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Civil Society, Political Capital, and Democratization in Central America

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Robert Putnam argues that civil society—citizen organizational activity—contributes to successful governance and democracy, outcomes potentially helpful in reconstructing Central America. Putnam does not, however, specify how civil society shapes government performance. We demonstrate how group participation might impinge upon the state through the "political capital" of political participation and democratic norms. We first explore the relationships among two civil society measures (formal group activism and community self-help activism) and social and political capital, employing survey data from Central America. We then investigate the effects of civil society and social and political capital upon levels of democracy. We find that while higher levels of formal group membership and several political capital measures associate with higher levels of democracy, social capital lacks the relationship Putnam predicts. We conclude that political rather than social capital links formal group activism to democracy in Central America.

Robert Putnam draws from de Tocqueville to argue that civil society—citizen participation in formal organizations—influences the success of democracy. In his study of Italy (1993), he observes that regions with higher levels of associational activity also have greater social capital and thus, he claims, more successful regional governments. He draws from Coleman (1988) to argue that membership in groups creates "social capital," or "networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 1995, 67). In this very influential 1995 piece Putnam uses the metaphor of "bowling alone" to express his concern that a decline of formal associational activity (e.g., "bowling in leagues") erodes social capital and may thus be undermining democracy in the United States.

We concur with Putnam that civil society may contribute to democratization by mediating between citizen and state, mobilizing and conveying citizens' interests to government, constraining government behavior by stimulating citizen activism, and inculcating democratic values. Indeed, many scholars have similarly argued that citizen involvement in organizations contributes directly or indirectly to political participation (Conway 1991; Nagel 1987; Rosenstone and

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Hansen 1993; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978), democratic values (Booth and Richard 1996), democratization (Blaney and Pasha 1993; Blair 1994; Cohen and Rogers 1992; Cohen and Arato 1992; Diamond 1992) and economic development (Carroll 1992; Clark 1991; Esman and Uphoff 1984; Hirschman 1984). Others have argued that civil society shapes the process of democratization in Latin America (Avritzer 1997; Lynch 1997; Olvera 1997; Peruzzotti 1997). Assuming, therefore, that civil society may be particularly important in areas emerging from authoritarian rule and violent political conflict, we test some of these ideas with data from six Central American nations.

Theory

Putnam's ideas, though much cited and praised, have also provoked a growing body of criticism. Foley and Edwards (1998) contend that Putnam misinterprets de Tocqueville, who believed that civil society not only reinforced civility but also generated political conflict. Foley and Edwards posit two opposed effects of civil society: in "civil society I," as in Putnam's view, associational life and the habits it inspires "foster patterns of civility in the actions of citizens" (1996, 39). In contrast, "civil society II" group actions are "capable . . . of energizing resistance to a tyrannical regime" (39). Thus, citizens' group participation can contribute to social comity or conflict, either of which may strengthen democracy.

Tarrow (1996) also takes issue with Putnam, faulting him for errors in historical inference and interpretation of Italian history. In particular, Tarrow suggests that Putnam has the causal sequence backward—rather than civil society shaping government performance, as Putnam contends, the state (and such institutions as political parties) has the capacity to stimulate high levels of organizational activity. Tarrow faults Putnam for paying too little attention to how the sociopolitical context may shape civil society. Other scholars have noted how such contextual factors as repression, constitutional environment, corporatism, and state mobilization efforts affect civil society in Latin America and thus condition its potential to contribute to democracy (Lynch 1997; Olvera 1997).

Foley and Edwards (1996, 44–47) focus on freedom of association as a critical aspect of political context that has particular resonance in Central America, where repression has been intense in some countries for much of their histories, and particularly so in recent decades. For instance, Foley (1996) contends that political repression in El Salvador in the 1970s forced associational activity into the conflictive, antityrannical mode (civil society II).[1] Indeed, we would extend this argument further still, proposing "civil society III" (or, perhaps better still, "uncivil society"), a violent and confrontational but not necessarily antityrannical form of associational activism. Examples include the Ku Klux Klan

[1]Similar arguments have been made about how repression altered the behavior of Nicaraguan and Guatemalan associations during the same era (Booth 1991; Booth and Walker 1993; Jonas 1991).

