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## Social Capital, Television, and the “Mean World”: Trust, Optimism, and Civic Participation

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*Robert Putnam argues that much of the decline in social trust and civic engagement in the United States can be attributed to increased television viewing. People who watch a lot of television are likely to believe that the real world is as “mean” as the “television world,” and hence withdraw their trust from other people and decline to participate in civic affairs. Using data from the GSS and other surveys, I show that it is not television that makes people less trusting, but optimism for the future that makes people more trusting. When measures of optimism were used as determinants of trust in the estimation of a simultaneous equation model, the effects of television vanished. There is no support for the argument that television makes us less trusting because of the content of the shows we watch, or for the argument that television makes us withdraw from civic engagement because of the amount of time consumed by viewing. In addition, no evidence for specific cohort effects was found.*

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**KEY WORDS:** media; optimism; participation; social capital; television; trust

American society has become disconnected, Robert Putnam (1995a) has argued. We have lost the sense of community that Tocqueville (1840/1945) believed was central to American culture. We don't trust each other as much as we used to. Trust in other people has fallen from 58% in 1960 to 35% in the mid-1990s (Uslaner, 1997). Our less trusting atmosphere has led us to recoil from civic life and social ties. We belong to fewer voluntary organizations, vote less often, volunteer less, and give a smaller share of our gross national product to charity (Knack, 1992; Putnam, 1995a, 1995b; Uslaner, 1993, pp. 96–97). People who trust others are more likely to participate in almost all of these activities, so the decline in trust is strongly linked to the fall in civic engagement (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Putnam, 1995a; Uslaner, 1997).

Putnam's argument about social capital is controversial. Although the trends in social trust are largely beyond dispute (see Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Uslaner, 1993),

some challenge the waning of civic ties in contemporary America (Greeley, 1996; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, chap. 3). But let us suspend skepticism about the decline of civic engagement and focus instead on Putnam's explanation for why both trust and participation have fallen. He points the finger at one prominent suspect: television. This paper is a case for the defense. Television is not guilty.

Putnam's (1996) case against television rests on two foundations. The first is a direct cause of waning participation in civic affairs: Television viewing eats up time. If you are hooked in front of your television set, you can't be out and about partaking in civic life. The second part gets to civic participation through television's effect on personality. Television dramas bring us violence and bad guys; news programs highlight crime, war, disease, and other plagues. A viewer might reasonably think that the real world is cruel as well. If you watch a lot of TV, you are likely to believe that the "television world" *is* the real world. And it is a "mean world," where people don't trust each other, would try to take advantage of each other, and are looking out primarily for themselves. People who watch a lot of television, Gerbner and his colleagues argue, rank low on social capital, or trust (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980, pp. 17–19). Putnam (1995b, pp. 677–680) argues that television leads people to become disengaged from their communities directly (through the time crunch) and indirectly (by making them less trusting).

Putnam (1995b, 1996) shows a strong relationship between civic engagement, social trust, and television viewing (after controlling for education, newspaper readership, and other demographic variables), but his model doesn't consider alternative explanations. The Brehm and Rahn (1997) account is more compelling, but their support for a television explanation is considerably weaker than Putnam's. I present a different model that incorporates a competing explanation: Trust depends on optimism for the future, a belief that the world tomorrow will be better than it is today. I find no support for either a time crunch explanation or a mean world explanation of declining social trust and civic participation. Using the same General Social Survey (GSS) data that Putnam, Brehm, and Rahn have examined, I find no relationship between the amount of television viewing and either group membership or social trust.

This does not suffice to dispose of television altogether. Perhaps only some types of television programs lead people to believe that the world is too mean to warrant civic participation. I examine a wide range of available measures of television viewing in many different surveys, and find virtually no evidence that any type of content—from news to dramatic programs, soap operas, even music videos—makes people less trusting, less optimistic, or less willing to participate in civic life. Some media exposure (such as to public broadcasting) may even increase civic activism. And the one piece of evidence that might implicate television—a program that appears both to make people less trusting and to demobilize them—comes from a series that teaches strong moral lessons without a lot of violence (see below). Overall, people don't confuse the television world and the

real world. This is true for everyone, especially for more recent generations that grew up glued to the tube. Instead, I find support for a different account: Optimism shapes trust, which in turn plays a powerful role in affecting civic activism. Ironically, the first cohort that was supposed to be demobilized by television—the baby boomers—ultimately became the most trusting, the most optimistic, and the most participatory.

Why should trust matter for civic engagement? Trusting “most people” involves making judgments about strangers, because we know but a handful of people personally. And many forms of participation that depend most heavily on trust—for instance, volunteering time and being willing to serve on a jury—bring us into contact with strangers (Uslaner, 1997). Trust in others stems from our moral sense and reflects a basic sense of optimism and control.

Trust is risky. Without information on strangers, we must base trust on our moral sense (Mansbridge, *in press*; Wuthnow, 1997). Trust is most likely to emerge—and is most rational—when you are optimistic about the future. Optimists shrug off bad experiences with untrustworthy people as exceptional events. They don’t let occasional setbacks determine their world view. Instead, they believe that they can control their own fate and that in the long run, trusting others is a sound (and moral) strategy (see Seligman, 1991). Both theoretically and (as I shall show) empirically, optimism for the future is a core determinant of interpersonal trust. When I add measures of optimism to the mix of factors shaping trust (and, indirectly, membership in voluntary associations), the effects of television disappear.

If trust were merely “encapsulated experience,” a summary of our life experiences, strong television effects might make sense. The cultivation argument suggests that people believe that the real world, the font of their experiences, is as mean as the television world. Television viewing colors our experiences and makes us less trusting of others and thus less willing to participate in civic life. If, on the other hand, trust is a moral commitment, the impact of television becomes less clear. We might see the world as a mean place but believe that it is our moral obligation to make it better. Values are more likely to be shaped by family ties than by external influences such as television (see Newton, 1997, p. 579). Overcoming such strong socialization is a more demanding task for television than simply shaping our views of what’s real and what’s not.

### **How Dangerous Is Television?**

Putnam (1995b, 1996) makes two interrelated arguments about the dynamics of television. The first is generational: Americans born before 1940 are more trusting because they were not exposed to television as children. Television’s effects begin early in life. The more you are exposed to television, the less trusting you should be by the time you become an adult. The rise in television viewing tracks the decline of both social trust and membership in voluntary organizations,

with an appropriate delay built in for socialization. Television sets spread throughout the country in the 1950s, when the baby boom generation was ripe for addiction. Viewing exploded in the 1960s and continued to grow in the 1970s (Andreasen, 1994, pp. 22–26).

The second is a linkage between the number of hours people watch television and their levels of interpersonal trust and civic engagement. People who spend many hours glued to the tube are (controlling for education, newspaper readership, and other demographic variables) less trusting and less likely to join voluntary organizations than are people who watch little or no television.

Putnam (1995b, 1996) surveys the evidence on television's effects on both adults and children. He emphasizes scholarly work holding that television is bad for you. Yet researchers are divided over the "cultivation" hypothesis. We are more likely to hear about the downside of television because a damning story is far more interesting than either exculpatory evidence or null findings. People pay attention when the Surgeon General of the United States (1982, p. 38) issues a report stating that "the evidence accumulated in the 1970s seems overwhelming that televised violence and aggression are positively correlated in children" (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978, p. 247; Condry, 1993, pp. 260–262). Negative effects on children generate press attention. Some scholarly literature also finds strong linkages between television viewing and perceptions of a mean world for adults (Geen, 1994, p. 156; Gerbner et al., 1980). Others argue that television merely makes the viewer passive, rather than aggressive (Postman, 1985).

