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American Journal of Political Science, Volume 32, Issue 4 (Nov., 1988), 908-928.

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American Journal of Political Science
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*Survey Research and Membership in Voluntary Associations**

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National surveys of the American electorate conducted regularly since the 1950s do not reflect accurately the growth of the public's involvement in voluntary associations. The problem stems from continued use of standard forms of the question which were last revised in the 1960s. A revised version of the question that takes into account financial contributions and multiple affiliations within group types reveals much greater participation in the American group system. New forms of affiliation have increased the relative importance of certain types of groups more than others. Labor unions, for example, are relatively unaffected by these changes, but charitable and other types of groups are heavily affected. As previous researchers have found, participation in voluntary associations leads to greater political participation, especially where individuals perceive political activities within their groups.

Introduction

The number of interest groups operating in Washington has increased dramatically during the past four decades. The purpose of our study is to determine whether this increase represents a widespread mobilization of the American public for political action, or simply an increase in activity among a thin strata of political activists. Many of the prominent organizations engaged in lobbying in Washington, despite their fancy letterheads listing dozens of prominent citizens as members, have only the most tenuous connections with those they claim to represent. With the advent of television, jet aircraft, cheap long distance telephone lines, overnight express mail, high speed printers, and computerized mailing lists, a small circle of energetic staff members backed by dedicated financial patrons willing to supply them with funds can make a lot of noise. Many groups are little more than figments of public relations. Before we can fully understand the complex linkages between the public and the government in democratic societies, we must make an accurate assessment of the depth of citizen involvement in the interest groups that press their claims upon the government.

The first step in discovering how many authentic members the American group system actually has must be to insure that our sources of information are reliable. Previous work on this question is contradictory, mainly because the survey data upon which much of the literature is based contain several serious flaws.

*Thanks are due to the Board of Overseers of the National Election Studies for a grant that made this research possible and for its cooperation in including our question on the 1985 pilot study. The Institute of Public Policy Studies met some of the costs of research and provided clerical support. This project benefited greatly from the comments of Rick Hall, Mary Jackman, Donald Kinder, David Knoke, Mark Peterson, Steve Rosenstone, David Sears, Santa Traugott, and Mayer Zald. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the National Election Studies Conference on Groups in American Politics, Stanford, CA, 16-17 January 1987.

Our paper includes a critique of the methodological shortcomings of past surveys and a description of a new measure of group affiliation that was included in the 1985 Pilot Study of the American National Election Study. In order to demonstrate the superiority of our new measure, we employ data from that survey to show how our measure provides a more accurate assessment of the popular roots of the group system. Our measure not only produces a better estimate of the extent of group affiliations, but it also allows for comparison of the impact upon political participation of various forms of attachment with the group system.

Evidence of Growth in Group Membership

Monographic Studies of Membership Growth

Two bodies of information exist concerning the size and representativeness of the group system. First, there are dozens of monographs describing the rise and development during the past half century of movements promoting new political causes. A study of the environmental movement, for example, shows that the membership of the five most prominent environmental groups (Izaak Walton League, National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, Sierra Club, and the Wilderness Society) rose from 439,400 in 1966 to 1,217,600 in 1975. Membership grew by almost 10 percent per year during this period, and there was no sign that the trend was slackening (Fox, 1981). Common Cause began operations in 1970, grew to a peak membership of over 350,000 in the months surrounding the resignation of President Nixon in 1974, declined to 203,000 in 1982, and then began a steady climb to over 260,000 members in 1985 (McFarland, 1984). The Moral Majority was founded in 1979 and quickly grew to a membership of over 400,000 by 1983 (Liebman and Wuthnow, 1983). The membership of the American Association of Retired Persons grew from 150,000 members in 1959 to about 1,000,000 in 1969, 6,200,000 in 1973, and 9,000,000 in 1975, making it the largest voluntary association in the world (Pratt, 1976).

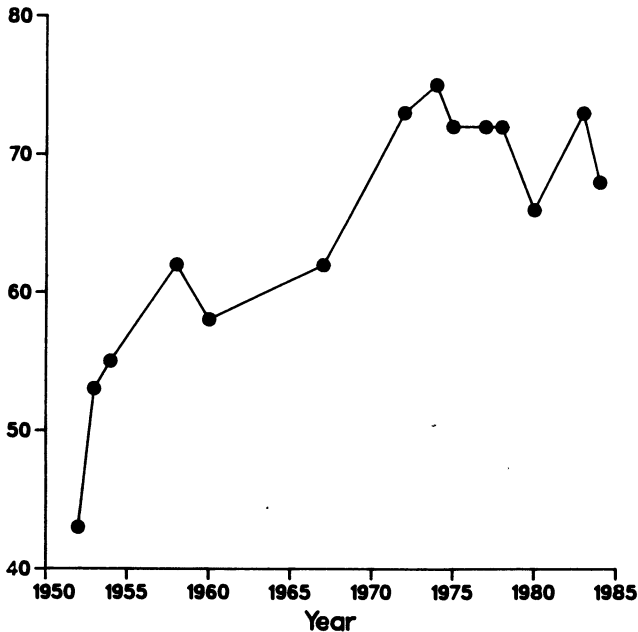
Interest groups often issue inflated estimates of the size of their memberships, so reports of membership growth cannot be accepted without question. Yet with all the uncertainties surrounding these reports, we have ample evidence that many large groups arose during the last three decades to address issues as diverse as the rights of consumers, the conservation of the environment, and the need to reduce the burden of property taxes. Scholarly studies of these movements contain numerous stories of explosive growth not only in the numbers of organizations formed but also in the number of people participating in group activities. Each of these studies covers only narrow segments of the society, and it is possible that there were significant declines in membership in other areas that went unreported, but taken together the published studies of group development constitute strong circumstantial evidence of growth in the membership of interest groups in the years since World War II. Not only has the membership of individ-