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and some of the militias in the United States, and the numerous ideological extremist groups, paramilitaries, and death squads of Central America in recent decades.[2]

We have an additional concern about the inadequate explication of the civil society equation suggested by Putnam. We have argued elsewhere (Booth and Richard 1998) that Putnam fails to specify how civil society impinges upon government. He holds that citizens' participation in groups gives rise to networks of civic interaction. These networks "pervasively influence public life" insofar as they "facilitate coordination and communication," reduce incentives for opportunism, and enhance "the participants' 'taste' for collective benefits" (Putnam 1995, 67). However, not only are these connections obscure or murky in their interrelationships, they do not actually reach governmental institutions or their decisions. Putnam never elucidates how group involvement affects citizen behavior or attitudes so as to influence government performance or enhance the prospects for democracy.

We thus seek to clarify and then test how associational activity might affect the relationship of citizens to the state. In contemporary Central America, with its civil wars now formally ended, it is of paramount importance to determine which types of civil society—civility-building, antityrannical, or antidemocratic (types I, II, or III, respectively)—may be present and what their effects may be. We contend that, in order to have political significance, associational activism must foster attitudes and behaviors that actually influence regimes in some way.[3] We label such state-impinging attitudes and activities "political capital." Of what would such political capital consist? For civil society I (the civility-reinforcing sort Putnam praises) and II (the antityrannical type), rather than the antidemocratic type III, political capital should include attitudes supportive of democracy (democratic norms), and behavior that would engage citizens with the state and each other in channeled ways. Both seem likely to influence government performance: democratic attitudes limit or motivate regime actions; citizen participation conveys interests, preferences, and demands to the regime (Booth and Richard 1998).

We test here the relationships between civil society and the development of both social capital (derived from Putnam) and political capital, and between all of the former and democracy, using contemporary data from six Central American countries. First, we examine the extent to which associational activity contributes to two measures of social capital (interpersonal trust and political information) and to four measures of political capital (democratic norms, voting, campaign activism, and contacting public officials). Second, we test for relation-

[2]On such groups in Central America, see Aguilera Peralta and Romero Imery (1981), Gould (1990), McClintock (1985a, 1985b), and Montgomery (1992).

[3]Seligson (1996) provides an example when she demonstrates that membership in communal organizations in Central America correlates positively with demands on government.

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ships between citizens' civil society activism, their social and political capital, and levels of democracy in Central America.

Hypotheses

This discussion suggests five basic hypotheses. H_1 and H_2 state the anticipated positive relationships between civil society and social and political capital. H_3–H_5 present the expected effects of civil society, social capital, and political capital upon national levels of democracy.

H_1: Higher levels of civil society activism will contribute to higher levels of social capital formation.

H_2: Higher levels of civil society activism will contribute to higher levels of political capital formation.

H_3: Higher levels of civil society will associate with higher levels of regime democracy.

H_4: Higher levels of social capital will associate with higher levels of regime democracy.

H_5: Higher levels of political capital will associate with higher levels of regime democracy.

Central America

Contemporary Central America provides an ideal setting in which to explore the links among civil society, the formation of political and social capital, and levels of democracy. The region experienced dramatic economic growth that began in the 1960s, faltered with the oil price shock of the mid-1970s, and moved catastrophically into the late 1970s and 1980s with civil wars and economic depression. Turmoil was widespread. A Marxist-led movement overthrew Nicaragua's Somoza dynasty and implemented a revolutionary transformation of the polity and society. Lengthy national rebellions by Marxist revolutionaries in El Salvador and Guatemala were eventually settled in 1992 and 1996, respectively, after tens of thousands of deaths. The United States invaded Panama in 1989 to oust dictator Manuel Noriega. This violence and political turbulence has subsided in the 1990s, however, as all the region's nations have implemented formal democracy (Booth and Walker 1993; Bulmer-Thomas 1987; Seligson and Booth 1995; Williams 1994).

This record of protracted political tumult and the recency of the region's return to political stability and civilian, constitutional rule makes it particularly appropriate for the study of links between civil society and political and social capital, as well as the links among all three and democracy. Central American nations

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have much in common,[4] yet they vary in their recent levels of turmoil, repression, and democracy. They thus provide an ideal most-similar-systems setting in which to examine civil society. This suggests several key questions: What is the status of civil society in Central American nations? Do organizations through their influence upon citizens contribute to the formation of social capital or political capital? Does civil society promote democracy by contributing to increased political civility in the form of interpersonal trust, democratic norms, or political participation? Does political repression affect civil society, the formation of social and political capital, or democratization?

