

CHAPTER 2

HOW THE UNITED STATES BECAME A CIVIC NATION

THE CIVIC CREATIVITY OF AMERICANS "of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition" has long been admired.¹ "Voluntary organization," writes Arthur Schlesinger, affords Americans "their greatest school of self-government. . . . In mastering the associative way they have mastered the democratic way."² Yet despite long-standing agreement that voluntarism is central to American democracy—and notwithstanding its frequent invocation in theoretical and policy pronouncements—surprisingly little is known about how the United States actually became a nation of civic organizers and joiners. Stereotypes prevail in the absence of systematic knowledge.

TODAY'S ACCEPTED WISDOM: SMALL WAS BEAUTIFUL

Even scholars and pundits who disagree about contemporary America's civic health share a mythical image of the past. Imagining that U.S. civil society was local and intimate, they envision voluntary groups as originally bottom-up and scattered creations, fashioned here and there in relatively bounded communities by immediate neighbors and personal friends. According to accepted wisdom, voluntary

groups once had room to flourish in the absence of supra-local governance. "Our reliance upon voluntary associations to achieve social goals stems from the widespread division and dispersal of authority in the United States" and from our dependence "on private religious associations to guide our public moral philosophy," declares a recent report by the Council on Civil Society, which offers nary a footnote in support, so self-evident does this statement seem to commission members.³ "Before the modern age," declare Michael Joyce and William Schambra in a crisp formulation of today's conventional wisdom, American "civic life was characterized by both its self-containment and its cohesiveness. Individuals were closely bound one to another by strong families, tightly knit neighborhoods, and active voluntary and fraternal groups. Through these small, local, 'human-scale' associations, Americans not only achieved a sense of belonging and connectedness but also tackled the full range of social and human problems that today have largely become the province of government."⁴

VOLUNTARISM AND DEMOCRATIC NATION BUILDING

Small-was-beautiful understandings of America's civic past may be taken for granted today, but it wasn't always that way. Analysts of earlier eras believed that much of U.S. voluntarism was translocal in scope and intimately tied to the building of national democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville is cited today as an exponent of apolitical localism, but in the famous chapter in *Democracy in America* titled "On the Use Which Americans Make of Associations in Civil Life," he offered just one specific example, the massive temperance

movement of the 1830s, in which "one hundred thousand men . . . publicly promised never to drink alcoholic liquor" because they wanted to "support sobriety" by their collective "patronage" instead of making "individual representations to the government."⁵ Similar accounts of nineteenth-century U.S. voluntary associations appear in the 1890s classic, *The American Commonwealth*, where Lord Bryce portrayed them as ramified networks spanning the continent, "a species of political organization which figures in State and even in presidential contests." "**Such associations have great importance in the development of opinion, for they rouse attention, excite discussion, formulate principles, submit plans, embolden and stimulate their members, and produce that impression of a spreading movement which goes so far towards success with a sympathetic and sensitive people.**"⁶

Building on such insights in his "Biography of a Nation of Joiners," a presidential address to the American Historical Association published in 1944, Arthur Schlesinger provides the most complete overview of U.S. civic voluntarism in the context of democratic nation building. Focusing on "voluntary bodies of sizable membership, reasonably long duration, and fairly large territorial extent," Schlesinger portrays the development of a "vast and intricate mosaic" of associations "reaching out with interlocking memberships to all parts of the country."⁷ In colonial America, he asserts, voluntarily established associations were few and far between and typically tied to local church congregations. But the struggles of the colonists for independence from Britain taught "men from different sections valuable lessons in practical cooperation," and "the adoption of the Constitution stimulated still further application of the collective principle."⁸

A new associational model crystallized in the early 1800s, a time of flux and experimentation in the democratizing U.S. Republic. Ambitious civil organizers converged on a standard approach: They chose an "imposing" name, "sent forth . . . agents on the wide public," and "multiplied" "subsidiary societies . . . over the length and breadth of the land." Associations began to organize along the lines of "the Federal political system, with local units loosely linked together in state branches and these in turn sending representatives to a national body."⁹ Then the Civil War intervened. Union victory brought a "heightened sense of nationality" and "Northern endeavors to plan far-flung undertakings," thus giving "magnified force" to association building in the late 1800s.¹⁰ Highlighting the role of ambitious national organizers who took inspiration from struggles to create and sustain representative national government, Schlesinger's 1944 interpretation is very much at odds with the localist notions of America's civic past that hold sway today.

NEW EVIDENCE FOR THE OLD VIEW

The older view turns out to be right. In this chapter and the next, I present systematic evidence that classic American civic associations were large and translocal networks, not self-enclosed bodies restricted to particular places. And I show the many ways in which civic voluntarism was thoroughly intertwined with government activities and popular politics. Mass-mobilizing U.S. wars and inclusive public social programs have involved and fostered civic voluntarism on a national as well as local scale. For most of our nation's history, civic voluntarism and bold public undertakings went hand in hand. Classic voluntary associations

(as I will label the popularly rooted membership groups that flourished from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century) were usually federations that brought citizens together across class lines while linking thousands of local groups to one another and to representatively governed centers of state and national activity.

It is one thing to aspire to map the history of U.S. voluntarism, quite another to approach this goal in a reliable way. There is no handy reference book—or computer disk—to which one can turn to map the rise and fall, the purposes and forms, of voluntary associations throughout U.S. history. Much can be learned from in-depth monographs about particular regions or communities, and there are impressive histories of major associations and particular categories of groups.¹¹ But the partial insights of such studies are hard to add up; and only a few scholars have documented the long-term spread of various types of groups across many places.¹² To fill the gap, my colleagues and I have investigated the origins and development of voluntary membership associations in America, from 1790 to the present.¹³ Our research triangulates among various sources of data and looks for overlaps between national and local voluntary groups.

We first set out on what we supposed would be a modest effort to map all very large associations in American history. Other scholars have studied political parties and religious denominations, so we would supplement their work by identifying and documenting all other voluntary associations that had ever enrolled 1 percent or more of U.S. adults as "members" (according to whatever definition of individual membership each group used). If groups formally restrict membership to men or women, then 1 percent of the

U.S. adult male or adult female population serves as the benchmark; if both genders are accepted into the group, then 1 percent of the entire adult population is the benchmark. No other relaxations of the demanding size criterion are made, because we seek a window into American civil society and democracy over time. Tracing very large voluntary membership associations seems promising for this purpose, because these groups have by definition been very popular and widespread.

Originally we expected to find perhaps one or two dozen very large membership associations; but many years later, we have identified fifty-eight very large groups, listed in table 2.1 in chronological order of their foundings in the United States.¹⁴ For each group on our master list, we are developing a complete quantitative and qualitative profile, gathering information on the intentions of each organization's founders and data about membership trends, associational structure, group activities, and group relationships to government, political parties, and religious institutions. In this chapter, I concentrate on the vast majority of associations that were founded and grew very large before World War II.

How much can we learn by looking at very large membership associations? Even if there are more of them than one might expect, they might have been just the icing on the cake of classic American voluntarism. As today's conventional wisdom posits, the vast majority of membership groups might have been particular, local creations (or else very small translocal associations confined to particular states). To situate the very largest associations in relation to others, my research colleagues and I have analyzed several additional kinds of evidence. Historical as well as current

TABLE 2.1
Large Membership Associations in U.S. History

ORGANIZATION	FOUNDING	ENDING	NATIONAL, STATE, AND LOCAL UNITS?	DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN POLITICS?	DECades ABOVE 1% OF MEN, WOMEN, OR ADULTS
Ancient and Accepted Free Masons	1733	Boston			1810s to present
Independent Order of Odd Fellows	1819	Baltimore	yes		1840s-1950s
American Temperance Society	1826	Boston	1865	yes	1830s-1840s
Gen. Union for Promoting Observance of the Christian Sabbath	1828	New York	1832	yes	1830s
American Anti-Slavery Society	1833	Boston	1870	yes	1830s
Improved Order of Red Men	1834	Baltimore	yes		1900s-1920s
Washington Temperance Societies	1840	Baltimore	ca. 1848		1840s
Order of the Sons of Temperance	1842	New York	ca. 1970	yes	1840s-1850s
Independent Order of Good Templars	1851	Utica, NY		yes	1860s-1870s
Young Men's Christian Association	1851	Boston			1890s to present
Junior Order of United American Mechanics	1853	Philadelphia	ca. 1970	war partner yes	1920s-1930s
National Education Association	1857	Philadelphia		yes	1970s to present
Knights of Pythias	1864	Washington, D.C.		yes	1870s-1930s
Grand Army of the Republic	1866	Decatur, IL	1956	yes	1860s-1900s
Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks	1867	New York			1900s to present
Patrons of Husbandry (National Grange)	1867	Washington, D.C.		yes	1870s, 1910s-1920s
Order of the Eastern Star	1868	New York		yes	1910s to present
Ancient Order of United Workmen	1868	Meadville, PA		yes	1880s-1900s
Knights of Labor	1869	Philadelphia	1917	yes	1880s
National Rifle Association	1871	New York		yes	1980s to present