ual groups increased, but there has also been a flowering of new groups (see Walker, 1983).

Survey Research on the Growth in Group Membership

The second source of information on the makeup and representativeness of the interest group system is the vast body of survey research that has been conducted during this century on membership in voluntary associations. Surveys of national samples have been conducted regularly since the 1950s, and the national studies have been supplemented by studies of Muncie, Indiana; Elmira, New York; Warren County, Virginia; Omaha, Nebraska; Indianapolis, Indiana; Bennington, Vermont; Flint, Michigan; and many other communities (Lynd and Lynd, 1929; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954; Maccoby, 1958; Babchuck and Booth, 1969; McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1982; Knoke, 1981; Olsen,

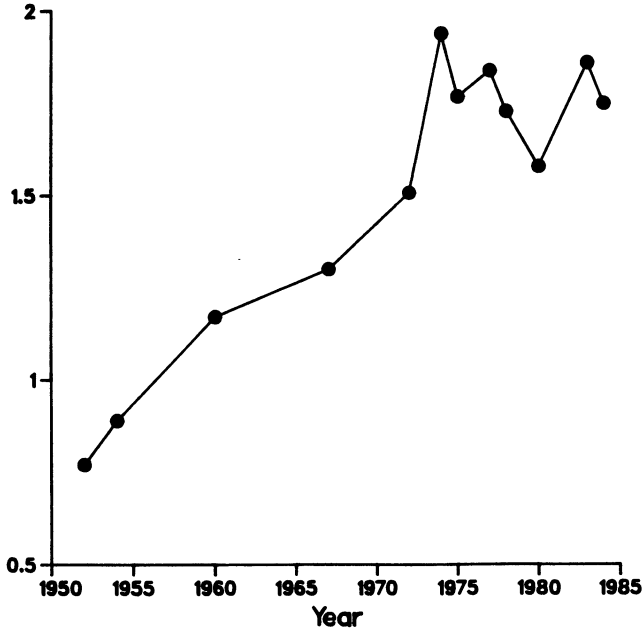
FIGURE 1
 Percentage Reporting One or More Group Memberships in
 Comparable National Surveys, 1952-84



SOURCES: 1952, NES; 1953, NORC (Hyman and Wright, 1971); 1954, AIPO (Hausknecht, 1962); 1958, NORC (Hyman and Wright, 1971); 1960, NORC (Almond and Verba, 1963); 1967, NORC (Verba and Nie, 1972); 1972, NES; 1974, 1975, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1983, 1984, NORC (Davis and Smith, 1985).

FIGURE 2

Mean Number of Memberships in Comparable National Surveys, 1952–84



SOURCES: 1952, NES; 1953, NORC (Hyman and Wright, 1971); 1954, AIPO (Hausknecht, 1962); 1958, NORC (Hyman and Wright, 1971); 1960, NORC (Almond and Verba, 1963); 1967, NORC (Verba and Nie, 1972); 1972, NES; 1974, 1975, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1983, 1984, NORC (Davis and Smith, 1985).

1972; Schott, 1957; Zimmer and Hawley, 1959; Freeman, Novak, and Reeder, 1957). The analyst might be grateful for this vast body of information, except for one disturbing fact. The results of these national surveys, especially the data obtained during the 1970s and 1980s, seem to contradict the circumstantial evidence contained in the monographic studies. In Figures 1 and 2 we display the striking results of a number of surveys of national samples during the past four decades that show *no growth of any kind* since 1974 in the proportion of the public who are members of voluntary associations.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of the population reporting at least one membership in a voluntary association. This number drifted steadily upward during this period from a low of 43 percent in the National Election Study of 1952 to a high of 75 percent reported in the General Social Survey in 1974. In an oft-cited study Hyman and Wright (1971) showed that the number of people belonging to at least one group increased at the rate of about 1 percent per year during

the period from 1953 to 1962. Figure 1 shows that a yearly increase of about that magnitude continued until 1974, but thereafter the percentage reporting at least one membership drifted downward in an irregular pattern, reaching 66 percent in 1980, and 68 percent in 1985. These data make it look as if participation in the group system actually *declined* during the late 1970s and 1980s.