For both children and adults, there is plenty of evidence that either is mixed or exonerates television. Schramm, Lyle, and Parker (1961) find minuscule differences in aggressiveness among children who lived in Canadian towns that had substantial and minimal exposure to television. Only children who came from homes and peer groups already marked by tension and frustration were susceptible to television's mean message (Schramm et al., 1961, pp. 121, 172–173). Bryant and Rockwell (1994, p. 194) show that close family ties erased the linkage between watching sexually explicit television programs and acceptance of sexual activity among teenagers. Feshbach and Singer (1971, especially p. 97) even uncover a *negative* relationship between exposure to TV violence and aggression among junior high school and high school students. Among adults, Hirsch (1980), Hughes (1980), and Brehm and Rahn (1997) find no linkage between television viewing and social trust. Doob and Macdonald (1979) reported a relationship between television watching and fear of crime, but argued that people who live in high-crime areas tend to watch more violent programs; their fear is based more on reality than on the television world.

Hawkins and Pingree (1981) argue that the mean world thesis really comprises two distinct but interrelated arguments. Watching a lot of television, especially violent programs, may make you believe that the world is a mean and aggressive place. Heavy viewers may have a distorted view of reality (in what are called

“demographic” or “first-order” effects).<sup>1</sup> Do such perceptions spill over into our values, especially trust (“second-order” effects)? Crime and adventure programs predict how children view the world, but not their values (Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Hawkins, Pingree, & Adler, 1987, especially p. 567; Potter, 1991). Children may get a distorted picture of the world from watching a lot of television, but that does *not* make them less trusting.

There is reason to be skeptical that television makes us less trusting and therefore less willing to take an active role in our communities. Contrary to what Putnam (1995b, 1996) suggests, any effects of television on children might not carry over to adulthood. Potter (1986, p. 161) finds that young children are more likely than older children to perceive the world as television presents it. Younger adults aren't persuaded by television, though older adults seem more prone to “cultivation” effects. There appears to be no monotonic trajectory from initial socialization to adult beliefs.

Putnam's alternative account of television's role might be on firmer ground. Television, he claimed, is the only leisure activity that creates a time crunch leading to civic demobilization (Putnam, 1995b, pp. 678–679; see Robinson & Godbey, 1997). People who watch a lot of television simply don't have time to get involved in their communities, a finding echoed by Brehm and Rahn (1997). As Putnam (1995b, p. 679) argues: “TV viewers are homebodies.” If television does produce a time crunch, it would be a remarkable institution indeed. For activities that are far more demanding than joining voluntary associations, there are few indications that time constraints matter (see Uslaner, 1997).<sup>2</sup> The evidence is not so firm on the time crunch aspect of television either, especially when people can tape their favorite programs and watch them later.<sup>3</sup>

### The Wonder(ful?) Years

If not television, then what? Trust primarily reflects an optimistic world view. Optimism for the future is one of the strongest predictors of trust. It is a world view that reflects satisfaction with your personal life, your life circumstances (income and education), and more generally your value system. There is little evidence that it is driven by the media. People who see the world as mean are not content with themselves. They don't get their world view from TV.

<sup>1</sup> First-order effects are usually determined by asking respondents factual questions (such as the rate of murder) and then comparing the estimates for people who watch a lot of television with those who do not.

<sup>2</sup> Compared with someone who is not working at all, a person who works 75 hours per week is 13% less likely to volunteer time, but 12% more likely to be willing to serve on a jury. Self-employed people are more likely to volunteer their time and to work on community problems (though they are less willing to serve on a jury). And having a working spouse makes one more likely to volunteer.

<sup>3</sup> Assuming, that is, that they know how to do so.

Optimists are not worried that others will exploit them. If they take a chance and lose, their upbeat world view leads them to try again. Setbacks are temporary; the next encounter will be more cooperative (Seligman, 1991, pp. 4–5). Their decisions to trust others go beyond their immediate experience. They are willing to take risks that others are trustworthy, even in the face of contrary evidence. Trusters are optimists who believe that getting involved in their communities is worth the effort. When the future looks bright, you can afford to be generous with others and take risks. When it looks glum, you fight to protect what you have and you see others as competitors for a limited bounty. They are not trustworthy partners. Pessimists see the future as dark and dangerous.

Optimism and pessimism are not primarily reflections of how well you fare now. They reflect your expectations for the long run, especially for whether life will be better for the next generation. Optimism reflects our values at least as much as our experiences—and it is only marginally affected by what we see on television (Uslaner, 1996). Optimists have confidence in their own capacity to shape the world, which lays the foundation for their hope (Lane, 1959, pp. 163–166; Rosenberg, 1956).

Optimism and trust are strongly related, but they are not the same thing. It makes little sense to trust others if you are a pessimist (though there are always some people who fit this category). But you may be an optimistic distruster, believing that tomorrow might be better than today for *you* because you control your own fate. Even though you may not trust others to engage in cooperative behavior, you still may be an optimist. And, across several surveys, there is evidence that (1) there are considerable numbers of optimistic distrusters (but relatively few pessimistic trusters), and (2) optimistic distrusters believe, as do optimistic trusters, that they control their own fate.<sup>4</sup> If the two concepts were simply measuring the same underlying concept, we shouldn't see distrusters who believe that they are masters of their own future. Although optimism and trust are not the same thing, a positive world view lays the foundation for trust.

As a nation, we have historically been optimists and trusters. Herbert Croly (1965), the Progressive theorist, expressed the American Dream well:

Our country is . . . figured in the imagination of its citizens as the Land of Promise. [Americans] believe that somehow and sometime something better will happen to good Americans than has happened to men in any

<sup>4</sup> I found support for this perspective in three separate surveys: the 1972 ANES, the 1978 Quality of Life Survey, and a 1971 Survey Research Center Pilot Study of Economic Incentives, Values, and Subjective Well-Being in Baltimore and Detroit. From the results of each survey, I created a combined measure of optimism and trust by cross-tabulating interpersonal trust with a dichotomous measure of expectations for the longer-term future (at least 5 years in the future). For each survey, (1) pessimistic trusters were by far the smallest category in the fourfold classification, and (2) optimistic distrusters strongly resembled optimistic trusters in their overall level of efficacy and belief that they could control their own destiny, whereas pessimistic trusters had less of a sense of mastery of their own fate. If trust and optimism were the same concept, I should not find this distinction.

other country. . . . The future will have something better in store for them individually and collectively than has the past or the present. (p. 3)

Henry Steele Commager (1950, p. 5) argued, "Nothing in all history had succeeded like America, and every American knew it."

Americans have not always been optimistic. But for most of our history, the belief that tomorrow would be better than today has been paramount. In public opinion polls from the late 1930s to the 1960s, Americans believed that their children would have a better life than they did. This creed is essential to American culture; it was the promise that guided immigrants to come to a land where the streets were paved with gold. By the late 1970s, we had turned sour. Not even during Ronald Reagan's tenure did a majority believe that the next generation would fare better (Uslaner, 1993, p. 76). By 1995, only 10% of Americans were "very confident" that life for their children would be better than it has been for them, and 54% were "not confident at all" (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1996, p. 22). When Americans are less optimistic about the future, they should be (and are) less trusting.