Nobles of the Mystic Shrine	1872	New York			1910s-1980s
Woman's Christian Temperance Union	1874	Cleveland	yes	yes	1910s-1930s
Royal Arcanum	1877	Boston	yes		1900s
Farmers' Alliance	1877	Lampasas, TX	1900	yes	1880s-1890s
Maccabees	1878	Port Huron, MI	yes		1900s-1910s
Christian Endeavor	1881	Portland, ME	yes		1880s-about 1920s
American Red Cross	1881	Washington, D.C.		war partner	1910s to present
Knights of Columbus	1882	New Haven, CT	yes	war partner	1910s to present
Modern Woodmen of America	1883	Lyons, IA	yes		1890s-1930s
Colored Farmers' Alliance	1886	Houston, TX	1892	yes	1880s-1890s
American Federation of Labor (AFL-CIO after 1955)	1886	Columbus, OH		yes	1880s to present
American Protective Association	1887	Clinton, IA	ca. 1911	yes	1890s
Woman's Missionary Union	1888	Richmond, VA	yes		1920s to present
Loyal Order of Moose	1888	Louisville, KY			1910s to present
National American Woman Suffrage Association	1890	Washington, D.C.	1920	yes	1910s
Woodmen of the World	1890	Omaha, NE		yes	1900-1930s
General Federation of Women's Clubs	1890	New York	yes	yes	1900s-1970s
American Bowling Congress	1895	New York	yes		1930s to present
National Congress of Mothers (PTA)	1897	Washington, D.C.	yes	yes	1920s to present
Fraternal Order of Eagles	1898	Seattle, WA	yes	yes	1900s-1980s
German American National Alliance	1901	Philadelphia	1918	yes	1910s
Aid Association for Lutherans	1902	Appleton, WI			1970s
American Automobile Association	1902	Chicago	yes	yes	1920s to present
Boy Scouts of America	1910	Washington, D.C.		war partner	1930s to present
Veterans of Foreign Wars	1913	Denver, CO	yes	yes	1940s to present
Ku Klux Klan (Second)	1915	Atlanta	1944	yes	1920s

TABLE 2.1 (cont.)
Large Membership Associations in U.S. History

ORGANIZATION	FOUNDING	ENDING	NATIONAL, STATE, AND LOCAL UNITS?	DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN POLITICS?	DECades above 1% of men, women, or adults?		
					yes	yes	yes
Women's International Bowling Congress	1916	St. Louis, MO	yes	yes	1950s to present		
American Legion	1919	Minneapolis	yes	yes	1920s to present		
American Farm Bureau Federation	1919	Chicago	yes	yes	1920s, 1940s to present		
Old Age Revolving Pensions Ltd. (Townsend movement)	1934	Long Beach, CA	1953	yes	1930s		
Congress of Industrial Organizations	1938	Pittsburgh	1955	yes	1930s-1950s		
March of Dimes	1939	New York		yes	1950s		
United Methodist Women	1939	Atlanta, GA		yes	1940s to present		
American Association of Retired Persons	1938	Washington, DC		yes	1970s to present		
National Right to Life Committee	1973	Detroit, MI	yes	yes	1970s to present		
Mothers Against Drunk Driving	1980	Sacramento, CA	yes	yes	1980s to present		
Greenpeace USA	1988	Washington, DC	yes	yes	1990s		
Christian Coalition	1989	Washington, DC	yes	yes	1990s to present		

directories and compilations enable us to track virtually all associations with national visibility; thus we can tell how very large membership associations compare to all kinds of nationally relevant groups.¹⁵ Sources on major American ethnic groups and racial minorities allow us to map associational development for sectors of the population whose numbers made it difficult to sustain groups surpassing 1 percent of the entire adult population.¹⁶

What is more, in a key evidentiary step, we have analyzed locally present voluntary groups listed in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century city directories.¹⁷ In a groundbreaking 1999 article, Gerald Gamm and Robert Putnam track the spread of locally present voluntary groups across twenty-six U.S. cities between 1840 and 1940. Gamm and Putnam tally tens of thousands of groups, decade by decade, using regularly published local directories for five large cities, ten medium-sized cities, and eleven small cities, spread across all regions of the United States.¹⁸ In about 1910 locally listed groups reached a peak of prevalence in relation to city populations. Reexamining directories for Gamm and Putnam's twenty-six cities in 1910 (or as close as possible to that date), we classified the types and organizational scale of all membership groups listed. Were most groups purely local, or were they parts of translocal federations of various sorts? Which kinds of groups were the most stable? Our findings are unequivocal.¹⁹ The vast majority of locally present voluntary groups in the industrializing United States were parts of national or regional voluntary federations. Averaging across all twenty-six cities examined at the height of per capita voluntary group organization in 1910, we found that 78 percent of groups were parts of religious denominations, union federations, very large membership federations

(in addition to churches and unions), or other membership federations spanning regions or the nation as a whole. Church congregations and chapters of the very same large membership federations listed in table 2.1 were predominant in every city and especially predominant in the smallest cities. What is more, over-time evidence also confirms the centrality of federated membership associations. Between 1870 and 1920 churches and chapters of very large federations were the most persistent of locally present voluntary membership groups, forming the stable core of organized civic life in communities of all sizes all over America. Thus as I talk about the origins and development of translocally federated voluntary associations in the pages that follow, the reader can be sure that I am talking not about the icing on the U.S. associational cake but about the cake itself.

THE ORIGINS OF AMERICAN VOLUNTARISM

An extensively organized and deeply participatory civil society took shape from the start of U.S. national life, even as the vast majority of Americans lived and worked on farms or in very small towns. In the era between the Revolution and the Civil War, voluntary groups proliferated and formed links across localities. American civic democracy emerged well before industries and metropolises.

Before voluntarily created associations could proliferate, historian Richard D. Brown explains, there had to be communities with two hundred to four hundred families and one-fifth of adult men engaged in nonagricultural occupations.²⁰ But demography alone did not shape early American civic destiny. Many communities surpassed this threshold

before 1760, yet colonial Massachusetts (which included most of the territory of present-day Maine) had only a few dozen voluntary groups apart from churches. More than one-third of these groups were located in Boston, the colonial capital and only substantial city. This situation soon changed, however. During the struggles for American independence from Britain, voluntary groups proliferated dramatically, at a rate far surpassing population growth. Associations other than churches and for-profit groups increased from 14 in the city of Boston before 1760 to 135 groups by 1830—a roughly 760 percent increase. Beyond Boston, groups emerged even more rapidly, increasing from just 24 before 1760 to 1,305 by 1830—an explosive growth of more than 5,000 percent.²¹ Most of this civic growth occurred after 1790, as the new U.S. nation took shape.

"In colonial America," Brown observes, social patterns involving choice and extralocal awareness were "a highly restricted phenomenon, limited to port towns that were also administrative centers."²² Such patterns penetrated parts of the hinterland only via elites "who were in touch with the [colonial] capital as an occupational necessity." But by the 1830s, "localism and insularity were being challenged. . . . People remained bound to the old organizations of family, church, and town, but now they possessed additional ties. . . . Sometimes the contact was direct, if they traveled to a meeting or convention or if outsiders came to them as part of a political campaign, lyceum, temperance or missionary association. More often, the contact was psychological, coming from memberships in countywide or statewide organization and the publications such activities produced."²³

Civil Society Goes National

Early America's burst of civic voluntarism happened first and most intensively in the northeastern United States, yet similar changes soon spread across the expanding new nation and involved people from many backgrounds. At first only groups such as the Masons and most churches were formally linked in translocal organizations. Even so, many other voluntary endeavors multiplied as people in one locality modeled their efforts on similar undertakings elsewhere.

Although women rarely organized separate translocal associations in this early period, recognizably similar female benevolent groups appeared in many towns.²⁴ At least one translocal association, the American Female Moral Reform Society founded in New York City, eventually encompassed 445 auxiliaries across the middle states and greater New England.²⁵ Meanwhile, male promoters disseminated explicit models and instructions for founding and operating community associations. A prime example was Josiah Holbrook, who traveled, spoke, and published to promote "lyceums," that is, voluntary community institutions intended to promote adult education, sponsor traveling lecturers, and support the emerging "common" public schools and their teachers.²⁶ Between the 1830s and the 1850s these institutions spread from New England into the upper South and (especially) into the Midwest east of the Mississippi River.

During the same era, vast moral crusades inspired the creation of thousands of interlinked local and state societies. Excellent examples are the temperance associations that gained enormous prominence before the Civil War.²⁷ By

1834 the American Temperance Society (ATS) claimed some 5,000 societies and one million members in the East and Midwest, but this group proved too top-down to sustain its popular appeal and soon evolved into a national center for publishing and lobbying (operating much like a modern professional advocacy group). In the 1840s the Washingtonian crusade reached out for working-class members and reformed "drunkards," briefly claiming some 600,000 members and 10,000 societies.²⁸ Washingtonians did not believe in formal national organization and experimented with radical, bottom-up democracy (much like the 1960s New Left). But such arrangements did not outlast the initial popular fervor, and temperance supporters soon joined orders with state and national institutions. Founded in 1842, the Sons of Temperance grew by 1860 into a truly continent-spanning federation boasting some 2,398 local "divisions" and 94,213 members spread across more than three dozen state divisions in the North and South and across the Mississippi River into Iowa and California.²⁹ During the 1850s, the Independent Order of Good Templars (IOGT) likewise began its climb to national prominence.³⁰ Open to women as well as men for leadership positions as well as membership, the IOGT claimed by 1860 more than 50,000 members grouped into about 1,200 lodges spread across 20 states, including Alabama and Mississippi in the Deep South.

Fraternal orders devoted to mutual aid and rituals of brotherhood also spanned the fledgling United States, despite the outburst of a fierce but temporary furor against Masons and other "secret societies" that peaked in the 1830s.³¹ From colonial times Masonic lodges sunk roots everywhere in America; local lodges were founded immediately on the

arrival of military garrisons in each new territory, and new "sovereign grand" lodges were chartered as states joined the U.S. union.³² National, state, and local political elites were very often members of the Masonic fraternity. Yet Masonry also incorporated men from many other walks of life. From the 1810s to the present Masonic membership has always surpassed 1 percent of the U.S. adult male population.