The same impression is created in Figure 2, which reports the mean number of group memberships reported for each respondent in the same surveys. It is possible that the proportion of "joiners" in the population did not increase after 1974, but that people who did participate each began joining a larger number of groups. Figure 2 shows that the mean number of groups per respondent increased steadily from .77 in 1952 to a high of 1.94 in 1974, and then drifted downward in an irregular pattern, hitting a low point of 1.58 in 1980 and reaching only 1.75 in 1984. Despite the reports of surging growth in many different kinds of associations during the past two decades, these data show that the average number of memberships per person reached a peak in the early 1970s and has been declining ever since.

No one has expressed concern about the apparent contradiction between the findings of the monographic studies and the results of survey research because almost all writers on this subject have accepted the evidence from the surveys, without reservations. It has become commonplace to call into question the country's reputation as a "nation of joiners" and to cite survey data as evidence that only a minority of Americans are members of more than one voluntary association (Hyman and Wright, 1971, p. 205). Comparative studies of political participation consistently show that Americans join voluntary associations more readily than citizens in most other countries (Almond and Verba, 1963; Curtis, 1971; and McDonough, Barnes, and Lopez, 1984), but survey data still show that about one-third of adult Americans are members of no organizations, and another third are members of only one. There are plenty of joiners, but the survey data clearly show that they are a minority of the population.

Underestimation of Group Affiliations in Previous Surveys

After examining both the monographic studies and the survey data, we are inclined to accept the impression created by the many independent studies of individual groups or movements, not the surveys. While the monographic studies describing the growth of particular groups cannot be taken as evidence for the growth of the group system as a whole, we believe that question wordings and administrative methods used in previous surveys have led to the serious underestimation of the level of involvement of the American public in voluntary associations. Though researchers were using the best practices of survey research, they did not react to changes in the way individuals affiliate with groups or to the tendency of people to affiliate with several groups of the same type.

The Development of a Standard Question on Group Membership

During the past 20 years, most researchers who have sought to collect data on group memberships have turned to a familiar question on this subject developed by Verba and Nie (1972) for their survey in 1967. The evolution of this question is itself an interesting study in the sociology of knowledge. Its origins are in the survey of community organizations conducted in 1924 by the Lynds for the Middletown study (Lynd and Lynd, 1929, p. 527), which was drawn on indirectly for many years afterward as researchers modeled their work on the most recent study of the subject. Drawing on the pioneering work of the Lynds, for example, researchers from Columbia developed an open question for the Elmira study in 1948 that read: "Do you happen to belong to any groups or organizations in the community here? If yes, which ones? Any others?" (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954).

As Table 1 demonstrates, the coding scheme used in the Elmira study was closely modeled on the categories employed in the Middletown study. Trade unions were eliminated because the Elmira study contained a separate battery of

TABLE 1
The Evolution of a Group Typology, 1924–67

1924 Middletown	1948 Elmira	1967 Verba and Nie
Athletic	Sports, Hobby, Recreational	Sports
Benevolent	Lodge, Fraternal	Fraternal
Business, Professional	Economic, Occupational,	Professional, Academic
Church Affiliated	Professional	Church Affiliated
Literary, Musical, Study	Church Affiliated	Literary, Art, Discussion,
Military, Patriotic	Cultural	Study
Social	Military, Patriotic, Veterans	Veterans
Civic	Neighborhood, Card Clubs,	Hobby, Garden
Juvenile Club	Discussion	—
Trade Union	Civic	Youth Club
	—	Labor Union
	—	Political
	Political, Political Party	Service
	Service	Farm Organizations
		Nationality Groups
		School Fraternities,
		Sororities
		School Service

questions on union membership, and categories were added for political groups and service clubs, but it is clear that the researchers in Elmira were drawing on the work done in Middletown 20 years before, just as Verba and Nie did 20 years later when they designed coding categories for their study, using the Elmira study as their model.

As the Middletown typology and the Elmira study question were incorporated into Verba and Nie's national study, they were modified in several important ways. First, the phrase "in the community here" was dropped, prompting respondents to mention memberships in national organizations. Second, Verba and Nie added five more categories to the list of probes, thus aiding the recall of the respondents and bringing the list of probes up to date. Third, in an effort to simplify and regularize the data collection and coding process, respondents were presented with a card that included the coding categories, and they were then asked: "Here is a list of various kinds of organizations. Could you tell me whether or not you are a member of each type?"

No further modifications have been made in the coding categories or the method of administration of the Standard Question since the Verba and Nie study was conducted in 1967, and the item has been used consistently on the General Social Survey from 1971 through 1984. While the Verba and Nie question was ideally suited to the mid-to-late-1960s, the question progressively became a less accurate indicator of Americans' affiliations with voluntary associations as researchers used it over and over without modification. The National Election Study in 1952 employed a slightly modified version of the question, probably modeled on the Elmira Study, and then adopted the Standard Question virtually without change in 1972, as did Almond and Verba (1963), Jennings and Niemi (1974), and Barnes and Kaase (1979). It is accepted practice among survey researchers when collecting time series data to avoid making minor modifications in the wording of questions. The slow, careful evolution of this question and the repeated use of it on national surveys during the 1970s and 1980s was a model of research administration. Data collection of this magnitude should have created an accurate portrait of the American system of voluntary associations, but it did not. The careful preservation of the Standard Question as devised by Verba and Nie for over two decades without alterations virtually crippled it as a reliable device for collecting information about group affiliations.