There is no reason to expect that pessimism will be sufficient to draw people away from participation. Optimism works through trust. If trust is a core value, then it should come before civic engagement in a causal chain that begins with optimism, goes through trust, and culminates in participation (see the more extended argument in Uslaner, 1997). As Levi (1996) argues, we should not presume that many of the groups we may join (or activities we engage in) should have any impact on our core values or our willingness to cooperate in the larger society. The estimation below supports this causal linkage, as do others I have conducted.<sup>5</sup>

In models without optimism, television affects both trust and civic engagement.<sup>6</sup> Once we bring optimism into the picture, the effects of television on trust drop out. This finding sharply challenges the mean world thesis, which holds that television makes people pessimistic (see Gerbner et al., 1980, pp. 18–19). Lots of things cause people to become pessimists, but television isn't one of them. However, this conclusion is hardly sufficient to undo Putnam's thesis. Putnam posed two linkages between television and civic activism. Only one goes through trust. The other is more direct: Television leads people to drop out. Here, I show that a well-specified model also eliminates the direct (i.e., time crunch) effect of television.

My thesis posits a straight fight between confidence in the future and television. Alas, it is not quite so easy to stage the confrontation. To give Putnam's argument a fair test, I must confront his test directly, using the 1972–1994 GSS.

<sup>5</sup> I estimated two-stage least-squares models of attitudes toward ingroups and outgroups from the 1996 ANES, with volunteering, trust, and group attitudes as endogenous variables. Trust is significant, but volunteering, working on community problems, and talking to neighbors are not significant. Neither civic involvement nor social networks shape values; values affect civic engagement.

<sup>6</sup> This is true for models developed by Putnam (1995a, 1995b), Brehm and Rahn (1997), and myself.



There is no ideal question on optimism in the data set that is available for more than a single year. The closest I can get is the GSS item ANOMIA6: "It's hardly fair to bring a child into the world with the way things look for the future" (also used by Gerbner et al., 1980). This item approximates whether life will be better for the next generation, but it is even more stark. We find 60.2% of all GSS respondents from 1972 to 1994 giving optimistic responses. Younger people, who are recent parents or perhaps contemplating parenthood, are more optimistic on this measure; other indicators show more recent generations less optimistic and trusting.<sup>7</sup> Hence, there is no distinctive time trend in this variable, which makes a time-series linkage with trust difficult to establish. A better measure of optimism would be welcome, but we must make do with what we have. There are three other acceptable GSS items as well. Two of them assess general levels of optimism: the belief that "the lot of the average man is getting worse," and the belief that "most public officials are not really interested in the problems of the average man."<sup>8</sup>

The item that best encapsulates personal control over one's environment is confidence in science. This is not a simple measure of expectations for the future, but it reflects an American ideal that is strongly connected to our national sense of optimism. Americans have long worshiped practical science and have believed that American ingenuity will help solve our problems. Americans have long been tinkerers and amateur scientists, and have worshiped technological advances (Lafollette, 1990, p. 127; Uslaner, 1993, pp. 71–72; Wright, 1957, p. 226). Optimists believe that they have control over their own destinies (Seligman, 1991, p. 6). And science is all about controlling one's environment. Confidence in science, then, reflects the optimistic belief that we can solve our problems if only we try hard enough.

Putnam's version of the mean world thesis is straightforward. Simple exposure to television, rather than what you watch, shapes your world view; hence, the GSS index of the number of hours spent watching television is a serviceable measure. It doesn't matter what you watch if you are sitting at home "viewing alone" (see Putnam, 1995b, p. 679). The time crunch explanation doesn't depend on content. Nor does an alternative account of television as the culprit for waning civic participation: the numbing effect. Like Chauncey Gardiner in Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*, we watch television to occupy our time; TV, in turn, makes us passive. We are content to sit in front of the tube, away from the distractions of the outside

<sup>7</sup> Other data, such as the *Washington Post*–Harvard University–Kaiser Family Foundation study of trust, show sharp generational effects in expectations that life will be better for the next generation.

<sup>8</sup> Is "public officials don't care" merely a surrogate for confidence in government? I performed a factor analysis of the four optimism measures, trust in people, and confidence in the executive branch of government. A single factor emerged, and the three ANOMIA measures (unfair to bring child into world, lot of average person getting worse, public officials don't care) had the highest loadings, whereas confidence in the executive branch had a much lower loading (.13 lower than public officials don't care). This suggests that the public officials measure is tapping a more general sense of pessimism than trust in government.

world (Postman, 1985; see Putnam, 1995b, p. 679). The mean world or cultivation hypothesis is based on the assumption that the predominant picture we get from television is of a turbulent world. Most network programs and children's programming contain violence (Gerbner et al., 1980, p. 13). Yet, as I will show, examining program content doesn't help the case for television effects at all.

The GSS rotates many of its items. The primary measure of optimism (unfair to bring a child into the world) and the number of hours a respondent watches television rarely appear together. Only for 1980 (partial sample) and 1993 do we find both items. This severely restricts the sample size but doesn't distort the analysis. The simple correlation between membership in voluntary associations and television viewing is virtually identical for the full sample and for the 1980/1993 subsample.<sup>9</sup>

### Trust, Television, and Optimism

I posit a linkage that goes from optimism to trust to membership in voluntary associations, with the causal direction going one way. When I estimate a model of membership in voluntary associations that includes television and trust in people, television watching does *not* shape either trust or optimism for the future. But optimism is a key determinant of trust. Collectively, the multiple measures of optimism overwhelm the effects of other variables on trust. Trust, but not television viewing or optimism, is a strong predictor (in a simultaneous equation model) of membership in voluntary associations. Optimism works its will through trust.

Consider first Putnam's generational argument. If exposure to television leads to disengagement, either directly or indirectly, then cohorts exposed to television should be less trusting, less optimistic, and less participatory than people born earlier. Putnam's cutoff for exposure to television is the baby boomer generation (Putnam, 1995b). Putnam (1995b, p. 674) points to people born in the 1930s as the last trusting generation. The baby boomers were the first television generation. They were also the first strong distrusters (Brehm & Rahn, 1997). They protested Vietnam and social injustice, didn't trust anyone over 30, and were convinced by Watergate that the system—and the people who supported it—were fundamentally corrupt.

If television had its first impact on baby boomers, it was not a lasting one. Before 1988, boomers were far less trusting than their elders.<sup>10</sup> In 1988, the boomers shot to the very top of all trusters and remained there. With each passing year, the boomers became less typical of the rest of the American population. As

<sup>9</sup> The correlation between number of hours of television watched and membership in voluntary associations is  $-.181$  for the full sample ( $N = 11,975$ ) and  $-.188$  for the subsample ( $N = 3,292$ ).