Data

To test these hypotheses we analyze public opinion surveys conducted in the early 1990s among comparable cross sections of the urban citizens of six nations—Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama.[5] Items included in the surveys investigated political participation, political attitudes and values, and democratic norms. The participation and democratic

[4]All but Panama have shared much political and economic history (membership in the same Spanish colony, the Central American Federation of the 1820s and 1830s, and membership in the Central American Common Market since 1960). All six are adjacent on the Mesoamerican isthmus, former Spanish colonies, small, relatively poor, predominantly Catholic, and culturally and linguistically similar.

[5]We gratefully acknowledge data collection support from the North-South Center of the University of Miami, the Howard Heinz Endowment and the Center for Latin American Studies of the University of Pittsburgh Research Grants on Current Latin American Issues, University of North Texas Faculty Development Grants and Faculty Research Programs, the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the Tinker Foundation, the Heinz Foundation, and the University of Pittsburgh. The project was designed and much of the data were collected by a team including Mitchell A. Seligson of the University of Pittsburgh and John A. Booth of the University of North Texas. Team members who also directed fieldwork were Ricardo Córdova, Andrew Stein, Annabelle Conroy, Orlando Pérez, and Cynthia Chalker. Guatemala fieldwork was conducted by the Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales (ASIES). Valuable collaboration was provided by the following: in Costa Rica: Consejo Superior Universitaria (CSUCA), Departments of Statistics and Political Science of the University of Costa Rica; in Nicaragua: Instituto de Estudios Internacionales (IEI) of the Universidad Centroamericana; in Honduras: Centro de Estudio y Promoción del Desarrollo (CEPROD) and Centro de Documentación de Honduras; in Panama: Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos "Justo Arosemena" (CELA); and in El Salvador: Centro de Investigación y Acción Social (CINAS) and the Instituto de Estudios Latinoamericanos (IDELA).

Methodology: Surveys were conducted in mid-1991 among the urban, voting age populations of El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. In 1992 a similar survey was conducted in Guatemala. The Costa Rica survey was conducted in 1995. In each a stratified (by socioeconomic level) cluster sample of dwelling units was drawn from the national capital and other major urban centers. Interviewees were selected using randomizing procedures and sex and age quotas. We collected 4,089 face-to-face interviews regionwide, with national samples ranging from 500 to 900. To prevent large country Ns from distorting findings in this analysis, the country samples have been weighted equally to approximately 700 each (weighted N = 4, 198). We generalize only to major urban areas, roughly half the region's populace.

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norms items have been widely validated and field-tested in various cultural settings (Booth and Seligson 1984; Muller, Seligson, and Turan 1987; Seligson and Booth 1993; Seligson and Gómez 1989).

Civil Society Measures

Responses to questions concerning activity in several types of organizations provided the basis for our indices of civil society (see notes to Table 1). Factor analysis of variables measuring citizens' participation in groups and associations detected two distinctive civil society activity modes. We label the first ***formal group activism*** (it includes membership in unions, civic associations, cooperatives, and professional groups). We call the second ***communal activism*** (it involves self-help groups and activities at the local level).[6] Table 1 displays the average civil society activity level for the urban populations of our six Central American countries. The results reveal marked differences among the nations in the levels of ***formal group activism***, and lesser differences in ***communal activism***.

Social Capital Measures

We were able to operationalize two of the indicators of social capital suggested by Putnam, each developed from multiple items. They are a measure of ***political knowledge*** or information[7] and a measure of ***interpersonal trust*** (see Table 1 for details on item construction). Means for the social capital variables appear in Table 1; they reveal substantial variation among nations.

Political Capital Measures

We have developed four political capital variables. The first is a measure of citizen commitment to ***democratic norms***. It incorporates the two main approaches to measuring democratic political culture. The approach derived from the civic culture and polyarchy literature taps respondents' willingness to extend participation rights to others. The approach based upon political tolerance considers respondents' willingness to grant political rights to disliked groups. Fourteen items from the two approaches have been combined into an overall

[6]Communal activism includes membership in school, church-related, and local self-help and development groups (undifferentiated as to governmental or private mobilization), as well as contribution to or participation in "helping solve community problems." Communalism thus captures both pure self-help efforts in traditional communal organizations plus such social movements as pro-housing and informal sector organizations that sometimes engage in confrontational demand making.

[7]The political information measure derives from correct responses to probes for the U.S. Secretary of State, Russian president, and number of seats in each particular nation's unicameral legislature. Although a scale constructed from more domestically and locally focused items might have been preferable, especially for exploring links to communal activism, this scale (frequently used in surveys in Central America) was the only one available for this analysis.