As time passed the Standard Question on group membership developed three serious flaws. First, the probes were not changed in response to changes in the nature of American voluntary associations, so they failed to record the growing number of affiliations with new types of groups. Second, the data collection techniques suited to the computer technology of the mid-1960s allowed for only one affiliation within each category, overlooking the explosive growth of the number of groups within certain types. And third, the concept of affiliation did not include sending money without being a formal member of the organization,

though direct-mail solicitation and other developments have made this form of affiliation more and more common among Americans. Each of these three shortcomings led to some of the inaccuracy in the estimates of the extent of support for the group system in the American public derived from these surveys. Their combination explains how such an impressive series of national surveys could make such a serious error. Each of these errors grew progressively more important, from minimal levels in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to much more serious misestimation by the mid-1980s.

The coding scheme in the Verba and Nie question, drawing as it does on earlier studies, does not provide obvious categories for groups in the civil rights, environmental, or consumer movements, which were just emerging in the middle 1960s, nor does it provide for the hundreds of specialized associations that have been formed during the past two decades to represent the elderly, the handicapped, children, the mentally ill, and other disadvantaged groups. There also is no category that easily covers national, nonpartisan, ideological groups such as the Moral Majority or Common Cause. Even more serious is the lack of a category for charitable organizations like the American Cancer Society or the Red Cross, organizations that have become increasingly active during the past 30 years, both in making contact with the public and in lobbying the government in Washington. These developments were not readily apparent when the question was last revised in the middle 1960s, but as researchers avoided any modifications during the next two decades in order to collect comparable data, the probes in the Standard Question steadily lost their currency. Because the probes listed on the show card in the Standard Question do not ask for several important types of groups, respondents may report some memberships under inappropriate types, or more likely, fail to mention them at all.

More serious than the lack of relevancy of the coding categories on the show card is the problem that the card allows each respondent to record only one membership within each group type, even though many respondents are members of several associations of the same kind. Within the category of professional or academic societies, for example, a person conceivably might be a member of the American Political Science Association, the American Association of University Professors, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and perhaps a specialized organization like the Public Choice Society, or the American Society for Public Administration. When the show card from the Standard Question is used, however, such a highly active person appears to have only one membership.

The third shortcoming of the Standard Question is its reliance on an outdated understanding of the nature of group affiliation. Much of the growth in the relationships between citizens and voluntary associations during the past three decades has taken place not through the expansion of membership in the conventional sense of the term but by individuals joining in the activity of a group by

making small financial contributions. In order to reflect reality, a question seeking to provide information on the connections between individual citizens and the group system must take into account the possibility that citizens can make regular contributions and receive many communications from groups without considering themselves members in any formal sense. A hint of this phenomena appeared on a Gallup Poll in 1981, when respondents were asked whether they were members of a list of groups that dealt with nuclear power, abortion, consumer rights, and other controversial topics. Only 13 percent of the sample reported that they were formal members of these groups, but in response to a further question about whether they sent money to such groups, 23 percent of the respondents—some of whom were also members—reported that they made contributions. A total of 26 percent of the respondents reported that they were members, made contributions, or both (Gallup Poll Report, 1981). A simple change in question wording doubled the estimated percentage of respondents affiliated with these groups.

Further evidence of the political significance of financial contributions as a method of group affiliation can be found in data from the 1985 Pilot Study, a national probability sample of 385 people who were previously interviewed in the 1984 NES.¹ In Table 2 we compare the impact on individual political participation of active membership of the conventional sort, membership with little or no accompanying activity, and financial contributions without membership. The Beta coefficients in Table 2 show that active membership in voluntary associations is strongly related to one's general level of participation in national elections (Beta = .32).² Inactive membership is not so strongly related to political activity (Beta = .21), and financial contributions are even less potent influences (Beta = .15), but Table 2 clearly demonstrates that all three factors have independent impacts upon the degree to which citizens become involved in electoral campaigns.³ Those who become active members of voluntary associations are highly likely to become involved in political action, but those who are inactive members of associations, and those who only make financial contributions also are more likely than the rest of the population to take part in electoral politics.

The impact of financial contributions upon political behavior is the weakest of the three forms of affiliation, but it is also the most prevalent, so that its total effect on political activity in the population is still large. Approximately 65 per-

¹Because of a purposeful oversample of the elderly built into the 1985 Pilot Study, weights must be used. All analysis in this article is based on weighted data. For a discussion of the 1985 Pilot Study sample, see Brehm and Traugott, 1986.

²The measure of political participation in Table 2 is a simple additive index based upon the following variables: v101 (interest in campaign), v201 (discuss politics), v5301 (vote in last election), v5411 (convince others), v5414 (attend rallies), v5416–v5418 (work for party, check-off income taxes, give money), and v5701 (contact elected representative).