<sup>10</sup> My definition of "boomers" is narrower than Putnam's. His boomers were born between 1946 and 1964; my definition encompasses only 1946–1955. Brehm and Rahn (1997) distinguished between early and late boomers, but obtained similar results for both.

others turned sour toward their fellow citizens, the boomers kept their renewed faith, which stemmed from a born-again faith in the American Dream. Putnam as well as Brehm and Rahn miss these changes because they considered the entire GSS as one sample. The changes in boomers' attitudes did not take place until the late 1980s; the sample sizes for the last 6 years will be overwhelmed by the previous 15. Before 1988, 41% of boomers believed "most people can be trusted" compared to 45% of non-boomers. Since 1988, 44% of boomers trusted others, compared to 37% of non-boomers. (Both differences are significant at  $p < .0001$ .)

These findings are damning for the idea of television as culprit, for its presumed effects are not immediate but cumulative. Socialization effects are not supposed to wither away when people reach middle age. But these do. Baby boomers became more trusting as their incomes rose. The boomers saw their income rise from about \$7,500 to almost \$25,000 from 1973 to 1994. More than any other cohort in America, the boomers made it. They were better educated and had higher incomes. And they were the last cohort, at least in this time series, to earn more than their parents. As their income matched their expectations, they regained faith in their fellow citizens. Boomers weren't just the most trusting generation; they were also the most optimistic generation. Since 1988, 66% said it was still fair to bring a child into the world, compared to 58% for other generations ( $p < .0001$ ). The boomers also became the most participatory cohort.<sup>11</sup>

The cohorts after the boomers, people born in the 1960s and 1970s, are less trusting, less optimistic, and less participatory than their elders.<sup>12</sup> And they watch more television than boomers (though not less than older people, who have more free time). Perhaps the television effect was delayed. Therefore, in the analyses for trust and optimism below, I estimated models that test for cohort effects.

### A "Mean World"?

Does a mean world exist, where television viewing makes people less willing to trust each other and less optimistic about the future? Tables I and II show estimated probit models for trust and optimism (see the Appendix for variable coding). For trust, the key question is what the relative effects of optimism and television are. For optimism, the central issue is whether television makes people less hopeful. For both trust and optimism, I estimated models with and without cohort effects. Does television (or optimism) play a more powerful role for younger people than for their elders, who did not grow up with this medium?

Consider the determinants of trust. Table I presents two probit analyses; the first is a straightforward model based on the logic presented above, and the second

<sup>11</sup> From 1988 onward, boomers joined 2.040 organizations, compared to 1.761 for pre-boomers and 1.678 for post-boomers.

<sup>12</sup> The patterns are again more pronounced beginning in 1988. People born before 1920 are less participatory than even the youngest cohort.

includes interaction terms for cohorts as well. I also reestimated the first equation without television effects; the reestimation greatly increases the sample size and, apart from some greater effects for the measures of optimism and less influence for satisfaction with friends, yields virtually identical results. The measure of impact is what Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) called the “effect” of an independent variable, the difference in estimated probabilities from the predictor’s highest and lowest values, letting the other independent variables take their “natural” values.

The model for trust includes the four measures of optimism discussed above (unfair to bring a child into the world, lot of the average person getting worse, public officials don’t care, and confidence in science), years of education (measured for both high school and college),<sup>13</sup> income, and age. People who are satisfied with their friendships should also be more likely to trust people they don’t know. And blacks should be less trusting; as Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976) argued, “The history of the black experience in America is not one which would naturally inspire confidence in the benign intentions of one’s fellow man” (p. 456). Finally, people living in states with high scores on trust should become more trusting. Context matters. It is hard to remain a Scrooge in a world of Bob Cratchits. I therefore used a measure of “contextual trust,” that is, trust (for the full GSS sample) aggregated by state.

I first consider the probit without cohort effects. Consistent with the findings of both Putnam (1995a) and Brehm and Rahn (1997), education, age, income, and race are important determinants of interpersonal trust.<sup>14</sup> The more people congregate with others, the more likely they are to develop a sense of community and be willing to engage in collective action beyond the confines of their groups and neighborhoods (Putnam, 1995a, pp. 73–74). People who live in states with high levels of trust are substantially more likely to be trusters themselves. This is among the strongest impacts in the model. The most powerful determinant of trust is satisfaction with friends (see Brehm & Rahn, 1997). In the model with television viewing, people who are very satisfied with their personal circle are 35% more likely to be trusters than folks who are unhappy in their personal lives. Your personal experiences shape your world view. If you have a fulfilling personal life, you are more likely to give strangers the benefit of the doubt.

Optimism matters mightily.<sup>15</sup> If you believe that it is unfair to bring a child into the world, you are about 10% less likely to trust others (averaging the impacts with and without television). If you believe that the lot of the average person is

<sup>13</sup> High school education is a measure ranging from 9 to 13, representing the number of years of education a person has (with other values set at zero). College education ranges from 14 to 20, with other values set at zero. I determined the cut-point empirically.

<sup>14</sup> The age distribution in the GSS goes beyond 75, but I estimated the effect at that age because few respondents were older than 75. Similarly, I truncated the impact of television viewing at 10 hours per day; only 1.3% of all respondents claimed to watch more than 10 hours per day.

<sup>15</sup> The item “lot of the average person is getting worse” is ANOMIA5; “officials don’t care” is ANOMIA7.

**Table I.** Probit Analysis of Trust in People

<u>Independent variable</u>	Without cohort interactions		With cohort interactions		Excluding television	
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Effect</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Effect</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Effect</u>
	<u>(SE)</u>		<u>(SE)</u>		<u>(SE)</u>	
Contextual trust	1.786****	.316	1.762****	.310	1.619****	.288
	(.402)		(.404)		(.175)	
Satisfied with friends	0.195****	.352	0.197****	.353	0.109****	.209
	(.032)		(.032)		(.014)	
Unfair to bring child into world	-0.270***	-.090	-0.264	-.088	-0.343***	-.116
	(.078)		(.078)		(.035)	
Lot of average person getting worse	-0.140*	-.046	-0.088	-.029	-0.270****	-.090
	(.080)		(.083)		(.034)	
Officials don't care for average person	-0.254**	-.084	-0.273****	-.090	-0.363****	-.122
	(.082)		(.083)		(.035)	
Confidence in science	0.310****	.203	0.314****	.205	0.172****	.113
	(.059)		(.060)		(.026)	
High school education	0.050****	.061	0.049****	.060	0.043****	.054
	(.012)		(.012)		(.005)	
College education	0.056****	.101	0.055****	.100	0.048****	.090
	(.010)		(.010)		(.004)	
Income	0.034**	.121	0.035**	.123	0.026****	.093
	(.014)		(.014)		(.006)	
Age	0.015****	.275	0.015****	.265	0.013****	.247
	(.002)		(.003)		(.001)	
Black	-0.525****	-.168	-0.542****	-.172	-0.619****	-.199
	(.140)		(.141)		(.059)	
Hours TV watched per day	-0.013	-.044	-0.014	-.044		
	(.018)		(.020)			
TV hours: Boomers			0.024	.076		
			(.027)			
TV: '60s generation			-0.048	-.149		
			(.044)			
TV: '70s generation			0.008	.022		
			(.077)			
Lot getting worse: '60s generation			-0.338**	-.218		
			(.138)			
Constant	-2.151****		-2.061****		-2.625****	
	(.340)		(.137)		(.142)	
N	1,520		1,520		7,744	
-2(log likelihood ratio)	1742.822		1731.108		8953.974	
Estimated R <sup>2</sup>	.338		.349		.320	
Percent predicted correctly						
Probit	69.3		69.6		69.7	
Null	53.8		53.8		53.5	

\*\*\*\*p < .0001, \*\*\*p < .001, \*\*p < .05, \*p < .10.

getting worse, you are 5% less likely to be trusting. People who believe that public officials don't care for the average person are also more wary, by about 10%. The biggest impact comes for confidence in science, which makes a person 11% more likely to be trusting. In the model without television in Table I, the effect for the lot of the average person getting worse is almost twice as large as in the model with television.