America's second great fraternal association, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF), was fashioned under the direction of brothers in Baltimore, Maryland, between 1819 and 1842. After immigrants established a few outposts of English orders, Odd Fellows in the United States took an organizational step that the (basic, "blue lodge") Masons never did. They established a three-tiered federal structure capped by a national-level "sovereign grand lodge" formed from representatives sent from state-level "grand" lodges with jurisdiction over local lodges.³³ Perfectly suited to American conditions, this new IOOF federated structure encouraged rapid growth. By 1830 American Odd Fellows met in fifty-eight lodges spread across Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia; and by 1860 there were more than 170,000 U.S. Odd Fellows meeting in more than 3,000 local lodges in thirty-five states in all regions of the nation.³⁴ As Paschal Donaldson, author of the 1852 edition of *The Odd-Fellow Text Book*, proudly declared: "From town to town, from city to city, from state to state, has this Order spread, and thousands upon thousands of the best men of our nation have been gathered to its folds."³⁵

If not on such a spectacular scale as the Masons and the Odd Fellows, other U.S. fraternals also made rapid headway

before the Civil War. Founded in 1834, the racially and ethnically exclusionist Improved Order of Red Men consisted of white Christians who dressed up like Indians and dated their order from 1492, when Columbus arrived in America. By 1860 almost 10,000 Red Men were meeting in 94 "tribes" spread across the "reservations" of Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, New Jersey, Missouri, Kentucky, Delaware, and the District of Columbia.³⁶ Not to be outdone, in 1836 Irish Americans founded the American branch of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, which was organized in eight states of the East, South, and Midwest by the outbreak of the Civil War.³⁷ During the 1840s, German Americans in New York City launched the Order of the Sons of Hermann and the Order of Harugari, two (eventually transstate) beneficial and cultural federations dedicated to furthering German culture and defending German Americans from nativist attacks during widespread Know-Nothing agitations.³⁸ Modeling their efforts on the Odd Fellows, moreover, Czech immigrants founded the Bohemian Slavonic Benefit Society in 1854.³⁹

Along with the Irish and Germans, African Americans were the other very large U.S. minority. With the exception of some temperance orders, white-dominated U.S. voluntary associations shunned blacks as members. Nevertheless, even before the Civil War, African Americans built substantial orders paralleling the groups from which they were excluded. Prince Hall Masonry originated in 1775, when British Masons chartered a Negro Masonic lodge in Cambridge, Massachusetts.⁴⁰ In early national times, free blacks spread this fraternal republic across eighteen states, including "most of the Atlantic coastal states as far south as Virginia, and many midwestern states . . . [and] Maryland,

Virginia, and Louisiana, the centers of the free Negro population" of the South.⁴¹ Meanwhile, in 1843 African Americans in New York City under the leadership of seaman Peter Ogden launched the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, again with the aid of a lodge charter from England. By the early 1860s about fifteen hundred African American Odd Fellows were meeting in about fifty lodges scattered across more than half a dozen eastern states.⁴²

Why Did Civic Voluntarism Flourish?

Why was early American civil society so sharply and precociously transformed—as communities of all sizes established voluntary groups with remarkable simultaneity, and many groups became linked in translocal, representatively governed, federated organizations? The effects of U.S. governmental institutions, and the political and religious competition they fostered, lie at the heart of the answer.

As we have glimpsed, the American break from British imperial control fueled the growth of a democratic civil society. The revolutionary war and subsequent struggles over a new U.S. Constitution disrupted taken-for-granted loyalties, brought geographically dispersed sets of Americans into contact with one another, and undermined the sway of great cities along the Atlantic seaboard. Once victory brought independent nationhood, the ongoing political routines of the representative polity pulled Americans into broader involvements. Elections were held for state-wide and national offices, and fledgling political parties competed for support, linking some citizens in each place to fellow Federalists or Jeffersonians elsewhere. By the 1830s most adult white men enjoyed the right to vote, and trans-

regional political parties were knitting together patronage machines and networks of grassroots associations capable of mobilizing popular votes in incessant rounds of elections.⁴³ It was no coincidence that translocal movements and civil associations flourished in the era of mass party building. Both party builders and association builders sought to mobilize a democratic citizenry.

Early America was simultaneously swept by the religious enthusiasms of the Second Great Awakening. Religious proselytization started during late colonial times and accelerated during the early national period. Distinctively, the United States soon did away with governmentally established church monopolies—and that turned out to be the best possible situation for popular, energetic, independent-minded religions to flourish. "Beginning with Virginia in 1776 and ending with Connecticut in the 1840s, all American states eventually broke the traditional ties that had bound church and state together."⁴⁴ Under the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, competing denominations were free to preach and proselytize.⁴⁵ Indeed, because churches lost governmental sponsorship, each denomination had to organize and attract devoted congregants or risk eclipse. Soon traveling organizers, especially newly energized Methodists and Baptists, spread out across the land. Traveling preachers founded new congregations and inspired local leaders, including laypeople, to keep them going.⁴⁶ Women as well as men were involved in these religious movements.⁴⁷ Because they were the majority of churchgoers, women were likely to be drawn into reform crusades grounded in religious ideals and networks; and they had room to assert themselves amid the contending denominations. As historian Kathryn Kish Sklar explains,

"beginning in the 1820s, women were able to form vigorous pan-Protestant lay organizations, which challenged the authority of ministers and generated an autonomous social agenda."⁴⁸

Translocal associations flourished in early America in significant part because people were constantly on the move. Recent demographic research shows that long-distance geographic mobility peaked in the mid-1800s, especially among young men.⁴⁹ As waves of migration spread across the continent, new arrivals established familiar kinds of lodges or clubs at the same time that they built farms, businesses, and churches.⁵⁰ Once settled, moreover, people visited or wrote to relatives and friends in their places of origin, learning in the process of new kinds of associations that they might help to establish in their new communities.

But Americans on the move might not have been able to cooperate had not a very centralized and active arm of the early U.S. government, the U.S. Postal Service, facilitated the efficient social communication that allowed citizens to create interconnected groups for political, religious, and moral purposes. Before the American Revolution the colonies had a rudimentary postal system comparable to that of many European countries, with larger cities loosely tied together, especially along the Atlantic coast. This changed soon after the founding of the republic, when Congress passed the Post Office Act of 1792, which "admitted newspapers into the mail on unusually favorable terms, . . . prohibited public officers from using their control over the means of communication as a surveillance technique," and "established a set of procedures that facilitated the extraordinarily rapid expansion of the postal network from the Atlantic seaboard into the transappalachian

West."⁵¹ By 1828, as historian Richard John points out, "the American postal system had almost twice as many offices as the postal system in Great Britain and over five times as many offices as the postal system in France. This translated into 74 post offices for every 100,000 inhabitants in comparison with 17 for Great Britain and 4 for France."⁵² In the 1830s and 1840s the system accounted for more than three-quarters of U.S. federal employees, and most of the 8,764 postal employees in 1831 and the 14,290 employees in 1841 were "part-time postmasters in villages and towns scattered throughout the countryside."⁵³

The postal network was shaped by U.S. government institutions. Congressional representation based in states and local districts gave members of the Senate and the House of Representatives a strong interest in subsidizing communication and transportation links into even the remotest areas of the growing nation—yet in a carefully calibrated way. Legislators wanted mail and news to be carried into even the smallest communities; and they also wanted to be able to travel to and from the national capital. Hence they subsidized stagecoach travel and set cheap postal rates. Postal rules also allowed for the free exchange of newspapers among editors, so that small newspapers could pick up copy from bigger ones. But at the same time, rate structures were fine-tuned to prevent eastern seaboard papers from outmarketing provincial news sheets.

To take advantage of politically engineered postal subsidies, voluntary groups as well as political parties disseminated their messages in "newspaper" (and later magazine) formats. Civil organizing was greatly facilitated—and, not infrequently, voluntary associations became engines of political reform. One of the first great moral reform movements

in America—briefly embodied between 1828 and 1832 in the General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath—was devoted to trying to stop the opening of post offices and transportation of the mails on Sundays.⁵⁴ Ironically, this movement depended on the federal postal system it sought to challenge, because it relied on the mail to spread tens of thousands of pamphlets and petitions! The same was true of other great voluntary crusades in the pre-Civil War era, including the temperance movements and the popular drive against slavery that helped to spark the Civil War.⁵⁵ The early U.S. state, in short, created favorable conditions for associations, social movements, and mass-mobilizing political parties—all of which, in turn, continuously roiled and transformed national politics and government.