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TABLE 1

Civil Society, Social Capital, and Political Capital Scores, by Country

Variables	Honduras	Costa Rica	Panama	Guatemala	El Salvador	Nicaragua	Significance[a]
CIVIL SOCIETY							
Group activism[b]	1.05	.47	.84	.66	.33	.43	****
Communal activism[c]	1.04	1.01	1.03	1.31	1.24	1.17	****
SOCIAL CAPITAL							
Information level[d]	1.43	.83	1.37	.62	1.25	1.03	****
Interpersonal trust[e]	.87	.82	1.12	.74	.78	.74	****
POLITICAL CAPITAL							
Democratic norms[f]	6.98	6.77	7.33	5.51	5.57	6.42	****
Voting behavior[g]	1.86	1.91	1.72	1.51	1.39	1.62	****
Contacting public officials[h]	.77	.56	.56	.41	.32	.17	****
Campaign activism[i]	1.08	.87	.84	.25	.17	.47	****

[a]Significance levels: **** = ≤ .0001; (NS) = not significant.

[b]At least sometimes attend union, civic association, cooperative or professional association; yes = 1, no = 0 for each; range 0–4.

[c]Involvement in 5 community group activities; 1 = yes, 0 = no for each; range 0–5. The groups are community development/improvement, school-parent, and church-affiliated; respondents also received a point each for working with and for contributing labor/funds to efforts to better the community.

[d]Index of political information based upon correctly naming the U.S. Secretary of State, Russian President, and number of seats in national legislature; range 0–3. See note 7 in text for a discussion of this item.

[e]Index of interpersonal trust (based on 3 trust-orientation items); range 0–3; higher value = greater trust in others. The trust items were: (a) “In general people are trustworthy”, (b) “Most of the time people worry mostly about themselves instead of trying to help their neighbors,” and (c) “Most people will try to take advantage of you if given a chance.” One point was awarded for a trusting response on each item.

[f]Overall support for democratic liberties (mean of 14 items expressing support for participatory rights); range 1–10. See note 8 in text for further details.

[g]Registered to vote plus voted in last election; yes = 1, no = 0 for each; range 0–2.

[h]Ever contacted president, legislative deputy, city council member, or national government agency; yes = 1, no = 0; range 0–4

[i]Attempted to persuade others how to vote or worked on campaign in last or prior election; 1 = yes, 0 = no for each; range 0–3.

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democratic norms measure.[8] Table 1 reports the mean scores by country for ***democratic norms***. The averages for the citizens of all six nations fall in the prodemocracy end of the scale.

The remaining three political capital variables measure citizens' participation in politics. A factor analysis of eight separate items identified three citizen activity factors,[9] each of which we have converted into an index: ***voting behavior, campaign activism***, and ***contacting*** various types of public officials (see Table 1 for details on index construction).

Contextual and Demographic Measures

Because certain demographic traits of citizens are known to influence their behavior and attitudes and thus affect the relationships we are examining, we employ measures of respondents' ***living standard, education***, and ***sex*** as control variables. Furthermore, given so many scholars' admonitions about the importance of context upon the formation of civil society, we employ two measures of sociopolitical context. The first is the national level of economic development, measured as ***GDP per capita***. The second treats repression as a systemic constraint upon individuals at the polity level. It includes two equally weighted components: one measuring repression at the time of the survey, and another the history of repression in the decade before the survey. The resulting measure (the mean of the two) provides a ***repression*** score for each country that we assign to each respondent by nation of residence.[10]

Analysis

We employ multiple regression techniques to test H_1 and H_2,[11] which predict that higher levels of civil society activism (both in formal groups and at the

[8]Each item was a 10-point scale registering degree of agreement or disagreement with various democratic norms, such as rights to vote or to participate in problem-solving organizations, similar rights for regime critics, and restrictions on civil liberties such as censorship or prohibition of demonstrations. The 14 items scaled nicely into an overall index of support for democratic liberties. See Seligson and Booth (1993) for an extended discussion and citations of these approaches, and Booth and Richard (1996) for details on index construction.

[9]This technique was developed by Verba and Nie (1972) and Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978), and has been applied with similar results to Central American participation data by Booth and Seligson (1979) and Booth and Richard (1996).

[10]We included a historical component (estimated intensity of regime repression over the decade before each nation's survey) on the assumption that the effect of repression on citizens will decay gradually even after actual repression has subsided. The immediate repression context also matters, so we estimated repression within each country at the survey date. See Booth and Richard (1996) for further details on construction and validation of this measure.