All four measures of optimism combine for a powerful effect on trust. A person who says that it is still all right to bring a child into the world, who says that the average person is faring better than in the past, who has faith that officials are listening, and who has a lot of confidence in science is 45% more likely to be trusting than a pessimist with the opposite attitudes. No other variable comes close to the combined effects of four different types of optimism. The effects of each measure appear to be additive. The more optimistic you are, the more trusting you will be.

Television brings up the rear. The standard error for TV is larger than its coefficient. And it has a minuscule effect: A person watching 10 hours of television per day is only 4% less likely to be a truster than someone who never watches television. Nor is there any indication that television matters more for later cohorts. I first added interaction terms for television watching and boomers, the 1960s cohort, and the 1970s cohort.<sup>16</sup> Only television watching for the 1960s cohort was significant. And the impact seems powerful: A 1960s child who now watches 10 hours of television per day is 22% less likely to trust others than one who never watches television. But this analysis produces an anomaly: Why are there powerful effects for the interaction of decade and television only for the 1960s cohort? Why didn't the 1970s cohort become less trusting as their television viewing increased?

The television effects for the 1960s cohort disappear when I enter an interaction term for the cohort and the lot of the average person getting worse<sup>17</sup> (see the second model in Table I). The simple measure of "lot of the average person" is no longer significant. The 1960s cohort is not noticeably more pessimistic than people born in the 1970s. Nor did the 1970s cohort outpace its predecessor in income. So why is there a big impact for the interaction of economic optimism and the 1960s cohort, wiping out the main effect for "lot of the average person" as well as the cohort effect for television viewing? Most likely the explanation harks back to expectations. For the boomers, income has continued to increase. The 1960s generation was the first that faced slow growth in incomes. Equally important may be the life experiences of this generation. The formative experiences of this generation were Vietnam, Watergate, and the civil rights movement.<sup>18</sup> The model

<sup>16</sup>The interaction is between a dummy variable for the cohort and the number of hours a person watches television each day.

<sup>17</sup>Cohort interactions for the other measures of optimism had no effect on this television interaction.

<sup>18</sup>I have found strong effects for civil rights attitudes as determinants of *change* in trust over the 1972–1974 wave of the ANES panel and for opinions on Vietnam as determinants of change in trust over the 1974–1976 wave of the same panel.

with interaction effects shows that it is not television, but optimism—especially for the 1960s generation—that shapes trust.<sup>19</sup>

Might television have an indirect effect on trust, through optimism? Could watching television make us less hopeful for the future? Table II presents a probit analysis for the key measure of optimism: whether it is unfair to bring a child into the world. Aside from the standard demographics (age is not significant), I included a contextual measure of optimism, based on the same logic as the contextual trust measure. A rising tide of optimism should lift many hopes. Optimism should also reflect one's personal life experiences. People who are satisfied with their personal lives—who say that they are happy, that their lives are exciting (rather than dull), and who are satisfied with their jobs—should have a more upbeat outlook. Happiness in one's personal life is *not* the same thing as optimism for the future; you can be happy in your own life, but not so sanguine about the world around you. And people who have a deep faith should find “something within” (Harris, 1994) to make them more confident that the future will bring good things. Fundamentalists and people who attend church or synagogue services frequently should also have a positive view of tomorrow. For many people, religious faith promises salvation, not only in the hereafter but on Earth now.

I exclude two of the other measures of optimism (lot of average person getting worse, public officials don't care) because my logic suggests that they should not be “causes” of feelings for the future, but alternative indicators of it. I do include confidence in science, because I believe that this aspect of optimism—the ability to control the world—is conceptually distinct from long-term optimism and is likely to be causally prior to it. A belief that tomorrow will be better than today relies, at least in part, on your ability to change the world.

Are we less optimistic because we are too glued to the tube? No. Once again, we see that context matters (Table II). If most people around you believe that things are destined to get better, you will be more prone to be an optimist too (by about 22%). Four measures of satisfaction with one's personal life or general optimism—whether you are happy, whether you find life exciting or dull, whether you like your job, and whether you have confidence in science—have equal impacts. And again, they are additive. Someone who is content and believes that we can control the world is 38% more likely to be optimistic than a person who finds a lot to complain about and feels the world to be out of control.

There are many paths to a sanguine personality. Beyond your personal life, your sense of control, and your environment, your world view may be shaped by faith. People who go to church or synagogue several times a week are also 7% more likely to be optimists than people who never go. Fundamentalists are also more

<sup>19</sup>This result does not depend on the specification I used here. I also estimated models from the 1995 *Washington Post*–Kaiser Family Foundation–Harvard University poll, which includes trust in people, television viewing, and general measures of optimism for the future. Television viewing was not significant, whereas measures of optimism are key determinants of trust.

**Table II.** Probit Analysis of Optimism (Unfair to Bring a Child into the World)

<u>Independent variable</u>	Without cohort interactions			With cohort interactions		
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>Effect</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>Effect</u>
Unfair to bring child into world: Contextual	1.323***	.410	.224	1.359***	.411	.230
Happy	-0.135***	.040	-.096	-0.140***	.040	-.100
Life exciting	-0.134***	.043	-.096	-0.141***	-.042	-.101
Job satisfaction	-0.089**	.029	-.095	-0.090**	.029	-.095
Confidence in science	-0.134***	.039	-.095	-0.137***	.039	-.097
Fundamentalist	-0.092**	.035	-.065	-0.095**	.035	-.067
Frequency of service attendance	-0.028**	.010	-.070	-0.029**	.010	-.071
Income	-.036****	.009	-.141	-0.038****	.009	.151
High school education	-.032****	.007	-.042	-0.032****	.007	-.042
College education	-.053****	.006	-.081	-0.053****	.006	-.081
Hours TV watched per day	0.013	.010	.044			
TV hours: '30s cohort				-0.007	.020	
TV hours: Boomers				-0.010	.013	
TV hours: '60s cohort				0.001	.022	
TV hours: '70s cohort				-0.040	-.093	
Constant	2.062**	.665		-2.168***	.666	
N		3,279			3,279	
-2(log likelihood ratio)		4018.624			4010.364	
Estimated R <sup>2</sup>		.230			.231	
Percent predicted correctly						
Probit		66.0			65.8	
Null		60.1			60.1	

\*\*\*\*p < .0001, \*\*\*p < .001, \*\*p < .05.

likely to be optimists, by about the same amount. Life circumstances also matter: Higher incomes and higher education (especially college education) make us more optimistic. (Race and age are not significant and are omitted.)

Once more, television doesn't matter. The coefficient for the number of hours watched per day is about the same size as its standard error. As with trust, someone who watches 10 hours per day is only 4% more likely to be a pessimist than a person who doesn't see TV at all. There is no mean world effect.<sup>20</sup> Nor does television have distinct effects on different cohorts. I exclude the main effect of television watching in order to look at more generational impacts without risking collinearity. I include interactions for the 1930s, boomers, 1960s, and 1970s cohorts. None are significant, and all but the 1960s cohort (which has a standard error more than 30 times the value of its coefficient) had incorrect signs.