The Federal Representative State as a Civil Model

There was a final way in which U.S. governing institutions influenced association building: the structure of government served as an organizational model. The United States was put together by the Founding Fathers as a federal republic, and the nation and the states had written constitutions that spelled out rules for voting and representation; explicitly parceled out administrative, legislative, and judicial functions; and assigned levels of sovereignty to national, state, and local government. From early national times American civil associations began to use governmental federalism as an organizational model (see table 2.1). Constitutions establishing national, state, and local units tied together by representative procedures were adopted by three-fourths of the ultimately large voluntary groups

launched in the decades before the Civil War (and by a similar preponderance of those launched in the late 1800s).⁵⁶

Political considerations encouraged many groups to adopt constitutional arrangements paralleling the U.S. state. Social movements often adapt their organizational structures and routines to national “political opportunity structures.”⁵⁷ The U.S. political system rewarded movements and associations able to coordinate efforts at the national, state, and local levels. From temperance movements and antislavery crusades to farmers’ groups, women’s movements, and nativist agitations, groups aiming to shape public opinion and influence elected legislators learned the advantage of such cross-level organization. Serving as bridges between local sets of citizens and elected officials, associations could influence both Congress and state legislatures. Operating across levels, moreover, groups could pursue both sociocultural and political change; and they could go toe-to-toe in battles with one another. “Our order,” explained the Right Worthy Grand Templar of the Independent Order of Good Templars, “is organized to destroy the evils growing out of the drink traffic, and the individual use of alcoholic drinks.” Because the “drunkard-makers have strong Local, State, and National Organizations,” subordinate lodges reach out to save individuals and agitate public opinion, while “against the State Liquor Union” the IOGT arrays the state-level “Grand Lodge; and against the American Brewers’ Congress and National Distillers Union” it deploys the national-level “R.W.G. Lodge.”⁵⁸

But the response of civic activists to political openings and challenges is not a sufficient explanation, because many associations not dedicated to political goals also adopted federal representative constitutional arrangements. Accord-

ing to institutionalist theorists of organizational development, organization builders who face complex challenges in conditions of uncertainty may draw inspiration from well-understood, already legitimate models in their environment.⁵⁹ Innovative adaptations of this sort are often made by ambitious but somewhat marginalized people, such as foreign immigrants arriving in a new country.⁶⁰ Thus Odd Fellows arriving in America seem to have reorganized themselves in imitation of the divisions of powers and local, state, and national levels of the U.S. state because the Constitution offered a prestigious and well-understood model for spreading lodges and coordinating their activities on a national scale. As chronicler Henry Stillson explains, immigrant Odd Fellows with "superior discernment" realized "the impracticality" and "especial unfitness for this country" of English-style fraternal governing arrangements, which coordinated local lodges through national committees of notables. Instead, the transplanted Odd Fellows soon "found their model in the political framework of the United States."⁶¹ The preamble of the fraternal constitution newly devised by the American Odd Fellows unmistakably echoed the U.S. Constitution:

Whereas, it has been found expedient, and of great importance to mankind, to perpetuate those institutions which confer on them great and essential benefit. Therefore, the GRAND LODGE OF THE UNITED STATES . . . , for the more effectual purpose of binding each other in the bond of one common Union, by which we will be enabled to insure a co-operation of action, . . . and to secure unto ourselves and posterity more effectually the

blessings which are to be derived from so valuable and beneficial an institution, do ordain and establish the following as the CONSTITUTION . . . OF THE INDEPENDENT ORDER OF ODD FELLOWS.⁶²

Many other groups soon followed in the footsteps of the Odd Fellows. So prestigious was the U.S. constitutional model that immigrant-ethnic fraternals often established a full complement of state and national representative arrangements at a stage when they barely had enough members to fill a small number of local lodges scattered across several cities. Everyone, it seemed, wanted associations patterned on America's new representative federal government.

Just as U.S. national and state constitutions specified residency rules for voting, the constitutions of civil associations included explicit rules about the establishment of state and local units and the recruitment of resident members into them. Unlike fraternal groups in other nations, for example, U.S. fraternals and their female partner groups required a potential member to apply to the lodge nearest his or her residence.⁶³ Traveling members had to have formal documentation from their lodges of origin to be admitted as visitors or to "transfer" their membership elsewhere. Associations other than fraternal groups did not always follow such formal rules, but they too managed the flow of people across places. U.S. voluntary federations certainly sustained ties across vast distances and let people move around. But rootless cosmopolitanism was not allowed—not in associational life any more than in the U.S. version of representative democracy.

THE MODERNIZATION OF CIVIC AMERICA

If waves of ambitious voluntary group formation occurred before 1861, even greater bursts gathered force after the Civil War, expanding some older associations and giving birth to hundreds of new popular voluntary federations, including dozens of groups that were destined to become very large and persist through much of the twentieth century. The late nineteenth century was an extraordinary period of civic creativity. But what kinds of groups emerged, and what forces shaped the innovations? Associational life might have been upended and divided by class as the United States became a metropolitan industrial powerhouse, yet this was not the whole story—not even the main story line. As the economy modernized, American associational life retained and expanded preindustrial forms, even as new kinds of groups emerged.

Social scientists often presume that big changes in the economy will automatically bring similar shifts in everything else. Standard explanations for associational change thus focus on emerging actors responding to new stresses and opportunities offered by corporate industrialization and the growth of big cities. Some scholars maintain that class conflict spurs workers to form unions and capitalists to band together in business groups. Others view modern associations as mechanisms of social integration, substituting for ties of family and neighborliness in preindustrial villages. One version of such reasoning appears in Robert Wiebe's influential synthesis, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920*, where the key actors are rising "new middle class" professionals and business people who fashioned new associations and service groups in "response" to the unsettling

transformations of immigration, industrialization, and urban concentration.⁶⁴

Certain facts fit these expectations. Gamm and Putnam's study of voluntary groups listed in directories for twenty-six cities between 1840 and 1940 documents that labor unions proliferated sharply in the late 1800s and early 1900, while business and professional groups also increased in number relative to city populations.⁶⁵ From more qualitative sources, we also know that elite "service groups"—Rotary clubs, Exchange clubs, and Lions clubs for men and smaller groups for business and professional women—also spread across cities in the early twentieth century.⁶⁶ Emphasizing fellowship and service to the broader community, such clubs accepted modest numbers of leaders from each business or profession (although "professions" could be defined very narrowly to expand membership). Some scholars believe that elite service clubs replaced cross-class fraternal associations, as business and professional people grew tired of evening-long rituals, preferred shorter lunchtime meetings, and wanted to network among themselves rather than reaffirm "brotherhood" with blue-collar wage earners and white-collar employees.⁶⁷ But this was not the whole story, because as America industrialized certain old-line fraternals renewed themselves; and rising fraternal groups such as the Elks, Moose, Eagles, and Knights of Columbus grew to unprecedented prominence, relying on simplified rituals and new solicitude for community outreach.

If we focus on isolated types of voluntary groups one at a time, it is all too easy to be fooled into thinking that as new kinds of associations emerge, older types must be in decline. That is why *systematic* data about the changing big picture is needed. Gamm and Putnam's overview of groups listed in

city directories shows, for example, that religious groups and fraternal associations not only were more prevalent than economic groups *before* the United States became a metropolitan-industrial nation; religious and fraternal groups also proliferated *during* industrialization.⁶⁸ In per capita terms, fraternal associations exhibited an especially sharp upsurge between the 1870s and the turn of the twentieth century. Data on national foundings of larger and smaller popular membership associations confirm this picture. The very large membership associations my colleagues and I have studied necessarily had many members from nonelite backgrounds, and most of these groups were launched in the late 1800s (see table 2.1 above and fig. 2.4 below). Historical directories tell us that hundreds of smaller cross-class federations were born and attracted members during the same era.⁶⁹

As industrialization transformed the national economy, in short, Americans did not simply sort themselves out into class-segregated and occupationally based associations. Of course, trade unions, business associations, and professional groups proliferated and attracted new members. But spreading and growing during exactly the same period were churches, religious associations, fraternal and women's groups, and many other long-standing kinds of voluntary associations that attracted members across class lines.

The Formative Impact of the Civil War

Apart from the American Revolution itself, no watershed had a greater impact on the development of U.S. civil society than the Civil War of 1861 to 1865. Scholars often presume that "basic" causes must be economic, but wars

and political conflicts also shape polities and societies—and nowhere was this more true than in the modernizing United States. More voluntary associations destined to attract very large memberships were launched at the conclusion of the Civil War, in the late 1860s, than in any other five-year period in all of U.S. history. Dozens of additional foundings of eventually large groups followed across the immediate post-Civil War decades, while prewar federations also ballooned in size.⁷⁰ The Progressive Era of the early twentieth century is often cited as the seedbed of modern American civil society, but this is off the mark: Union victory in the Civil War spurred the formation and expansion of many of the very large, popularly rooted membership federations to which the extraordinarily numerous local lodges, clubs, and labor union locals of the early twentieth century were connected. The national- and state-level centers of these ambitious federations were almost always founded well in advance of the local chapters that flourished within them. National- and state-level organizers and leaders fashioned rules and institutions that fostered local chapters and allowed them to flourish in constant touch with one another.⁷¹ American voluntary group formation was not primarily local or attributable to "spontaneous" grassroots organizing. Local people and leaders certainly mattered, but they were called into action by and worked hand in hand with, nationally ambitious leaders—bold and visionary men and women who launched and spread the great voluntary federations that would serve as the institutional holding environments for U.S. associational life well into the twentieth century.

That the Civil War encouraged ambitious association building seems, at first thought, counterintuitive. Tocque-

ville feared that prolonged warfare would squelch civic freedom.⁷² And the cataclysm of 1861 to 1865 was by far America's most destructive war, involving more casualties per capita and much more civilian destruction for the United States than the great wars of the twentieth century. The Civil War tore apart preexisting voluntary federations like the Odd Fellows and the Sons of Temperance; diverted adult energies and took hundreds of thousands of lives; and left much of the South economically prostrate. Yet the Civil War also brought "philanthropic results," as one contemporary observer marveled.⁷³ People committed themselves to service; and massive wartime efforts reinforced the practicality of popularly rooted federalism as America's preeminent model for large-scale association building. Especially for leaders, wartime experiences created ideals, network connections, and models of citizen organization that encouraged ambitious association building long after the fighting ceased.