³The results were virtually unchanged in a multiple regression equation that applied controls for each of the other two forms of activity on each relationship.

TABLE 2
The Relationship between Levels of Group Affiliation
and Political Participation

Level of Affiliation	Beta	R ²	Prob.
Active membership	.32	.10	.000
Inactive membership	.21	.05	.000
Contributions	.15	.02	.000

NOTE: This table reports the results of regression equations between indices of group activity and a nine-point additive index of political participation. This index is described in footnote 2, above.

cent of the sample reported active membership in at least one voluntary association or trade union, while 85 percent reported that they had made at least one financial contribution. The mean number of active memberships for the Pilot Study sample was 1.3, while the mean number of financial contributions to groups was almost double that at 2.3.

Financial contributions by citizens are an important new form of group affiliation that strengthens some types of groups more than others. The standard question on group affiliations not only underestimates affiliations when it overlooks financial contributions, it also misestimates the extent of affiliation with different types of groups. Labor unions do not rely on financial contributions from people who are not also formal members, and their members typically are not members of other labor unions—labor laws make multiple memberships virtually impossible. Citizens' groups, ideological groups, and social issue groups, however, thrive on financial contributions that are solicited by mail, and individuals can be connected with several such groups at once through this form of affiliation. The willingness of the public to send a check without taking a formal part in the activities of a group has altered the shape of the interest group universe, but the extent of these changes has not been captured by the Standard Question.

A New Question on Group Affiliations

Since public involvement in the group system has changed in fundamental ways during the past three decades, any new question about the phenomenon must be designed to capture the full range of group affiliations. Given these important changes in the operation of voluntary associations, a new question must include both the possibility for membership and financial contributions as a form of affiliation, and it must capture all the memberships that individuals maintain and the contributions they make. We use the term group affiliations rather than group memberships to describe the activities we are seeking to measure, and we allow for multiple affiliations within group types.

Our question begins as follows: “Now we would like to know about the groups and organizations you might belong to. I am going to read a list of different types of organizations.⁴ For each type, could you tell me the names of any organizations you belong to or have given money to in the past twelve months.” For each group mentioned, respondents are asked: “Are you an active member, a member but not active, or have you given money only?” In order to stimulate the respondent’s memories, interviewers read to them the following types of groups while recording responses on a work sheet:⁵

- National or local charities such as the United Way, the Red Cross, the March of Dimes, or any similar organization
- Labor unions or employee associations
- Any association or group connected with a business or profession
- Veterans’ organizations
- Any association that looks after the interests of some kinds of people, such as the elderly, the handicapped, children, or some other similar group
- Any association that is concerned with social issues, such as reducing taxes, protecting the environment, promoting prayer in the schools, or any other causes
- Sports, recreation, community, neighborhood, school, or youth organizations
- Fraternalities, lodges, nationality, or ethnic organizations
- Cultural, literary, or art organizations
- Any other groups

The group types used in our question are meant to be similar to those employed in the Standard Question with some additions to bring the list up to date, but they are regarded as probes, and respondents are allowed to list as many groups under each one as they recall.

For each group mentioned, respondents also were asked: “Does (group mentioned) take stands on or discuss public issues or try to influence governmental actions?” This question was intended to tap respondents’ awareness of the activities engaged in by the groups with which they affiliate. Without independent data on the actual behavior of interest groups, there is no way to verify re-

⁴Since the Pilot Study was conducted by phone, no show card could be used.

⁵As our question was revised during the pretest of the Pilot Study, we decided to drop a probe that concerned church-affiliated groups. This was done in part to avoid confusion among the respondents about what constituted a church-affiliated group and what should be regarded as a church. We also believed that we could make use of the data already collected in the NES on church membership to describe this part of the group universe. We suspected that the Standard Question probe about church-affiliated groups actually was picking up a great many conventional church memberships—33.8 percent of the respondents in the 1984 GSS say that they are members of church-affiliated groups. We now regard this decision as a mistake and have included a probe about church-affiliated groups in a revised version of the question.

spondents' impressions about the extent of political activity engaged in by their groups. Respondents might be aware that some recreational associations or charities with which they are affiliated are heavily engaged in lobbying or electioneering, while other respondents might be affiliated with groups that are devoted to affecting public policy without being aware of the group's political activities. Regardless of the accuracy of these perceptions, however, the follow-up question allows us to measure the impact of respondents' subjective awareness of group political activities on their own level of participation in politics.

For each group, therefore, the data file generated from the new question includes its name, the probe that stimulated the respondent to mention it, the type of affiliation the respondent has with the group, and the degree of awareness the respondent has of political activities being conducted by the group. Since the names of the groups are included in the data file, many different coding categories besides the ones used in the question can be created, and the data can be aggregated in many different ways.

The New Question Compared with the Old

The Amount of Participation in the Group System

By coding only formal memberships and only one membership per group type from the data collected by the 1985 NES Pilot Study using our new question, we are able to simulate the results that would have been obtained from the Pilot Study sample if the Standard Question had been used. The results of this replication of the Standard Question may then be compared to the total number of affiliations (memberships and financial contributions) recorded in response to our new question. The differences in the data generated by these two treatments of the question are clearly apparent in Table 3.