<sup>20</sup> Again, an analysis of the *Washington Post*–Kaiser Family Foundation–Harvard University survey shows no impact of television viewing on a scale of optimism.



## Television and Civic Participation

There is little support for the mean world thesis. Television does not make us less trusting or less optimistic. But it may still drive us away from participation in civic life. Putnam (1995b) placed great emphasis on how television eats up our time. And Brehm and Rahn (1997, p. 1015), who also find no connection between television viewing and trust, argued: "Television, as an opportunity cost, is a serious drain upon the civic participation side of social capital."

Is there evidence of a time crunch? I estimate a two-stage least-squares model of civic participation, using the GSS summary measure of membership in voluntary associations, corrected as noted in Helliwell and Putnam (1996).<sup>21</sup> The model treats group membership and interpersonal trust as endogenous variables; the equation for trust is the same as that presented in Table I (without the interaction terms).

The model for group membership includes key variables that others have found important: demographic indicators such as income, education (again measured for both high school and college), and time pressures such as having a working spouse and the number of hours per week one works. These time pressures should lead people away from civic participation. Social connections should also make people more likely to participate in civic life. Union membership should bind people to each other and engage them in civic life (Putnam, 1995a). People who have lived in their communities since age 16 are more likely to have the strong ties that will motivate them to take an active role there. Frequent attenders of church or synagogue should be more likely to take part in civic life. People who attend church learn important skills that carry over into political action. Clergy also mobilize people into political and social action (Verba, Schlozman, Brady, & Nie, 1993, p. 457; Wuthnow, 1991, p. 156). I also include contextual measures for two measures of optimism: unfair to bring a child into the world, and lot of the average person getting worse.<sup>22</sup> And, of course, the model includes the number of television hours watched each day. (Television viewing is not included in the first-stage equation for trust.)

I present the two-stage least-squares estimates for joining voluntary associations, in Table III, with a sample size of 827 for the model with television and 3,105 without TV. The *N*s for both equations are constrained by my concern for including relevant variables both in the main equation and in the reduced form.

People who live in states with high scores on optimism should be more actively involved in their communities. Contextual measures (aggregated by state) are used

<sup>21</sup> The revised figures come from a coding error by the GSS. The total membership in voluntary associations from 1989 to 1994 mistakenly excludes school and service organizations.

<sup>22</sup> These two variables are highly collinear (see below). This collinearity results in one variable having the wrong sign. I did not include other contextual measures because of even more severe collinearity problems.

Table III. Two-Stage Least-Squares Estimation of Membership in Voluntary Associations

<u>Independent variable</u>	With television			Without television		
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>t ratio</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>t ratio</u>
Trust in people	1.090***	0.322	3.386	1.497****	0.206	7.274
Frequency of service attendance	0.181****	0.026	7.046	0.168****	0.014	11.882
Union family	0.461****	0.131	3.512	0.572****	0.070	8.192
Live in same community since age 16	0.234**	0.125	1.872	0.144**	0.070	2.056
Unfair to bring child into world:						
Contextual	3.384	1.449	2.336	2.208	0.813	2.715
Lot of average person getting worse: Contextual	-3.241**	1.855	-1.747	-1.335*	1.000	-1.335
High school education	0.039**	0.023	1.673	0.034**	0.013	2.588
College education	0.092****	0.019	4.911	0.080****	0.010	7.503
Family income	0.021	0.030	0.685	0.041**	0.018	2.298
Hours work per week	0.010	0.005	2.292	0.005	0.002	1.865
Spouse work	-0.203*	0.132	-1.553	-0.168**	0.074	-2.287
Hours TV watched per day	-0.037	0.038	-0.982			
Constant	-0.028	1.952	-0.014	0.661	1.154	0.573
<i>N</i>		827			3,105	
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.159			.088	
Standard error of estimate		1.716			1.862	

\*\*\*\**p* < .0001, \*\*\**p* < .001, \*\**p* < .05, \**p* < .10.

for two of the optimism indicators discussed above: whether it is fair to bring a child into the world, and whether the lot of the average person is getting worse. The models also include the standard predictors of participation—education and income—and two other measures of time constraints: how many hours per week a person works, and whether the respondent has a working spouse. People who face time crunches should be less active in their communities.

The model shows that trust and community ties have strong impacts on membership in voluntary associations. Trusting people belong to an extra organization. People who attend religious services more than once a week belong to almost two more groups than those who never go. Union members join an extra organization; each family member in a union brings an extra half membership. And people who grew up in their current home towns are more likely to take an active role. Social ties clearly promote civic participation. And social ties have frayed since the 1970s. Family membership in unions has fallen by 40%. Church and synagogue attendance have declined by 16%. There has been a small, if erratic, increase in residential mobility. And social trust has fallen sharply. Each of these factors leads people to shy away from civic activism.

If membership in voluntary associations did not plummet, rising educational levels were the reason. High school and especially college education leads to more participation; so do higher incomes. College education became more widespread from 1973 to 1994; in 1994, 41% of Americans had at least 2 years of college, compared with 23% in 1973. Education picks up the slack where social capital and community ties leave off. But family income plays no role in membership in voluntary associations.

Context matters a little. A person living in the most pessimistic state (“lot of the average person getting worse”) will join 1.25 fewer organizations than someone in the most optimistic state. But the sign on the other measure of contextual optimism (unfair to bring a child into the world) is wrong, almost certainly a reflection of multicollinearity with the other contextual measure ( $r = .68$ ).

There is modest evidence of any time crunch. People with working spouses will join 0.2 fewer organizations. The more hours a person works per week, the *more* likely he is to get involved. Busy people are likely candidates for civic activism (Uslaner, 1997). But the effect is small. Someone who works 75 hours per week will join 0.75 more organizations than a person who doesn’t work at all. Homemakers, retired people, and students are no more likely to become members than others. Nor is there any effect for marriage, separation, or divorce. Decisions about joining organizations don’t reflect time pressures.

So it is not surprising to find that television also has no effects. The standard error for number of hours watching television is about the same as the coefficient. There is neither a time displacement effect nor a mean world impact. Overall, the models with and without television produced very similar results. The models excluding television have stronger impacts for trust and to a lesser extent for contextual optimism. And again there is no evidence of a generational effect. When I estimate the same model including interaction effects for television for boomers, 1960s, and 1970s cohorts, neither the main television viewing variable nor any of the interactions was statistically significant. The interaction terms for the 1960 cohort and the 1970 cohort have positive signs and approach significance at the generous  $p < .10$  level for a two-tailed test.<sup>23</sup> No matter how we slice it, there are no impacts for television viewing among any cohort or for the entire sample. People’s values, social connections, and resources shape their decision to participate in civic groups. Television is *not* the culprit once we bring optimism for the future into the picture.

Perhaps television works its will even more indirectly. I estimate regression for confidence in science, happiness, and whether life is exciting (results not shown).<sup>24</sup> There are no television effects for confidence in science. Two cohorts

<sup>23</sup> These results are available on request.

