60	64	54	7	22	10	18	4	6	4
		0	0	+	+	+	-	+	0	0	-	0	0
5. political parties or groups (1981: political parties and groups)	1981	12	6	13	15	7	8	9	5	3	3	6	4
	1990	14	8	15	10	7	7	11	4	6	3	6	1
	2000	20	7	19	11	7	3	9	4	7	2	4	2
		+	0	+	0	0	-	0	0	0	0	0	0
6. local community action on issues like poverty, employment, housing, racial equality;	1990	6	6	2	2	5	2	6	4	5	4	2	1
	2000	13	9	3	9	6	1	7	6	5	2	3	2
		+	0	0	+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7. third world development or human rights (1981: organisations concerned with human rights at home and abroad)	1981	5	3	3	5	3	2	3	1	1	1	1	2
	1990	2	5	4	10	3	2	15	2	6	3	1	1
	2000	6	6	8	15	4	1	24	3	10	2	3	3
		0	0	+	+	0	0	+	0	+	0	0	0
8. conservation, the environment, ecology, animal rights ^a (1981: conservation, environmentalist and animal welfare groups)	1981	5	5	5	7	6	3	12	3	3	1	2	2
	1990	6	3	2	7	4	5	13	1	8	3	2	1
	2000	17	10	5	11	13	3	44	3	12	2	4	2
		+	+	0	0	+	0	+	0	+	0	0	0
9. professional associations	1981	15	12	11	11	14	8	9	4	4	4	3	5
	1990	15	16	15	12	12	9	14	5	7	6	4	3
	2000	29	18	19	14	11	5	16	8	9	3	7	2
		+	+	+	0	0	0	+	0	+	0	0	0
10. youth work (e.g. scouts, guides, youth clubs etc.)	1981	12	11	20	9	8	3	7	9	5	6	2	4
	1990	14	10	9	10	5	4	8	7	8	3	3	2
	2000	28	12	8	7	7	2	7	7	8	2	5	2
		+	0	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11. sports or recreation	1990	21	24	32	33	33	32	41	24	20	16	11	5
	2000	37	28	35	37	33	31	51	28	26	17	12	8
		+	0	0	0	0	0	+	0	+	0	0	0
12. women's groups	1990	9	7	7	3	2	6	8	5	9	1	0	1
	2000	15	9	6	3	2	4	5	5	10	0	1	2
		+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13. peace movement	1990	2	3	1	3	2	2	4	1	2	1	1	1
	2000	5	2	1	1	1	0	3	2	2	1	2	1
		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
14. voluntary organizations concerned with health	1990	9	10	6	2	6	5	20	4	4	3	3	2
	2000	18	12	3	7	4	3	9	4	6	3	5	3
		0	0	0	+	0	0	-	0	0	0	0	0
15. other groups.	1990	11	13	10	19	11	9	11	3	5	6	2	4
	2000	23	12	3	25	14	4	9	6	12	8	3	4
		+	0	-	+	0	-	0	0	+	0	0	0
(1981: 16. consumer groups)	1981	2	2	3	5	1	0	12	1	2	1	0	2

^a In 2000 'animals rights' is a separate category.