In the column in Table 3 labeled "Standard Question Replication," only formal memberships are counted for the Pilot Study data, and only one membership

TABLE 3
Comparison of 1985 Pilot Study Data

Number of Memberships or Affiliations	Standard Question Replication	Multiple Memberships	Total Affiliations
Zero	22.3%	22.3%	9.6%
1-2	60.0	48.3	33.8
3-5	17.1	24.9	33.5
6+	0.6	4.5	23.1
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

is recorded within each group type. Using this method of coding, we find that 77.7 percent of the respondents report at least one membership, and less than 1 percent report six or more memberships. In the column labeled "Multiple Memberships," all memberships are counted within each group type, and when we code the data in this way the number of people reporting three or more memberships increases from 17.7 to 29.4, an impressive increase from such a modest change in coding and question administration.

In the third column of Table 3, labeled "Total Affiliations," we record both financial contributions and all reported memberships. When group affiliation is conceived in this more encompassing and realistic way, 90.4 percent of the sample reports some affiliation with the group system, and almost a quarter (23 percent) reports six affiliations or more. Over one-half of the sample reports three or more group affiliations. By recording all memberships and financial contributions, we uncovered 187 percent more group affiliations than we would have with the Standard Question.

The Changing Shape of the Interest Group System

Once all forms of affiliation are taken into account, a significantly altered picture of the group universe emerges from the data. Not only is the number of participants in the group system greatly expanded, but the group universe appears substantially different from that depicted by the Standard Question. In Table 4 we display the distribution of groups among types in the Pilot Study data as it appears when the Standard Question is replicated, how it changes once we add multiple memberships, and how it is even more radically altered once we report all forms of group affiliation.

The addition of multiple memberships reveals that the second largest number of memberships is in professional societies, rather than in charities or labor unions as seems to be the case when only one membership within each group type is counted. Once all forms of affiliation are included in the column of the table labeled "Total Affiliations," it becomes clear that the most numerous connections between the public and the group system are with charities, not sports and recreation groups as previous studies have consistently indicated. Almost half of the affiliations mentioned in the new question (45.9 percent) are with some form of charitable group. Of course, most people affiliate with charities by giving them money; only about 18 percent of the affiliations with charities take the conventional form of memberships, even when multiple memberships are counted. Yet even if financial contributions were not counted as affiliations, only professional societies and groups dedicated to local concerns (neighborhood improvement, sports, schools, youth groups, and other community issues) would show larger numbers of *conventional members* than charities. Once multiple memberships are counted, Table 4 shows that there are almost twice as many *members* of charitable organizations in the Pilot Study sample than there are

TABLE 4
Comparison of 1985 Pilot Study Data

Type of Group	Standard Question Replication		Multiple Memberships		Total Affiliations		% Increase from Standard Question to Total Affiliation
	N ^a	%	N ^a	%	N ^a	%	
Local	144	20.3	192	20.7	319	15.7	122
Charity	102	14.4	144	15.5	933	45.9	814
Union	97	13.7	103	11.1	111	5.5	14
Professional	93	13.1	163	17.6	178	8.8	91
Categorical	67	9.5	86	9.3	109	5.4	63
Fraternal	59	8.3	75	8.1	88	4.3	49
Church	53	7.5	53	5.7	76	3.7	43
Issue	33	4.7	36	3.9	78	3.8	136
Cultural	32	4.6	41	4.4	58	2.9	81
Veterans	25	3.3	31	3.3	77	3.8	208
Other	3	0.4	4	0.4	6	0.2	100
Total	708	100.0	928	100.0	2033	100.0	187

NOTE: ^aN refers to the number of memberships or affiliations, not to the number of respondents. The second wave of the 1985 pilot study had 345 respondents and a weighted N of 481.

members of fraternal organizations; three times as many members of charities than there are members of issue-oriented groups, and more than 30 percent more full-fledged members of charities than there are members of trade unions.

It is not surprising that a coding scheme which counts financial contributions as a legitimate form of group affiliation shows that charities are the most common object of group affiliation. Table 4 further demonstrates, however, that when both multiple memberships within group types and contributions are included, the number of affiliations with labor unions is increased by only 14 percent, while the number of affiliations with veterans' groups increases by 208 percent, with issue-oriented groups by 136 percent, with local groups by 122 percent, and even with professional societies by 91 percent. The relative importance of labor unions in the interest group universe is shown to be much smaller than indicated by earlier studies that used the Standard Question.

Political Action and Group Affiliations

The data in Table 4 point toward a further important conclusion about individual motives for joining groups in American society. The overwhelming majority of people's connections with the associational world are through groups that

operate mainly in their immediate communities, whose purposes are essentially altruistic, or which promise some form of recreation or personal growth. Our data suggest that most people do not affiliate with groups in order to pursue overtly political aims. When respondents were asked whether the groups with which they reported some form of affiliation "take stands on or discuss public issues or try to influence governmental actions," positive answers were given in only 33 percent of the cases.