Civic results flowed from *how* this huge conflict was fought, especially on the winning Union side. Well before 1861 Americans were familiar with federated voluntary associations; they knew how to "combine" for purposes big and national as well as particular and local. Government, however, was less well prepared than the citizenry for the gargantuan efforts internecine warfare would demand. When South Carolinians fired on Fort Sumter, the U.S. federal government had little in the way of a standing army. The federal military consisted of a mere sixteen thousand soldiers—most coping with Indians "in seventy-nine frontier outposts west of the Mississippi"—led by a small corps of West Point-trained professionals, about a third of whom, including leading lights like Robert E. Lee, soon "went

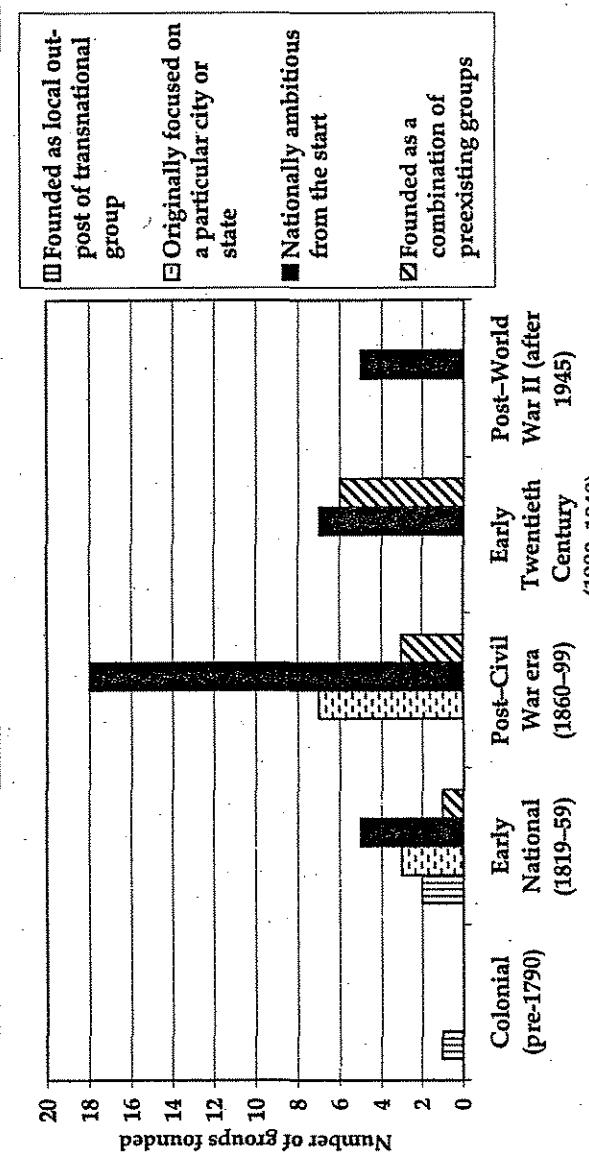
South on us" to serve the rebellious Confederacy.⁷⁴ Both sides in the war between the states relied of necessity on civilian as well as elected leaders to assemble local volunteers into community and state units and then combine those assemblages into great armies and civilian relief operations. The Civil War was fought by volunteer groups organized across class lines. Educated and privileged citizens and other officers who rose through the ranks "led by example, not prescript."⁷⁵

Voluntarism was especially deep and persistent in the North. Even though there were Union military drafts from 1862 on, at least 87 percent of the men who fought were volunteers, usually marched off to war by officers from their own states, towns, and ethnic groups.⁷⁶ On the home front, women and civilian men coordinated medical, social, and spiritual support for the troops through the U.S. Sanitary Commission (which evolved from the Women's Central Association for Relief), the YMCA-sponsored Christian Commission, and other volunteer federations. The U.S. Sanitary Commission was "the largest voluntary organization yet formed in a country noted for such enterprises," explains historian James McPherson; it "grew from a fusion of local soldiers' aid societies that had sprung up within days of the firing on Sumter. Women took the lead in forming these associations, drawing upon their sense of commitment and previous experience in societies advocating the abolition of slavery, women's rights, temperance, education, missions, and the like."⁷⁷

After the Confederates surrendered at Appomattox, spirits soared on the Union side. Inspired by a new sense of national purpose and thoroughly familiar with federated models of popular mobilization, northern men and women who grew

to maturity in the late 1800s launched many new mass-based voluntary federations. These were bold organizational creations, intended to span the nation and tie localities and states together. I noted earlier that ultimately very large U.S. membership associations launched after the Civil War (like those founded before 1860) were usually organized as representative national-state-local federations. The aspirations of the founders of ultimately large membership associations also reveal the impact of the Civil War. Figure 2.1, using data for all U.S. voluntary membership associations that ultimately recruited 1 percent of men or women or both genders as members, summarizes data about the scope of operations originally envisaged by associational founders.⁷⁸ Some ultimately large associations were originally "local," in the sense that they were initially understood as city or state groups and only later evolved into widespread national associations. Others, like the Masons, the Odd Fellows, and the YMCA, commenced on American soil as local "outposts" of transnational associations arriving from Europe. Still other ultimately very large associations, like the General Federation of Women's Clubs, were formed as "combinations" of preexisting groups.⁷⁹ But these three paths taken together account for only two-fifths of the foundings of ultimately very large U.S. membership associations across all eras of national history. Three-fifths of all such associations were launched by ambitious leaders who, from inception, envisaged creating national organizations, even if it took them some time to realize their plans. And notice that the Civil War era, from 1860 to the turn of the twentieth century, stands out as having a very high number and proportion of nationally ambitious foundings (64 percent of the foundings between

FIGURE 2.1
The Original Scope of Very Large U.S. Membership Associations Founded in Different Eras



SOURCE: Civic Engagement Project data on 58 U.S. associations with memberships that ever exceeded 1% of men and/or women.

1860 and 1899 were nationally focused). Not only were a greater number of ultimately very large associations launched in the decades after the Civil War than in any other era of U.S. history, association builders of this watershed era were more likely to have planned national projects from the start than were founders of ultimately very large associations active in any other (comparably long) period before World War II.

The founding stories of particular groups suggest how wartime Union mobilizations encouraged subsequent association building. In 1868 railroad workers who met during the Civil War launched the Ancient Order of United Workmen (AOUW) in Meadville, Pennsylvania. They formed the nation's first insurance-oriented fraternal group, a model for other associations soon to come.⁸⁰ Founders of the AOUW aimed to bridge class divisions thought to have been sharpened by the war, by offering cultural uplift as well as regular insurance benefits to all workingmen. Soon to grow into America's third largest fraternal association, the Knights of Pythias was launched from Washington, D.C., in 1864 by young clerks who met in the war-swollen federal civil service and devised a ritual of sacrificial brotherhood that appealed not only to former soldiers but also to all Americans hoping to reknit North and South.⁸¹

Another regionally disparate group of federal clerks started the Patrons of Husbandry (or Grange) in 1867.⁸² This happened after Minnesota native and federal agricultural official Oliver Kelley was commissioned by President Andrew Johnson to assess the rural needs of the devastated South. Using Masonic ties to make personal contacts in the defeated region, Kelley soon realized that farmers too could

benefit from a nationwide fraternity. Working with fellow federal officials—each of whom, like him, moved back and forth between Washington and his home region—Kelley designed a federation that incorporated some existing farm groups and stimulated the founding of thousands of additional local granges.

Union Civil War experiences also heightened the aspirations and increased the civic capacities of American women.⁸³ Oliver Kelley's niece, Carrie Hall, persuaded him to make females equal and full members of the Grange.⁸⁴ Along with the famous wartime nurse Clara Barton, many other women and men who had been active in wartime relief activities agitated from the 1860s to 1881 for congressional charter of the American Red Cross.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, women moved to the fore in the massive temperance movement. Willing to accept women leaders and members on equal terms, the IOGT held its own during the war and burgeoned afterward, prodding the Sons of Temperance to accept females too.

Temperance-minded American women nevertheless wanted an even more dominant role to meet challenges they understood in gendered terms. They were anxious to counter male drunkenness, which had been exacerbated by military service, and determined to fight government policies favorable to the liquor industry, which had become a lucrative source of tax revenues during the war. Female reformers convened in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1874 to launch the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Some of these women had met in Union relief efforts; all of them applauded the women's crusades against saloon keepers that spread in the Midwest during the early 1870s.⁸⁶ Grassroots protests were hard to sustain, however, so women

gathered at a summer camp for the National Sunday School Assembly hatched a plan to institutionalize "the grand temperance uprising." In cadences resonant with the "Onward Christian Soldiers" rhetoric of Union victory, a "Committee of Organization . . . consisting of one lady from each state" issued a "Call" to organize the national WCTU. "In union and in organization," proclaimed the Call, "are . . . success and permanence, and the consequent redemption of this land from the curse of intemperance."⁸⁷

Wars can bring together people on all sides of the conflict, yet the winners are likely to reap the most enduring civic gains. Before 1860 many American voluntary groups were founded and maintained their headquarters in Baltimore, an eastern seaboard city at the juncture of North and South. What is more, despite their predominantly rural character, southern areas held their own within national federations. But after the war new associations with national ambitions were launched from large or medium-sized northeastern and midwestern cities and later from a few far western sites, while southern membership lagged in previously established national federations like the Odd Fellows (see fig. 2.2 below).⁸⁸ Although Union veterans' federations (including the eventually dominant Grand Army of the Republic) were launched right after the war, local groups of Confederate veterans did not come together to form the United Confederate Veterans until 1889. As losers in the great conflict over the demarcation of American nationhood, white southerners found it harder than the victorious northerners to organize or participate in large-scale civic endeavors in the postwar era.

