

Active participation in voluntary organizations declining faster than checkbooks can keep up

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The decline in active memberships in civic groups, fraternal organizations, and other local associations is greater than the increase in checkbook memberships, according to new research to be presented at the 106th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

"There is a lot of evidence that our democracy is based on having citizens connected with one another," said Pamela Paxton, a sociology professor and Population Research Center affiliate from The University of Texas at Austin. "When we connect with one another in associations we learn that our self interest is actually connected to the interests of others. That gives us a conception of the public good, common identity, and sense of common responsibility as a nation and as citizens. Any decline in that scholars see as potentially detrimental to democracy."

Paxton and co-author Matthew A. Painter II, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Wyoming, used the Iowa Community Survey and the [General Social Survey](#) to explore the changing nature of voluntary association membership between 1994 and 2004, using responses from approximately 10,000 citizens in 99 small towns in Iowa as well as a national sample of the United States population. They compared active members, who regularly attend local meetings, to checkbook members who do not attend any meetings and whose only requirement for membership was likely just to write a check.

Six broad categories of organizations are represented in the study: service and fraternal organizations, recreational groups, political and civic groups, job-related organizations, church-related groups, and all other groups and organizations.

The findings show that small-town Iowans on average actively participated in about one-quarter fewer associations in 2004 than they did in 1994.

The largest declines are seen for fraternal, recreational, and "other" memberships, although declines are seen for all other categories of membership as well. Active participation in recreational groups declined the most at 6 percent.

The smallest declines in participation occurred for church and political/civic associations, with the latter possibly due to 2004 being a presidential election year. Church participation declined by 3.5 percent, and active memberships in political and job-related groups declined by 2 percent.

Overall, the evidence from Iowa suggests not only declining membership in general, but also a shift in how members participate in voluntary organizations.

"Even if we thought these checkbook memberships were equivalent to being actively involved in an organization, the decline in the active associations is greater than any increase we are getting in checkbook memberships," Paxton said.

All categories except fraternal organizations, which stayed the same, show small but significant checkbook membership increases of 1 to 1.6 percent.

Paxton said there are a number of potential explanations for the shift from more active to passive participation. Communities are designed differently with less neighborhood interaction, commutes tend to be longer, television keeps us inside more, and there are some generational differences.

Paxton said scholars are still trying to understand the decline, but if it is happening in small towns in Iowa, the heartland of America, she expects the declines may be even more drastic elsewhere in country.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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