<sup>24</sup> I estimated identical models using Zellner’s seemingly unrelated equations technique, which adjusts for intercorrelations among the residuals across equations.

had significant interaction effects with television for the measures of personal well-being: The 1920s and 1960s cohorts are each more likely to say their lives are dull if they watch a lot of television, and the 1920s cohort and baby boomers are more likely to say that they are unhappy if they watch a lot of television. Television effects are most pronounced in a cohort that grew up without this medium. For other cohorts, the effects are mixed and not terribly strong. And the interaction effects for older respondents were modest compared with other variables (especially satisfaction with family, friends, job, and income). By the time they pass through the causal chain from life satisfaction to optimism to trust to civic participation, the effects of television are minuscule.

Yet this model seems incomplete. It does not allow for reciprocal causation among the core variables. Putnam (1995a, 1995b) argues that membership in voluntary organizations not only depends on trust, but contributes to it. Brehm and Rahn (1997) held that participation in civic life has stronger effects on trust than confidence in others has on membership. I did not posit a reciprocal linkage for theoretical reasons (see Uslaner, 1997). For the same reason, I did not posit a reciprocal link between trust and confidence in the future. Are these decisions correct? I reestimated these equations (with minor differences reflecting some insignificant coefficients) by three-stage least-squares, allowing for reciprocal linkages: between membership in voluntary associations and trust, and between trust and confidence in the future.<sup>25</sup> This model allowed a test of the causal ordering I have presented: from optimism to trust to civic participation.

When optimism was made endogenous in the system of equations for membership in organizations, it had an insignificant coefficient. There is also a reduced effect for trust ( $b = .933$ ,  $t = 2.333$ ). Almost all of the other coefficients and significance levels are undisturbed. Hence, optimism does not affect membership in voluntary associations directly. Its effect is through trust, as I originally posited. The relationship between trust and membership in voluntary associations goes one way, and it begins with trust. Confidence in others has a powerful effect on group membership ( $b = 1.563$ ,  $t = 4.249$ ), but there is no effect of membership on trust ( $b = -.0003$ ,  $t = -.037$ ). But trust and faith in the future reinforce each other. Expectations for the future are the strongest predictor of interpersonal trust ( $b = .698$ ,  $t = 11.038$ ), and vice versa ( $b = 1.408$ ,  $t = 8.322$ ).<sup>26</sup>

What happens to television when causal loops are allowed? TV viewing still has no direct effect on memberships in voluntary organizations ( $b = -.039$ ,  $t = -.741$ ). Yet some evidence for the mean world begins to emerge: People who watch 10 hours of television per day are 31% more likely to be pessimistic for the future, compared to people who never tune in ( $t = -2.116$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Through the causal chain from television to optimism to trust to civic participation, heavy watchers

<sup>25</sup> Details are available on request. The three-stage least-squares estimations are based on 833 cases.

<sup>26</sup> These results hold with equal, if not greater, force for larger samples—between 2,918 and 2,996—obtained when we exclude television viewing.

joined .35 fewer organizations. But people who watch a lot of television, this estimation suggests, are *more* trusting ( $b = .022$ ,  $t = 2.093$ ). There is thus a corresponding increase in joining from heavy viewers through trust. It is just powerful enough (.34) to counterbalance the effects of pessimism. The net impact of television is virtually zero. In contrast, the indirect impact of expectations for the future is substantial (again through trust): An optimist will join 1.09 more organizations than a pessimist.

The three-stage least-squares estimation provides general support for the causal ordering I have posited. It suggests that the linkage between optimism and trust runs both ways (with a much stronger link from optimism to trust). Although this estimation does show some modest impact for television on optimism, it also shows a positive influence of television on trust. Overall, I find little evidence to sustain the indictment of television.

### Does Content Matter?

The time crunch explanation would lead us to believe that it doesn't matter what we watch: If we are glued to the television set, we can't be out and about participating in our communities and volunteering. Putnam (1995a, 1995b) does not distinguish among different types of programming. But the mean world effect depends on what we watch (Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Norris, 1996). If we see lots of violence—through police dramas, or perhaps even the news—we might be more likely to believe that the real world is violent as well. To investigate whether the content of what we watch makes a difference, I examined several surveys that asked about different types of viewing: the 1993 GSS, a 1994 survey by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, and the 1976 and 1996 American National Election Studies (ANES).

The 1993 GSS asked respondents about the frequency with which they view specific kinds of programs [prime-time shows (drama or comedy), television news, and public television] as well as the total number of hours they spend watching television. For each type of television viewing, there are only tiny correlations with any of the measures of optimism. The highest correlation is between watching a lot of public television and believing that the lot of the average person is getting worse ( $r = .040$ ). Watching a lot of public television also boosts trust, though modestly ( $r = .101$ ,  $\gamma = .140$ ). The correlations with television news and prime-time shows are small—slightly positive for news ( $r = .043$ ) and slightly negative for prime-time shows ( $r = -.031$ ). The correlations were of similar magnitude for membership in voluntary organizations, except that watching public television did not correlate highly with group membership ( $r = .044$ ). The 1976 ANES asked about a variety of daytime entertainment (soap opera), evening entertainment, national news, and local news shows. In a multivariate model, none of these types of programs affected trust in other people.

In 1994, the Times Mirror (now Pew Research) Center for the People and the Press political typology survey asked people whether they volunteered and also inquired about different forms of television viewing and leisure activities. I estimated a probit equation for volunteering. People who watched the nightly hour-long news analysis program on noncommercial (public) television and people who regularly listened to radio news (most likely on noncommercial public radio) were each 7% more likely to volunteer than people who don't watch or listen to the news. Some types of television (and radio) may actually stimulate civic engagement. Other television shows don't seem to have *any* significant effect on volunteering. We might think that people who watch soap operas or music videos would be less likely to be out and about serving their communities. No, these variables have no significant effect on volunteering.

Even the positive effects I have found may be overestimated. The Times Mirror survey did not contain a question on trust. And we know from the 1993 GSS that people who watch a lot of public television are more likely to be trusting (though they are no more likely to join voluntary associations). With an appropriate control, some of the positive relationships might vanish.

And they do vanish in the 1996 ANES, which asked how often people watch different types of television shows: game shows, sports, a news magazine (*PrimeTime Live*), either of two comedies (*Frasier* and *Friends*), a Western (*Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*), and a hospital drama (*ER*). In a multivariate Heckman sample selection model of membership in secular voluntary associations, I could not find any type of television show that determines whether someone would join an organization at all. But watching *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* determined *how many* organizations a person would join. And the impact is substantial: Someone who regularly watches *Dr. Quinn* joins .67 fewer organizations than a person who never watches. Among people who join any organization, the mean number of memberships is 2.458 with a standard deviation of 1.615. So the standardized effect for watching *Dr. Quinn* is .413. Watching this show a lot moves you over 40% of the standard deviation of membership.

So there are television effects after all, impacts that survive the usual (and some unusual) controls. But they are puzzling. *Dr. Quinn* isn't a shoot-'em-up drama that makes people think that the real world must also be mean. It is a heart-wrenching drama about a woman doctor in the old West that airs during the "family hour" on television, when violence is prohibited by federal regulation. The program appeals to people who attend services regularly ( $\gamma = .137$ ) and to born-again Christians ( $\gamma = .224$ ), although these variables (and others) don't wipe out the effects of the show. Perhaps people who stay home on Saturday nights to watch the show are less likely to get out and about through group memberships. If "Saturday night is the loneliest night of the week" for regular viewers, this might solve the puzzle.