An exception to pure northern predominance in U.S. associational growth after the Civil War confirms the rule

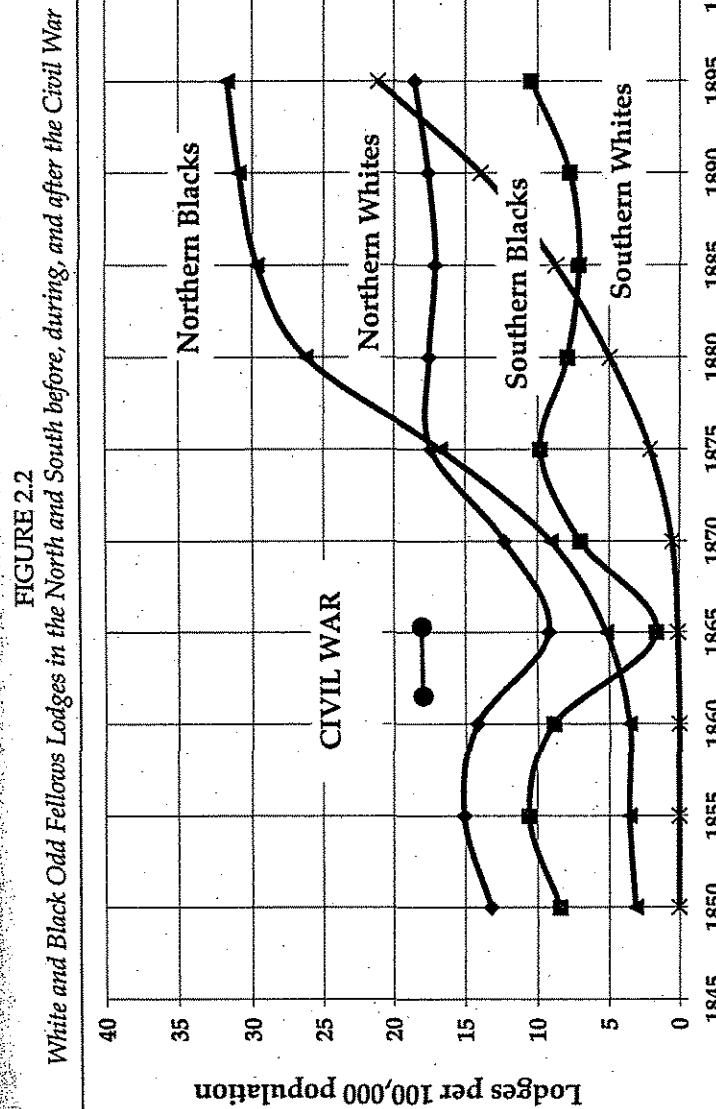


FIGURE 2.2
White and Black Odd Fellows Lodges in the North and South before, during, and after the Civil War

Source: Annual Reports of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows; estimates from lodge foundings and death rates in Charles H. Brooks, *The Official History and Manual of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in America* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971; reprint of 1902 ed.).

that winning a mass-mobilizing war boosts civic energy. Along with northern whites, after all, African Americans in the South and North alike were big winners of the Civil War. Some 180,000 African American men served in the Union armies, contributing to the victory that ultimately broke the legal shackles of slavery for all blacks. The moment southern slaves started to become emancipated, transregional African American associations expanded in numbers and membership. Dozens of new African American fraternal and mutual aid federations, many of them involving women along with men, were launched in the decades after the Civil War. Such federations were often launched from cities in states of the upper South. Along with pre-Civil War fraternal groups like the Prince Hall Masons and the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, emerging African American fraternal federations such as the United Brothers of Friendship and Sisters of the Mysterious Ten, the Independent Order of Saint Luke, the Knights of Tabor and Daughters of the Tabernacle, and the Mosaic Templars of America established lodges and attracted new members at an extraordinary rate.⁸⁹ Rapid growth occurred even in rural parts of the Deep South where African American freedmen and women were economically impoverished and little educated. After the end of Reconstruction in 1876, blacks faced increasingly fierce repression if they tried to vote or join labor unions, yet they never lost their right—or their will—to form and join churches and fraternal groups. Indeed, the spotty evidence that exists suggests that African Americans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were even more likely than privileged Caucasian Americans to organize and join churches and fraternal groups. For one very telling piece of evidence,

figure 2.2 traces the incidence of African American and white Odd Fellows lodges in the South and the North through the Civil War. Note that after the Civil War both northern and southern lodges of the African American Grand United Order of Odd Fellows proliferated in relation to population much more rapidly than even the fast-proliferating *northern* lodges of the white Independent Order of Odd Fellows. White southern Odd Fellows, tellingly, were by far the laggards in forming and maintaining lodges in proportion to their share of the adult male population.

VOLUNTARY FEDERATIONS PROLIFERATE

African Americans exemplified the exuberance of association building characteristic of the post-Civil War era. Following well-worn organizational grooves, all sorts of federated, cross-class membership associations continued to proliferate across the United States through the turn of the twentieth century. Established models were copied and elaborated by multiple waves of association builders, including female civic activists, organizers offering fraternal insurance, and clashing nativists and ethnics.

Women formed many new national associations in the decades around 1900.⁹⁰ Often after years of struggles (which revealed that female fraternalists were anything but passive), auxiliaries open to women relatives were added to almost all of the major male fraternal and patriotic groups.⁹¹ Professional women, though few in numbers, formed their own federations. And two new, giant independent women's membership federations appeared: the General Federation of Women's Clubs, founded in 1890, and the National Congress of Mothers (later the National Congress of Parents

and Teachers [PTA]), founded in 1897. For these cross-class federations, the WCTU, formed during the immediate post-Civil War era, was an organizational model. Many women who had been active in the WCTU helped to found and spread the General Federation and the Congress of Mothers as well. By the turn of the twentieth century, American women not only participated avidly in local communities; they also influenced state and national legislation through an interlocking system of membership federations.

Another turn-of-the-century dynamic was the rise—and often quick demise—of fraternal groups aiming to provide insurance to members. Fraternal insurance orders established after 1880 usually adopted more businesslike methods than the pioneering Ancient Order of United Workmen. They tailored their dues assessments to the age of members and built up financial reserves to cover projected benefit payments. But many small insurance orders never grew very large, because they were deliberately limited to potential members thought to be relatively healthy or because they formed in the first place by breaking away from previously established insurance orders. Youthful westerners, for example, frequently broke away to avoid paying dues to cover benefits for aging easterners. And still other small insurance fraternals, like the Order of the Iron Hall of 1881–91, represented little more than thinly disguised Ponzi schemes that proved actuarially unsound and hence short-lived. Tellingly, only a handful of the fraternal groups that grew very large and survived over many decades were *primarily* focused on provision of social insurance—except among African Americans, where major orders almost invariably sponsored insurance. Among whites, leading U.S. fraternal groups normally did better when they focused on

social ties and moral suasion, while relegating insurance provision, if any, to adjunct programs that were optional for members.

A final point is worth emphasis, given the tendency of today's analysts to treat voluntary groups as pure manifestations of social cooperation. In real life, people often associate to exclude, fight, or defend against others. Certainly, fierce ethnic and religious conflicts fueled much association building in the late-nineteenth-century United States. In response to waves of new immigration from eastern and southern Europe, voluntary associations appealing to native-born Americans asserted Protestant folkways, championed public schools, and demanded laws to limit the influx and political influence of hyphenated Americans.⁹² In turn, ethnics under attack pulled together their own voluntary federations aiming to unite local groups for self-defense and assert their legitimacy as Americans. Unsurprisingly, peak periods of nativist association building and political agitation in U.S. history—such as the 1840s and 1850s, the 1890s; and the 1920s—are the same periods when large numbers of ethnic American groups were launched or expanded.⁹³

CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By the dawn of the twentieth century, the United States was awash with chapter-based membership federations recruiting men or women (or, occasionally, both together) across lines of class as well as place. Dozens of ultimately very large voluntary federations, and hundreds of smaller ones too, were launched between 1865 and the early 1900s. Local chapters linked to these federations soon spread into even the smallest towns. Sheer numbers of local chapters of large

and small voluntary federations probably peaked during the 1900s and 1910s. After that a certain consolidation occurred, as many insurance-oriented fraternals faltered and other voluntary federations completed their nationwide chapter networks. Twentieth-century American membership associations were also more likely than their earlier counterparts to stress large units with many internal sub-groups rather than sheer proliferation of separate units. Thus expanding twentieth-century fraternal groups, such as the Elks, the Eagles, the Shriners, the Knights of Columbus, and the Moose, had rules allowing only one or a few lodges per city, instead of encouraging the formation of dozens of lodges in each place, as had the Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, and other fraternal federations that grew to national prominence in the nineteenth century.⁹⁴

Federations and Government in World War I

The surprisingly beneficial impact of big wars on American civic voluntarism did not end with the Civil War, for similar dynamics happened again during and immediately after the great, mass-mobilizing world wars of the twentieth century. As Tocqueville believed, war can be deleterious for organized civic life, especially when authoritarian bureaucrats take over all aspects of economic and social life and suppress voluntary efforts. But this was not the way big wars were fought in the United States. During America's greatest wars—the Civil War, World War I, and World War II—federal authorities needed help from voluntary groups willing to jump into the fray. Participation on the winning side of such wars in turn enhanced the legitimacy and bolstered the resources of cooperating voluntary groups.

Great, mass-mobilizing wars also taught American elites the value of organizing their fellow citizens and drawing them into full participation in shared endeavors. Along with competitive elections run by parties committed to popular mobilization, great wars encouraged American elites to be democratic. In big wars as well as in the competitive electoral politics of the nineteenth century, U.S. elites discovered that they could not get the job done unless they organized and involved masses of ordinary citizens in cooperative endeavors.

World War I was America's first centrally managed war, with men selected to fight by the Selective Service and economic production coordinated by federal agencies.⁹⁵ Even so, this war, like the Civil War before it, stimulated and reinforced organized voluntarism in the United States. The federal government of the 1910s deployed professionals and managers in Washington, D.C.—many more, certainly, than it used in the 1860s—but government could not reach into local communities and homes. Only popularly rooted voluntary federations could do that, so federal war managers needed them. Because partnerships with popularly rooted voluntary groups were so necessary to war mobilizations, World War I helped to consolidate an organized U.S. civil society grounded in nation-spanning federated associations.

