Rebuilding Civic Trust:
The Role of Local Leaders
with Erica Chenoweth

We are living in a period of historically high civic engagement in the United States.

- **Voter turnout** is at an all-time high.
- **More individuals are participating in protest** than ever before.
- **Young people are highly engaged in key policy challenges**—from gun control to climate change and beyond—on an ongoing basis.

Usually these are signs of a healthy electorate. But in this case, civic engagement does not necessarily mean that our democracy is healthy. Instead, there are a few worrying trends:

- **Polarization**. There are deep partisan divisions that affect most dimensions of public life—from the type of information we consume, to the political events we participate in, to the parties we vote for, to the businesses we support, to the social media we use, to our overall worldviews.
- **Distrust.** Polls show record-low levels of trust in public officials and in our democratic processes (especially elections) themselves.
- **Service failures.** Community organizing has stepped up because people perceive their governments to have failed in responding to life-and-death emergencies. This includes various forms of mutual aid, which have provided food, unemployment, and medical assistance where local, state, and national governments did not have the capacity to do so.

A GLOBAL TREND

The US is not unique with respect to this paradox of high citizen engagement with high polarization. There are several trends and patterns worldwide that help us to put this paradox into broader context:

- **A populist wave.** This is part of a global phenomenon that has been growing over the past fifteen years.
- **Declining trust in established institutions.** This trend has accelerated around the world since the Great Recession and encompasses not just political and social institutions but also democracy itself.
- **Growing demand for effective responses to urgent & complex global crises.** These crises— including the pandemic, rising inequality, and climate change—challenge governments at all levels.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AS A PATHWAY TO REBUILDING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

How can people maintain high levels of engagement while overcoming the deep polarization that has taken hold?

Democracy requires that citizens regard one another and their elected leaders in good faith, relatively speaking. Research highlights the role of civil society—voluntary associations between individuals and groups and the general ethos of citizenship that accompanies these activities—in re-weaving a damaged social fabric. A highly engaged civil society has even been found to lead to longer peace agreements in countries emerging from civil war. This is because a robust associational life creates what political scientist Robert Putnam calls **social capital**—*networks of people with shared norms, understandings, and values that facilitate cooperation and community spirit*. Widespread membership in civic institutions—hobby groups, volunteer organizations, social clubs, neighborhood associations, youth groups, and intramural sports leagues—is thought to boost prosperity and efficacy for both communities and individuals by building trust, reinforcing mutual responsibility, and making elected officials more accountable to their constituents.

Societies that have not intentionally curated these networks in ways that overcome inequalities and cultivate trust between people and groups with different background characteristics, however, may not realize these benefits. The United States has a very engaged civil society, but it is primarily characterized by ***bonding* social capital**, meaning we have very *tight networks within certain communities*. However, what is needed for trust, reciprocity, and effective democratic governance is ***bridging* social capital**—*loose networks that build trust across different communities*.

Bonding social capital	Bridging social capital
Within	Between
Intra	Inter
Exclusive	Inclusive
Closed	Open
Inward looking	Outward looking
"Getting by"	"Getting ahead"
Horizontal	Vertical
Strong ties	Weak ties
People who are alike	People who are different
Thick trust	Thin trust
Network closure	Structural holes

Source: adapted from Claridge 2018

Our bonded social capital is both a product and a driver of social and economic inequalities and polarization. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, breaks down mutual suspicion, mistrust, and negative stereotypes; reduces the sense of resource scarcity and zero-sum conflict; and provides low-cost and low-risk opportunities to foster trust, reciprocity, empathy, and shared purpose.

CAN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CULTIVATE BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL?

Local governments can play an important role in building social capital to emphasize bridging over bonding. Mildred Warner argues that to do this, local government should act as **catalyst, convener, and facilitator** (NOT as controller, regulator, or provider). This could include making *sustained investments in existing civic associations or new activities that bridge divides* by convening, facilitating, promoting, and prioritizing bridging activities.

Bridging social capital is characterized by a few key elements:

- **Participation** in social groups (e.g., neighborhood associations, hobby groups, volunteer organizations) **whose membership comprises people who are dissimilar** with regard to race and ethnicity, socioeconomic or citizenship status, or other characteristics.
- The ability of individuals to **access information, resources, and support outside of their own social scene**.
- The extent to which **people from different backgrounds express trust of others** in their neighborhood, figures of authority (e.g. police, courts, immigration authorities), etc.

Some examples of bridging social capital include:

- **Mutual aid groups,** such as those that have broadened during COVID-19 pandemic, as long as they are sustained by a diverse range of supporters and accessible throughout the community.
- **Mentoring programs,** especially inter- or multi-generational ones.
- **Work-based learning opportunities** for students from diverse backgrounds in professional workplaces.
- **Partnerships** between schools, churches, or other institutions, connecting neighborhoods across difference.
- **Volunteering groups** that support intercommunal exchanges on common projects.

Collecting data over time could help to assess the degree to which these efforts (and/or investments in them) have begun to sow bridging social capital, as well as the degree to which they are yielding the desired results. **Key Performance Indicators** of effective bridging social capital could include:

- **Increased diversity of membership** in mentorship programs, work-based learning, partnerships, youth groups, volunteer groups, religious organizations, and sports groups.
- **Public polling** revealing **increased trust** and **mutual aid** among neighbors.
- **High voter turnout among diverse groups** and polling revealing **increased trust toward elected officials.**

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