The 1996 ANES results also offer little support for the mean world thesis. Of the nine measures of television viewing in the survey, five had positive correlations

with trust and four had negative correlations.<sup>27</sup> The average value of  $\gamma$  was .015; only three types of programs had  $\gamma$ s with absolute values greater than .10: *Dr. Quinn* was associated with less trust ( $\gamma = -.111$ ), whereas regular viewers of *Frasier* and *Friends* were more trusting ( $\gamma = .128$  and  $.138$ , respectively). Watching national news makes viewers barely more trusting ( $\gamma = .001$ ); local news tilts them slightly the other way ( $\gamma = -.070$ ). But none of these programs had significant effects on trust in a multivariate model.

Across a wide variety of television content, I found no systematic effects for television viewing. Thus, Putnam apparently did not err when he paid little attention to what people watch. But he and others are not correct when they attribute waning trust and civic participation to television effects. There is scant evidence that television makes us less optimistic for the future, less trusting of others, and less willing to participate in civic life, be it through joining voluntary associations or doing more demanding things such as volunteering time. The key determinant of social trust is optimism, and trust in turn is a central factor in shaping civic participation (although the reverse is not true).

### Are We What We Watch?

People may see a mean world on television because the world outside might really be mean (see Brody, 1991). Recent research on cultivation effects shows only tenuous linkages between people's perception of the television world and their view of the real world. Either people see the real world on television, as it might appear in national news programs, or they make a distinction between what they see on television and how they view the real world. Local television news has gained a deservedly bad reputation for emphasizing violent crimes. "If it bleeds, it leads," critics argue. But daily viewers of local news, according to the 1996 ANES, are barely less trusting ( $r = -.048$ ) than people who never watch. And they are only marginally more likely to fear being the victim of a crime ( $r = -.049$ ) or to judge other races harshly ( $r = -.052$ ).<sup>28</sup>

It's not all—or even mostly—in our television sets. The Trust and Citizen Engagement survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for The People and The Press in 1996 asked people in the Philadelphia region how safe they felt walking at night and how violent their neighborhoods are. In both cases, perceptions were largely based on reality. Perceptions of safety don't depend on how much you watch television in general or local news in particular. Instead, they reflect where you live: People who live in areas with high rates of motor vehicle

<sup>27</sup>The values of these correlations are reflected where necessary, so that positive correlations indicate that more frequent viewing leads to more trust.

<sup>28</sup>The scale of other races is a factor score based on measures of how trustworthy, hardworking, and intelligent blacks, whites, and Hispanics are. Each respondent was coded as black, white, or Hispanic, and the scores here reflect attributes of outgroups only.

theft, in areas with high poverty rates, and in the central city are more likely to fear walking in their neighborhoods.

The belief that your neighborhood is violent also depends on the social and economic context. Renters, people living in the central city, women, and people living in areas with high rates of rape are all more likely to say that their neighborhoods are violent. Watching local television news is unrelated to perceptions of violence, whereas overall television viewing has a surprising effect: People who watch four or more hours of television per day are 11% *less* likely to say that their neighborhood is violent than folks who watch no television at all.<sup>29</sup> This counterintuitive result may reflect available leisure time, which will be more readily available to higher status people. But it withstands controls for income and education. Whatever its source, it does not speak well for the cultivation hypothesis.

Across a wide variety of surveys and different measures of television viewing and content, I have found no systematic media effects on either trust or civic engagement. There is little evidence for either socialization or contemporaneous effects of television on trust or optimism. But there is plenty of evidence that optimism leads to trust, which in turn plays an important role in fostering civic engagement.

Because I made no attempt to link trust, optimism, and civic engagement over time, I have not solved Putnam's (1996) puzzle of the "strange disappearance of social capital." But I have uncovered a new prominent suspect: The aggregate trends suggest that trust and optimism run in cycles. The most trusting generations grew up under transforming experiences, namely the Second World War and the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s. Our recent history has been bereft of unifying themes. We are becoming increasingly Balkanized, pessimistic, and distrustful. In such an atmosphere, it makes sense for people to turn away from civic activism.

It would be nice if television were the answer. It *should* be easier to reform the media than to push the entire society in a new direction. We don't know much else about restoring trust, and we know precious little about instilling optimism. Seligman (1991), the guru of "learned optimism," offers a program that will make us positive thinkers as Norman Vincent Peale did decades ago. If pessimism is a rational response to an untrustworthy world, there is little reason to believe that such a program could work. But gloom is more than just a reflection of one's objective circumstance. In this and other estimates I have made, objective measures by themselves fare poorly as predictors of optimism. There is more going on here than perceptions of the real world, and, as with trust, it probably reflects socialization in the family (see Newton, 1997, p. 579). If long-standing values form the basis of both trust and optimism, we face a daunting task indeed in restoring the foundations of civic activism.

<sup>29</sup>Details of these estimations are available on request. I am grateful to Andrew Kohut and Margaret Petrella of the Pew Research Center for making these data available.



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### APPENDIX: Coding of the GSS Variables

*Dichotomous (0,1)*: Trust in Other People,\* Unfair to Bring Child into World,\* Lot of the Average Person Getting Worse,\* Officials Don't Care for Average Person,\* Black (recoded from race), Live in Same Community Since Age 16 (recoded from GSS MOBILE16), Spouse Works [constructed from GSS variable SPWRKSTA (spouse work status) and a dummy variable for being married; 1 if respondent (R) married and spouse works, 0 otherwise].

*Ordinal*: Confidence in Science (3-point scale, from high to low confidence);\*\* Union Family [3-point scale: 0, neither R nor spouse member of a union; 1, either R or spouse member; 2, both R and spouse member (recoded from GSS UNION variable)]; Happy (3-point scale from very happy to not too happy);\*\* Life Exciting (3-point scale: exciting, routine, dull);\*\* Fundamentalist (3-point scale: 1, fundamentalist; 2, moderate; 3, liberal);\*\* Job Satisfaction (4-point scale from very satisfied to very dissatisfied);\*\* Satisfied with Friends (7-point scale ranging from very great satisfaction to none);\*\* Service Attendance [9-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 8 (more than once a week)]; Income [12-point scale ranging from 1 (less than \$1,000) to 12 (\$25,000 or more)].

*Interval*: Education (number of years of education, from 0 to 20); TV Hours (number of hours R watches television per day, from 0 to 24); Age (18 to 89); Hours Worked per Week (from 0 to 89).

*Constructed:* High School Education (years of education from 9 to 13 if R has high school education, 0 otherwise); College Education (years of education from 14 to 20 if R has college education, 0 otherwise); Contextual Trust, Contextual Lot of Average Person, Contextual Unfair to Bring Child into World (state mean of each dichotomy assigned to R); TV Hours for each generation (interaction of TV hours and dummy variable for each generation); Lot of Average Person Getting Worse\* ('60s Generation): 1 if R said that lot of average person is getting worse and was born in the 1960s, 0 otherwise.

*Don't Knows:* All respondents who answered "don't know" or didn't answer a question were assigned missing values on that question, and all estimations were done with listwise deletion of cases.

\* Indicates that dummy variables were recoded from (1,2) in original GSS to (0,1) in this analysis. The "2" codings were replaced by zeros.

\*\* Coefficient signs in the text were reflected for ease of interpretation.