To be sure, most of the brand new associations established during and right after World War I were business and professional bodies.⁹⁶ To manage the economy between 1917 and 1919, federal authorities fostered innovative kinds of cooperation among business and professional leaders; and elites who met on wartime boards often established more permanent associations.⁹⁷ While dozens of

new business and professional groups formed in the late 1910s and early 1920s, only two new large-scale popular federations were born. In 1919 military officers launched the American Legion as a nationwide federation representing World War I veterans of all ranks.⁹⁸ That same year the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) was founded, taking advantage of the wartime cooperation among local and state farm bureaus encouraged by federal Agriculture Department officials, who had preferred not to rely on the somewhat pacifist Grange or other preexisting farm federations.⁹⁹ In most areas of wartime activity, however, federal authorities had no need to encourage new popular voluntary federations, because so many were already flourishing and were eager to cooperate and lend their preexisting networks of local units to the national effort. For example, table 2.2 enumerates the dozens of associational networks and thousands of congregations and voluntary chapters that participated in food conservation drives in the single midwestern state of Iowa. Iowa may have been an especially civic state, yet similar voluntary mobilizations occurred all over the country.

Dramatized in the ubiquitous posters adorning homes and public places during the Great War (see fig. 2.3 for an example), partnerships between federal government agencies and leading nationally federated membership associations figured in every aspect of social and economic mobilization.¹⁰⁰ The Red Cross, the YMCA, the Knights of Columbus, and the Jewish Welfare Board (including the Young Men's Hebrew Association) worked with the War Department to provide social supports to the troops.¹⁰¹ This partnership of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish associations was especially important, because for the first time in

TABLE 2.2
Federated Groups Engaged in World War I Food Drives in Iowa

CHURCH CONGREGATIONS:

Methodist: 783	Presbyterian: 202
Catholic: 480	German Lutheran: 121
Lutheran: 337	German Evangelical: 56
Christian: 324	Swedish Lutheran: 53
Congregational: 237	Episcopal: 40
Baptist: 221	Evangelical Lutheran: 19
	Total: 2,873

ASSOCIATION CHAPTERS:

United Commercial Travelers: 34 lodges
Travelers Protective Association: 14 lodges
Iowa State Traveling Men's Association: 235 lodges
Gideons: 324 lodges
Knights of Pythias: 235 lodges
Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks: 32 lodges
Loyal Order of Moose: 50 lodges
Knights of Columbus: 47 lodges
Ancient Order of United Workmen: 118 lodges
Fraternal Order of Eagles: 25 lodges
Independent Order of Odd Fellows: 685 lodges
Brotherhood of American Yeomen: 500 lodges
Homesteaders: 140 lodges
Woodmen of the World: 400 lodges
Modern Woodmen of America: 982 lodges
Masons: 531 lodges
Sons of Herman: 1,500 lodges
Foresters: 22 lodges
Royal Neighbors of America: 575 lodges
Order of the Eastern Star: 419 lodges
Woodmen of the World Circle: 190 lodges
Rebekahs: 600 lodges
Pythian Sisters: 144 lodges
Women's Clubs: 600 clubs
Woman's Christian Temperance Unions: 400 unions
Daughters of the American Revolution: 75 chapters

TABLE 2.2 (cont.)

Colonial Dames: 100 chapters	
Grand Army of the Republic: 600 posts	
Sons of the American Revolution: 25 chapters	
Ad Men's Clubs: 14 branches	
Rotary Clubs: 14 clubs	Total: 9,630

SOURCE: Ivan L. Pollock, *The Food Administration in Iowa*, vol. 1 (Iowa City State Historical Society of Iowa, 1923), pp. 188–89.

U.S. history interdenominational cooperation was officially sanctioned and made nationally visible. From this time, Americans could begin to think of the nation in more religiously inclusive terms. Beyond the leading associations of the United War-Work Campaign, moreover, the Boy Scouts helped the Treasury Department to sell liberty bonds.¹⁰² Women's voluntary federations and fraternal groups worked with the Food Administration to ask every home to use less wheat, meat, and other food products needed for export to starving Europe.¹⁰³ And the American Federation of Labor cooperated to manage war production.¹⁰⁴ Close to the entire panoply of nation-spanning voluntary federations that had grown up since the Civil War came into play as partners helping the U.S. federal government to fight America's first world war. In the end the federations that worked most closely with national agencies during World War I—including the Red Cross, the YMCA, the Knights of Columbus, the Elks, and the PTA—were the ones most likely to attract members right after the conflict. These groups, in turn, ended up well positioned to withstand economic downturns in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁰⁵ (An exception was the American Federation of Labor, which gained during

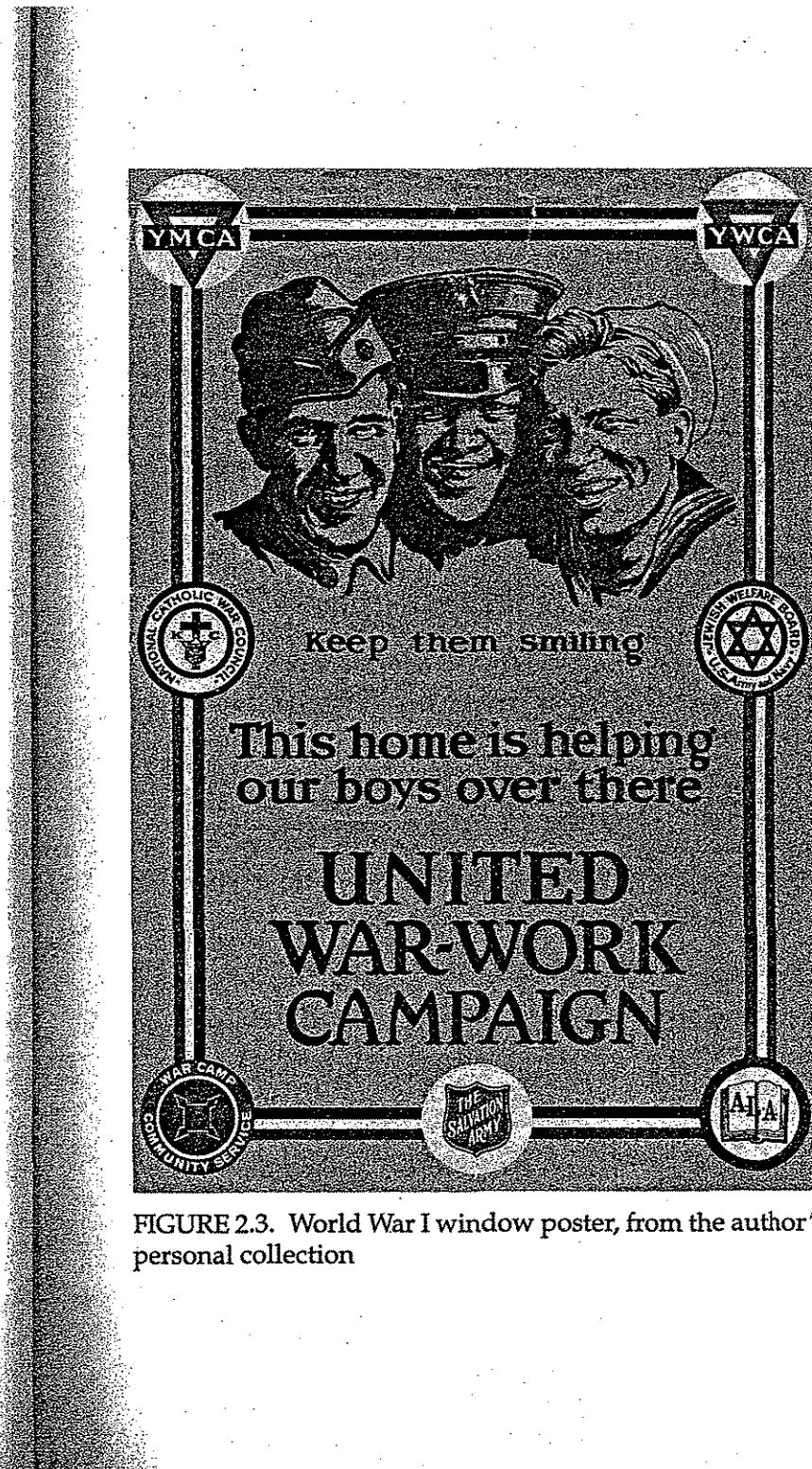


FIGURE 2.3. World War I window poster, from the author's personal collection

the war but lost ground in the 1920s due to severe corporate and federal repression.)

World War I was not good for all voluntary groups, however. Socialist and radical groups suffered during as well as after the war, as did ethnic associations whose identities were misaligned with wartime enmities and alliances.¹⁰⁶ Unable to be enthusiastic about a conflict in which the United States was allied with Ireland's enemy, Great Britain, the Irish American Ancient Order of Hibernians went into decline in the World War I era.¹⁰⁷ Previously vibrant German American associations fared even worse.¹⁰⁸ After Congress convened hearings to investigate its alleged disloyalty, the German-American Alliance decided to disband and hand over what remained in its treasury to the Red Cross.¹⁰⁹ And this was but the tip of the iceberg. From World War I, the approximately one-tenth of the U.S. population who were of German descent mostly switched to non-ethnic-identified groups—or relabeled long-established associations in ostentatiously "American" ways. Fraternal groups disallowed long-standing German-language lodges; "German" churches went incognito; and German flags and national colors disappeared from group emblems.

