

The Last Word

Self Serve

Civic IQ Hits New Low.
If there were a measurement for such things, that would be the headline.

There is no way to measure it accurately.

But you know it.

And we know it.

Just look around your own house.

What are people doing in their spare time?

Staring into computer screens.

Watching television.

On their phones.

Sports. Pornography.

Gambling. Netflix. Computer games. TikTok. YouTube.

Diversion. Diversion.

Diversion. Diversion.

Diversion. Diversion.

Diversion.

Odds are, they are not immersed in the political economy.

And if they are, it's infotainment.

Where's the civic action on the political economy rooted in human interaction?

Disappearing.

The term civic intelligence was first reportedly used in the United States in 1902 by Samuel Dutton, superintendent of Teachers College Schools on the occasion of the dedication of the Horace Mann School when he noted that "increasing civic intelligence" is the "true purpose of education in this country."

David Matthews, then President of the Kettering Foundation, wrote an article in 1985 titled *Civic Intelligence*, in which he detailed the decline of civic engagement in the United States.

By all indications, civic intelligence has continued its downward trajectory in the last forty years or so.

Earlier this year, a report from the National Assessment Governing Board found that only 22 percent of eighth graders scored at or above the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) proficiency level in civics.

Harvard University sociologist Robert Putnam, author of the best selling book *Bowling Alone (Revised and Updated: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, 2020)*, uses the a related term – social capital – instead of civic intelligence.

In a recently released documentary about Putnam's life's work – titled *Join or Die* – Putnam says that the fate of the country depends on joining.

"In a couple of decades, half of all the civic infrastructure in America has simply vanished," Putnam says in *Join or Die*. "It's the equivalent of saying that half of all the roads in America just disappeared."

Putnam puts numbers on the decline.



FRANK STARTING TO REALIZE THAT THE REASON WHY THE DEMOCRACY SUCKS SO BAD IS BECAUSE IT WAS DESIGNED TO BE SELF-SERVE AND NOT AUTOMATED AND, FOR FUCKSAKE, NOBODY HAS THE TIME, ENERGY, OR PATIENCE FOR THAT

A 40 percent decline from the 1970s to the 1990s in the number of Americans who attended even one public meeting on town or school affairs in the previous year.

A 50 percent decline from the 1970s to the 1990s in the number of Americans who took any leadership role in any local organization.

A 35 percent decline from the 1960s to the 2020s in religious congregation membership.

A 50 percent decline from the 1970s to the 1990s in the number of times Americans attended a club meeting the previous year.

A 66 percent decline from the 1960s to the 2010s in union membership.

A 60 percent decline from the 1970s to the 1990s in the amount of picnics Americans attended annually.

Not only is the decline in civic intelligence or social capital undermining democracy, it's also adversely affecting our health.

"There are major physical and many other effects on you personally, if you become isolated," Putnam told WGBH radio earlier this year.

Chris Hedges took a more trenchant look at the decline in civic engagement in a 2018 column titled *American Anomie*.

"The French sociologist Emile Durkheim in his classic book *On Suicide* examined the disintegration of social bonds that drive individuals and societies to personal and collective acts of self-destruction," Hedges wrote.

"He found that when social bonds are strong, individuals achieve a healthy balance between individual initiative and communal solidarity, which he called a 'life-sustaining equilibrium.' These individuals and communities have the lowest rates of suicide. The individuals and societies most susceptible to self-destruction, he wrote, are those for whom these bonds, this equilibrium, have been shattered."

"Societies are held together by a web of social bonds that give individuals a sense of being part of a collective and engaged in a project larger than the self," he wrote. "This collective expresses itself through rituals, such as elections and democratic participation or an appeal to patriotism, and shared national beliefs."

"The bonds provide meaning, a sense of purpose, status and dignity. They offer psychological protection from impending mortality and the meaninglessness that comes with being isolated and alone. The shattering of these bonds plunges individuals into

deep psychological distress that leads ultimately to acts of self-annihilation. Durkheim called this state of hopelessness and despair – anomie – which he defined as rule-lessness."

And shattered is us.

"But the capture of political and economic power by the corporate elites, along with the redirecting of all institutions toward the further consolidation of their power and wealth, has broken the social bonds that held the American society together. This rupture has unleashed a widespread malaise Durkheim would have recognized."

To which you might ask – but what about all of those not for profit public interest groups doing good work all around the country?

Well, as we have documented in the last few issues of the *Citizen*, increasingly, to an alarming degree, they too have been captured by the corporate state into what we call the Non Profit Industrial Complex – if not through direct links to corporations, then to direct links to one or both of the major corporate parties. (See NPIC Out of Control, *Capitol Hill Citizen*, page 40, July/August 2023).

On the ground, when citizens do engage, they largely argue over the ideological divide of the two corporate parties – one consumed by Trump, the other by Trump derangement syndrome.

It's increasingly rare to find human beings coming together to address the needs of their community in human terms – face to face, person to person.

We would put the current Civic IQ of the USA at 5 out of 100. (By Civic IQ, we include not only the problems of the political economy, but also taking action to address them.)

Maybe people listen to talk about the political economy. Or read books about it. Maybe they agree to fulfill their jury duty, or vote on election day. That takes them to five percent.

We'd love to be proven wrong here.

Please don't send us instances of the non-profit industrial complex or people engaging in protest as performance art.

We are instead interested in people getting together, for example, to challenge their member of Congress in direct face to face meetings. Or to challenge the corporate duopoly inside the political arena.

If you think your Civic IQ is above five percent, then tell us what your number is and show us receipts.

We know that a collective Civic IQ of 30 would make our country and our world a better place to live.

Let's get off the couch, put down the phones and begin exercising our civic muscles.

Art: Mr. Fish

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