These reports often may be inaccurate, of course, since the respondents may often be unaware of some of the political activities undertaken by the groups with which they affiliate, but our respondents seem to have a reasonably accurate picture of the scope of political action. In Table 5 we display the percentage of the reported affiliations with each of our principal types of groups in which respondents report political activity. The groups at the top of the table are those in which more than half of the respondents report political activity, and those at the bottom are those where less than half are aware of political activity. The groups that most respondents report to be engaged in politics are those that typically are most openly engaged in public affairs—trade unions, professional societies, veterans' groups, organizations meant to represent people in need, and groups engaged in the advocacy of causes. Those where few respondents report political activity are those which normally avoid involvement in public affairs—cultural organizations, local associations, fraternal groups, and charities.

The picture which emerges from Table 5 probably is a reasonable approximation of the actual scope of political activity by voluntary associations, but we cannot be certain about the actions groups engage in until independent data on

TABLE 5
Percentage of Respondents Saying That Group Is Involved
in Public Affairs by Type of Group

Type of Group	Percentage of Members or Contributors Saying Group Is Involved in Public Affairs
Social issue	76
Unions	67
Professional	62
Categorical	55
Veterans	54
Cultural	31
Local	27
Fraternal	21
Charities	19

TABLE 6

The Impact on Political Participation of Involvement in Groups
Which Respondents Believe to Be Engaged in Public Affairs

Index of Activity in Political and Nonpolitical Groups ^a	<i>b</i>	Beta	<i>R</i> ²	<i>T</i> -score
<i>Bivariate regressions:</i>				
Political group activity	.18	.37	.14	6.60
Nonpolitical group activity	.07	.15	.02	2.46
<i>With controls for education, social class, income, efficacy:</i>				
Political group activity	.13	.27	.22	4.63
Nonpolitical group activity	.04	.07	.17	1.29

NOTE: Dependent variable is an additive index of nine forms of political participation. See footnote 2, above, for complete description. *N* of regression = 276.

^aIndex of group activity is an additive index that combines activity levels in groups that the respondents report to be involved or not involved in public affairs. For each of the two indices, active memberships are weighted by a factor of 2.3; inactive memberships by a factor of 2.0; and contributions by a factor of 0.97. These figures are derived from the *b*-coefficients in separate regressions for each activity level on the index of political participation used here.

their behavior can be gathered. The reports of our respondents certainly contain some distortions. When controls for the level of activity are applied, for example, we find that only 28.5 percent of those who are contributors only or report that they are inactive members believe that the groups they are affiliated with are engaged in public affairs, while 43.4 percent of those who describe themselves as active members report political activity by their groups. Regardless of the type of group with which respondents are affiliated, those who become actively involved in its affairs are much more likely than those who are only loosely affiliated to report that their group plays a role in public affairs.

The general importance of the awareness of group involvement in public affairs is demonstrated in Table 6. It shows the impact on political participation of activities in groups that the respondents believe to be involved in politics versus involvement in groups that the respondents perceive not to be engaged in such activities.

Although the size of the sample is too small to allow us to place too much emphasis on the precise figures reported in Table 6, the magnitude of the differences between subjectively defined political and nonpolitical groups is impressive. With or without controls for the standard social background and political efficacy variables, activity in politically active groups has over twice the impact on political participation as activity in groups that respondents believe not to be involved in public affairs. When respondents perceive their groups to be nonpolitical, no matter what type of group it may be, the level of involvement in

group activities has almost no impact on political participation. When respondents believe that their groups are involved in public affairs, on the other hand, involvement in group activities has an impressive impact on their own propensity to participate in politics.

Table 6 clearly demonstrates that it is individual awareness of political activities by their groups that has an impact upon a respondent's level of political activity, not the ostensible purpose of the group. In Table 5 we reported that sizable minorities of the respondents affiliated even with charities or cultural organizations reported that their organizations were involved in public affairs. Similarly, Verba and Nie reported that 40 percent of the members of hobby or garden clubs reported that their groups were involved in community affairs, and 35 percent of the members reported that political discussions took place within the organizations (Verba and Nie, 1972, pp. 179, 191). Their conclusion is buttressed by our results: "Affiliation with manifestly nonpolitical organizations does increase an individual's participation rate but only if there is some political exposure within the organization" (p. 194).

Group activity has a strong impact on individual political participation, but only if the individuals are aware of political activities within or on the part of the groups with which they are affiliated. Those respondents who are more active in their groups are much more likely to perceive political activities by their groups, no matter what the objective nature of the group might be. It is impossible to determine the direction of causality between the perception of political activities and greater participation in politics because of the small size of the sample on which we rely and our lack of panel data. We believe, however, that group involvement leads to political involvement, and not the contrary. Our analysis demonstrates that higher levels of activity in groups are associated with greater likelihood of perception that the group is involved in public affairs. As Americans become more active in groups, even ostensibly nonpolitical ones such as charities or sports leagues, they become attuned to the impact of governmental activities and are drawn into political life. Greater activity in groups leads to more political activities and discussion within the groups, and this, in turn, leads to greater political participation even outside the group system (see also Verba and Nie, 1972, p. 194, for similar findings). Increasing involvement by the American public in the group system has certainly had a great impact on participation rates over time. In order to gauge this increase, researchers must be armed with an effective battery of questions that measures accurately both the extent of involvement and the political activities of voluntary associations.