From nineteenth- into twentieth-century America, in sum, great wars pulled many Americans into stronger civic commitments. Some groups were marginalized, to be sure, especially white Southerners after 1860 and German Americans after 1917. On balance, however, both the Civil War and World War I—the great martial bookends of American industrialization—invigorated organized civil society. Both great wars reinforced local and national participation in large-scale cross-class federated membership associations—and such federations, in turn, helped to prevent Americans

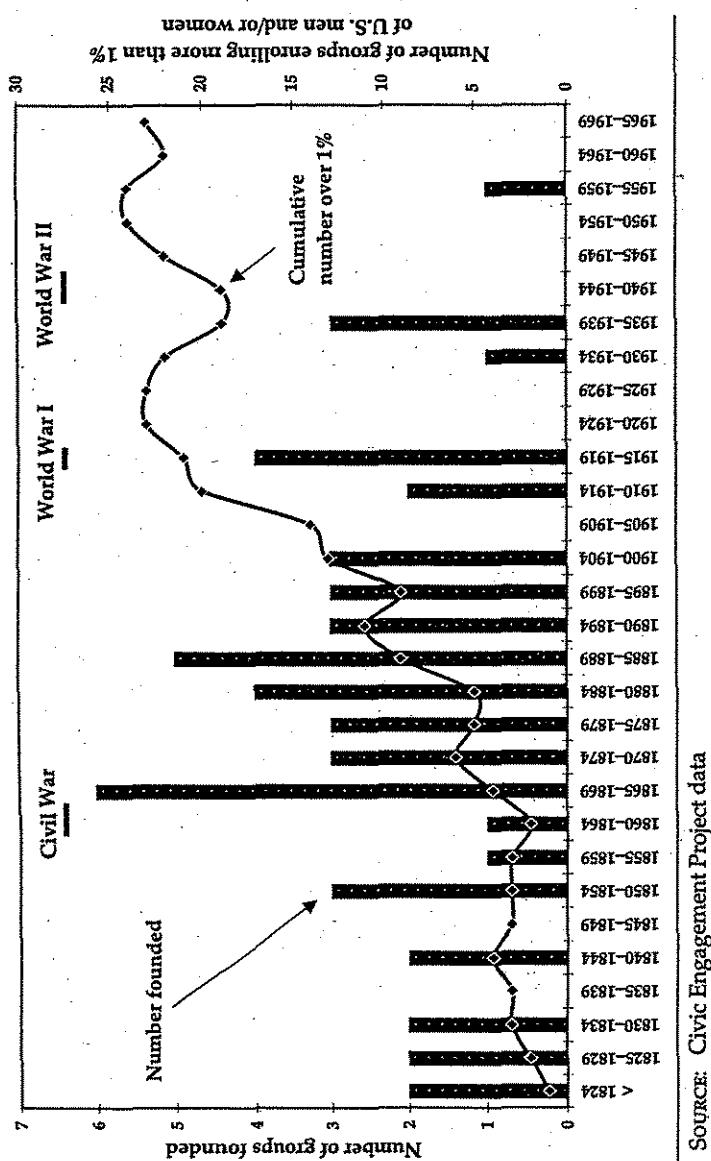
from dividing into class-segregated associational worlds as the country modernized.

Voluntarism in the Modern U.S. Polity

By the 1920s the United States had become an industrial nation, and the data in figure 2.4 make it clear that some two dozen large-scale membership federations coexisted thereafter, though there was some shrinkage in the ranks of very large associations during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Of course, the exact mix of large U.S. voluntary associations was considerably transformed over time. Some older groups such as the Sons of Temperance and the IOGT and the GAR declined or went out of existence, while other associations were never more than temporary. Some brief-lived associations died after reform crusades, whether abortive (as in the cases of the Knights of Labor and the Colored Farmers' Alliance) or successful (as in the case of the National American Woman Suffrage Association). Other short-lived groups—such as the American Protective Association, the Junior Order of United American Mechanics, and the second Ku Klux Klan—became huge only briefly during periods of heightened ethnic or racial tension. In the final accounting, however, as some massive voluntary federations declined or disappeared, others emerged and grew, including the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the PTA and the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and the Knights of Columbus, the Shriners, the Eagles, the Moose, and the Elks.

Political parties and voluntary federations met somewhat different fates in the early twentieth century. As organizations, U.S. political parties changed in striking ways after

FIGURE 2.4
Foundings and Accumulation of Large U.S. Membership Associations



Source: Civic Engagement Project data

the end of the nineteenth century. Although the Democratic Party acted as an agent of mass mobilization during the 1930s, both the Democrats and the Republicans gradually turned toward more “educational” styles of electoral campaigning.¹¹⁰ In many states and localities, party organizations gradually withered and stopped organizing and contacting voters at the grass roots. In contrast, civil associations other than political parties remained much more stable as locally rooted federal networks. The basic features of the membership-based federations examined throughout this chapter proved surprisingly persistent—through industrialization and depression, through war and peace—from the early 1800s through the middle of the twentieth century.

As is well known, the New Deal marked a period of heightened electoral mobilization leading to new federal government initiatives to help people and businesses cope with the Great Depression. The Townsend movement flourished at this juncture, demanding new efforts to aid America’s elderly. And labor unions (including industrial as well as craft workers) finally gained a major foothold in U.S. civil society during the 1930s and 1940s. Yet the 1930s were stressful for many other voluntary associations, because economic times were so hard for the working and middle-class men and women who paid dues to them. Most voluntary federations experienced membership downturns during the Great Depression, sometimes very sharp declines. But most also revived along with the economy in the late 1930s; and nearly the same panoply of national federations that cooperated with the federal government to fight World War I turned up to cooperate again during World War II. The aftermath of that great conflict brought renewed growth and energy to the nation’s voluntary membership federations,

larger and smaller ones alike. In his important book, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam goes so far as to present the immediate post-World War II decades as the high point of modern American civic voluntarism, a veritable golden age for the nation of joiners.¹¹¹

Conservatives frequently assert that the growth of "the modern welfare state" crowded out U.S. voluntary efforts, citing as a prime example the diminution of social insurance provision by fraternal groups.¹¹² But the timing of associational change does not fit this hypothesis, because many major fraternal groups abandoned or marginalized their social insurance programs well before the New Deal of the 1930s; and hundreds of small insurance fraternals died or merged into commercial insurance companies in the 1910s and 1920s.¹¹³ Besides, we cannot just look at voluntary associations as social service providers. Their roles as organized voices for citizens, their political activities, need to be considered as well. Many of America's greatest voluntary membership federations pressed for public social programs in the first place and then prospered by helping government to reach citizens with new benefits and services for millions of people.

In the late 1800s the GAR grew along with generous state and national provisions for Union military veterans and survivors.¹¹⁴ From the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, the Grange and the AFBF were closely involved with state and federal programs to aid farmers.¹¹⁵ Independent women's associations—including the WCTU, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and the National Congress of Mothers—advocated and cooperated to implement local, state, and national public policies to help mothers, children, and families.¹¹⁶ The Townsend movement pressed for federal benefits for the elderly during the 1930s

and 1940s; and more recent associations of retirees have grown along with the resulting public programs.¹¹⁷ Labor unions needed the U.S. government's help fully to establish themselves—and in turn became champions of New Deal economic and social programs.

A leading fraternal order, the Fraternal Order of Eagles (FOE), championed mothers' pensions in the 1910s and led campaigns for old-age pensions in dozens of states during the 1920s. Indeed, so central was the FOE in the struggle for old-age provision that the Grand Eagle himself was one of the dignitaries given an official pen when President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Social Security bill into law in 1935.¹¹⁸ And finally, we must never forget that the nation's most generous social program for young workers and families, the G.I. Bill of 1944, was drafted and championed by a vast voluntary membership federation, the American Legion.¹¹⁹

From the Civil War through the post-World War II era, voluntary membership associations and the U.S. version of the modern welfare state were thoroughly intertwined. Leading membership federations gained by being associated with bold national efforts that concretely helped millions of citizens. And of course the U.S. Congress and state legislatures responded when widespread voluntary associations mobilized members and chapters to shape public opinion and press for the legislative enactment of inclusive public programs. Civil society and government thus worked hand in hand to fashion and sustain America's version of the modern welfare state, which historically consisted of educational, veterans', and social insurance programs intended to extend opportunity and guarantee a modicum of security to millions of individuals and families. Popular social

programs in the United States were never “welfare” handouts for the poor alone. They were inclusive benefits or services, exactly the kinds of government activities likely to be favored by massive voluntary federations that spanned places and bridged classes.

VOLUNTARISM AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

This chapter has taken us on a historical whirlwind tour, and we have learned that the true story of American voluntarism is very different from the myth of apolitical localism projected onto the nation’s civic past by so many of today’s pundits. Most voluntary groups active in American communities from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century were more than strictly local entities. Membership associations usually enjoyed a strong local presence, to be sure, yet most emerged and flourished as parts of regional and national federations that were, as Schlesinger suspected, “voluntary bodies of sizable membership, reasonably long duration, and fairly large territorial extent.”¹²⁰ Deliberately built by civicly ambitious men and women with national vision and power aspirations, membership federations grew with unusual vigor in the wake of the nation’s biggest wars, and many of them supported and drew legitimization from their support of expansive—and expensive—public social programs.

Once we get beyond the blinkered thinking of recent times, there is nothing in the findings of this chapter that should really surprise us. As so well understood by wise observers—ranging from Alexis de Tocqueville and James Bryce in the nineteenth century to Arthur Schlesinger Sr. in the 1940s—civic voluntarism in the United States was the

creation of citizen-organizers with national ambitions as well as an understanding that the organizations they built needed to put down strong local roots. At once luxuriant and contentious, American civic voluntarism always flourished as a vital part of muscular representative democratic governance—and never was in any sense a substitute for it.