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Does Civil Society Stop the Downward Spiral of Bad Government or Speed It Up?

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This article examines the nonprofit sector's impact on good government. Through a brief synthesis of several literatures, the author constructs two competing hypotheses. In the first, nonprofit activity acts as a self-correcting force for the public sector; in the second, the third sector accelerates bad government's downward spiral. The author shows that the key element in deciding between these hypotheses is the relationship between confidence in government and participation in civil society.

Beliefs about the relationship between the nonprofit sector and “good government” tend to form along ideological lines. For many conservatives, the nonprofit sector represents a necessary bulwark against government hegemony in the provision of public goods and services, because, in the famous words of Thomas Jefferson, “that government is best which governs least.” For many liberals, on the other hand—especially in the European social democracies—nonprofit activity can leave public goods in unreliable hands.

The purpose of this article is to further the theory of the third sector's impact on good government without such ideological baggage. Through a brief synthesis of several disparate literatures, I will construct two competing hypotheses. In the first, an active third sector acts as a self-correcting force for dysfunctional government. In the second, the third sector accelerates bad government's downward spiral. I will show that the key element in deciding between these hypotheses is the relationship between confidence in government and participation in “civil society.”¹ I will make suggestions on how future research can help settle the question as to which hypothesis is correct, and leverage the results for both policy and management.

Note: For their helpful suggestions, I am grateful to David Van Slyke and Greg Lewis.

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EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT, PUBLIC
OPINION, AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Three substantial literatures provide the basis for understanding the relationship in question. The first is the public management research on the “effectiveness” of government. The second is the work on public opinion toward government. The last is the literature on civic participation and social capital.

First, the work to date on government effectiveness comes in two forms: research on the public bureaucracy’s *inherent* effectiveness and inquiry into its *measurement*. In the former category, it is not surprising to learn that authors disagree with respect to the costs and benefits of government in general. For example, while Goodsell (1994) argues strongly that the benefits of the public bureaucracies exceed their costs, Niskanen (1973) argues precisely the opposite. The measurement literature describes government’s attempts to gauge its effectiveness (Gore, 1993; Government Accounting Standards Board, 1993) and suggests tools for doing so (McGowan, 1995; Stiefel, Rubenstein, & Schwartz, 1999).

Second, notwithstanding the differences in scholars’ conclusions about government’s effectiveness, public opinion research has generally concluded that confidence in the public sector is low (e.g., Farazmand, 1989). In addition, much empirical work on the topic finds that this confidence has fallen considerably over the last 30 years (Miller & Listhaug, 1990).

Third, a burgeoning literature with tangential links to public sector issues is that which focuses on “social capital,” measured in levels of participation in civil society. The most prominent author of this work is Putnam (1995, 2000), whose research has concluded that rates of participation are unambiguously falling, with deleterious results for society.

Smaller literatures link these research topics, with provocative implications. Specifically, recent work connects civic participation with effective government, effective government with confidence in the public sector, and confidence with civic participation.

Several authors have theorized that higher levels of civic participation should lead to more effective government. Boix and Posner (1998) assert that charitable giving and volunteering tend to make both citizens and bureaucrats more virtuous, making the former easier to govern and the latter more effective at governing. Participation also makes citizens more sophisticated as “political consumers”—and thus more likely to punish bad government at the polls. Gregory (1999) and Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1993, p. 167) suggest that the main side benefit of civic participation is “trust,” which engenders citizen cooperation with government and makes governance more effective.

The issue of trust is related to the public’s confidence in government, which proceeds from a change in government effectiveness. However, most of the literature on changing confidence appears in the popular press. In general, this

literature charts the perceived dishonesty of politicians and outright corruption with the supposed secular declines in the public's faith in the public sector (see, e.g., "Is There a Crisis?" 1999; "Stopping the Rot in Public Life," 2000).

Potentially, the most polemical of the links is between confidence in government and civic participation. Here we find disagreement on both theoretical and empirical grounds. On the one hand, Putnam (1995) argues that "every year over the last decade or two, millions more have withdrawn from the affairs of their communities. Not coincidentally, Americans have also disengaged psychologically from politics and government over this era" (p. 68). This assertion is strengthened by Brehm and Rahn's (1997) empirical finding that higher confidence in government predicts higher participation in civil society. On the other hand, Brooks and Lewis (2001) hypothesize that, as people lose confidence in the government and its ability to provide public goods and services effectively, they will increasingly turn to private-sector alternatives. They find empirically that lower confidence in government predicts higher levels of volunteering all across the nonprofit sector.

IS THE NONPROFIT SECTOR PART OF GOVERNMENT'S SELF-CORRECTING MECHANISM?

These links suggest a mechanism through which the nonprofit and voluntary sector becomes dynamically intertwined with the effectiveness of government. Figure 1 synthesizes the literature just reviewed, such that changes in civic participation lead to changes in government effectiveness. Effectiveness affects levels of confidence in government. This confidence, in turn, affects the amount of civic participation.

The literature suggests that Links 1 and 2 are positive. That is, giving and volunteering should vary positively with the effectiveness of government, which should, in turn, have a direct relationship with the level of confidence in government. Link 3 is indeterminant, however, given the literature's contradictory findings.

In the first case, we envision a positive feedback loop. If Brehm and Rahn (1997) are correct, lower government effectiveness will drive down confidence, which will suppress civic participation, further lowering government effectiveness, and so on in a downward spiral. In the second case, we would see a negative feedback loop. If Brooks and Lewis (2001) are correct, lower effectiveness, and thus confidence, will drive participation up, leading to more effective government. In this latter case, the nonprofit and voluntary sector has an ameliorating role on government. Thus, government and the third sector together form a self-correcting mechanism.

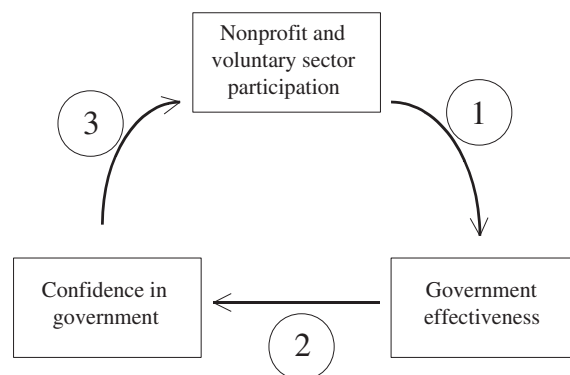


Figure 1. The Mechanism Connecting Civic Participation With Government Effectiveness

CONCLUSION

In this note, I have synthesized several literature strands in an effort to advance theory on the interplay between the public sector and civil society. The trailing question from this synthesis is whether the nonprofit sector indirectly reinforces or corrects low government performance. Settlement of this question will require empirical replication of models linking confidence in government with giving and volunteering, ideally using longitudinal data so as to ascertain individuals' reactions to changes in confidence.

Settling this question could produce an important pay-off for research and practice. For example, it would be useful to know if a deteriorating civil society could be improved through government reform. Conversely, the fundraising cases for many nonprofits would be strengthened if a convincing argument could be made that giving and volunteering have the side benefit of improving government. As such, testing the competing hypotheses and interpreting the results for both public policy and nonprofit management represent fruitful areas of future research.

Note

1. Generally, "civil society" or "civic participation" is defined loosely in the social capital literature as social cohesion manifest in voluntary associations and charitable activities. For researchers involved primarily in third-sector work, this is obviously not an adequate definition. I use it simply for consistency with the research I am reviewing in this note.

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