Conclusion

By using a new question on group affiliations, we find that a much larger proportion of the American public participates in the system of voluntary associations than we were led to believe by earlier studies. Our new question, used on

the 1985 NES Pilot Study, showed that 90.4 percent of the respondents are involved in some way in the system of interest groups and that the average number of affiliations per respondent was 4.23. The sample employed in the Pilot Study was not a random selection of the entire public, so we are not ready to extrapolate to the entire population and assert that group participation is as extensive as data from the Pilot Study imply. We are confident, however, that the results of our new question, compared with the results that would have been obtained with the Standard Question, offer powerful evidence that the numbers for the entire population are larger than the 67.6 percent involvement and 1.75 affiliations per respondent reported in 1984, when the Standard Question was last used by the General Social Survey. The evidence from monographic studies of different types of groups makes us confident that increases in participation took place during the past 20 years, but these increases were not detected by the national sample surveys conducted during these years, mainly because of the questions and the methods of administration employed in these studies.

The Standard Question probably underestimated slightly the level of group participation from the beginning because respondents were asked only for single memberships within each group type, but this shortcoming became more serious as the number of associations grew. The increase in the number of groups was associated with the development of an elaborate division of labor among educational groups, those operating in medical care, environmental protection, and many other policy areas (Laumann, Knoke, and Kim, 1985). Groups became more specialized, with some concentrating on midcareer training for professionals, others on data collection, public relations, research, or political advocacy. Each group struggled to find its niche within the newly emerging policy communities, but inevitably, competition increased for members and financial resources among associations of similar types (Hannan and Freeman, 1977; McPherson, 1983). As the communities of groups became more elaborate, individuals were appealed to by many associations offering different services or benefits—a process that led to an increase in the number of multiple memberships within group types. Since the Standard Question registers only the first membership reported by respondents within each type of interest group on its show card, its accuracy declined as the number of multiple memberships increased, thus producing the misleading results depicted in Figures 1 and 2 for the years after the mid-1970s.

Under the increased pressure of competition in the 1970s and 1980s, voluntary associations rushed to adopt the latest techniques of mobilization and fundraising. Thousands of people began receiving appeals for money from groups in which they had no formal membership as direct mail solicitation became widespread. The Standard Question became increasingly inappropriate during this period because it provided no data whatever on this new form of interaction between the group system and the public. The public's involvement with the group

system continued to grow during the 1970s and 1980s through the practice of making small financial contributions, sometimes to several groups of the same type. If points representing our figures from the 1985 Pilot Study were added to Figures 1 and 2 (90.6 percent involvement in Figure 1; 4.23 group affiliations per respondent in Figure 2), they would show continued and steady growth from the 1950s to the present time.

Data collected with our revised question profoundly alter the picture of the interest group system. While trade unions fade in relative importance, the overwhelming prominence of charities in American associational life is revealed. Our data show that the public is much more involved in the group system than earlier researchers were aware, and most of their affiliations are with groups that are engaged in overtly nonpolitical, altruistic activities. Those who are most active in these essentially nonpolitical groups are more likely to be aware, however, that even the most altruistically inclined group must sometimes engage in efforts to shape public policy. Once group members become aware of these activities, their group involvement has a strong impact on their likelihood to vote and to engage in other forms of conventional political action. The group system is a vast training ground for political activity and an important pathway through which citizens are linked with the political parties and the formal institutions of government.

The shortcomings of the Standard Question on membership in interest groups did not arise from sloppy mistakes in research administration. Ironically, the problems were the direct result of the careful efforts by researchers to follow the best recommended practices of survey research. The question was modified in the early stages of its development in light of past experience in the field; a simple data collection system was adopted with a convenient show card that took full advantage of the coding and data generation technology available at the time. Once the question had been used on a number of highly successful national surveys, its wording was not changed, and it was administered repeatedly to national samples over almost 20 years.

In the years since World War II, fundamental organizational, financial, and political changes have occurred that have altered the system of interest groups in America. The trend toward heightened social mobilization has resulted in a new agenda of controversy, opened up new political cleavages, changed the way in which candidates are recruited, profoundly altered the process of raising money for campaigns, and helped to alter the role of political parties in the American system of government. Many aspects of this organizational transformation remain mysterious, however, in large part because they have not been detected by repeated surveys using the Standard Question. Normally it is preferable to collect data with precisely the same instrument over a long span of time rather than risk the comparability of data by introducing small modifications in the wording of questions. When many new types of interest groups are arising, however, and fundamental alterations are taking place in the way established groups are fi-

nanced and maintained, this generally sensible rule of research administration can produce fundamentally misleading results. When the world being measured is undergoing important changes, the researcher must adapt to the changes or run the risk of overlooking the emergence of important new social trends.

Manuscript submitted 14 April 1987

Final manuscript received 6 August 1987

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