[11]Portions of the following analysis concerning H_1 and H_2 are drawn from Booth and Richard (1998).

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communal level) raise respondents' levels of social and political capital. Table 2 examines these questions, leaving aside for the moment possible demographic and contextual influences upon these relationships.

For social capital, the results in Table 2 show that the ***formal group activism*** measure contributes significantly and positively to ***political information*** (beta = .253) and ***interpersonal trust*** (beta = .054). ***Communal-level activism***, on the other hand, associates negatively with ***political information*** (–.097), but positively with ***interpersonal trust*** (.059). The negative beta for communal activism's contribution to ***political information*** suggests either that national-level political knowledge, as we measure it, may have little relevance for community self-help activism or that the relationship is spurious and may be the product of intervening socioeconomic factors. Indeed, with respect to the latter possibility, we find communalists poorer and less educated than the average citizen, while both ***standard of living*** and ***education*** correlate positively with ***political information*** (r = .43 and r = .28, respectively).

The overall explanatory power of civil society for ***political information*** levels is fairly strong (R^2 of .25), or a quarter of its variance. In contrast, civil society activism accounts for very little of the variance (less than 1%) of ***interpersonal trust.***[12] These first results provide some support for Putnam's theoretical argument concerning civil society and social capital as applied to urban Central America. Three of four beta coefficients behave as predicted by H_1.

Turning to the political capital variables, Table 2 reveals that the ***formal group activism*** civil society measure behaves as hypothesized—the beta coefficients are positive and significant for ***democratic norms*** and each of the participation variables. In sharp contrast, the results for ***communal activism*** are mixed. Participation in communal-level activities associates with lower (rather than higher) levels of ***democratic norms*** and ***campaign activism***, has no significant association with ***voting***, and contributes positively only to ***contacting public officials***.

The results so far only modestly support Putnam's theory and our extension of it that civil society activism will increase levels of social and political capital. ***Formal group activism*** positively correlates with all six social and political capital variables, tending to confirm both H_1 and H_2. ***Communal civil society activity***, in contrast, increases political and social capital as measured here only for ***interpersonal trust*** and ***contacting***. It appears to depress levels of ***democratic norms, campaigning***, and ***political information***. This raises the intriguing possibility that communal-level civil society activism—which is more prevalent in Central America's more repressive nations—is generating some of the more confrontational civil society II, or perhaps even the antidemocratic or alienated civil society III.

[12]This likely stems from the fact that interpersonal trust levels are quite low and vary little throughout Central America.

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TABLE 2

The Impact of Civil Society Activism on Social Capital and Political Capital.[a]

	SOCIAL CAPITAL			POLITICAL CAPITAL		
	Political Information	Interpersonal Trust	Democratic Norms	Voting	Campaign	Contact
Group activism	.253****	.054***	.192****	.117****	.198****	.191****
Communal Activism	–.097****	.059**	–.091****	–.011	–.066***	.164****
R^2	.250	.008	.037	.013	.038	.078
Standard Error	1.025	.937	1.953	.613	.919	.821
F	127.57	15.14	68.16	23.77	69.47	148.21
Probability of F	.0000	.0000	.0000	.0000	.0000	.0000
(N)	(3849)			(3526)		

[a]Significance levels: ** = ≤ .01; *** = ≤ .001; **** = ≤ .0001; (NS) = not significant.

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Why might communalism unexpectedly associate with lower rather than higher levels of democratic norms and campaigning, yet remain positively linked to contacting? We suspect that communalism as we measure it here has these effects because it taps the urban activism most widespread among the poor and less educated, who also generally manifest less support for democratic liberties and lower participation rates.[13] That communalism nonetheless leads to higher contacting is unremarkable given that one of its major goals is to seek government assistance with community problems. We consider below whether the communalists of more repressive nations, pursuing their goals by working through local groups, are indeed less engaged in elections and campaigns and less prone to support democracy, or whether these findings are artifacts of the particular socioeconomic traits of communal civil society activists.

So far we have reported on civil society–social/political capital linkages without taking into account how various demographic traits of respondents and national contexts might affect these relationships. Characteristics such as ***sex***, ***education***, and ***living standard*** almost certainly have some effect on group behavior, political participation, and attitudes. Two contextual effects—levels of economic development and political repression—may also be very important in Central America (Booth and Richard 1996).

Table 3 provides evidence about the impact of civil society activity upon social and political capital, controlling for key demographic and contextual variables. A first striking finding is how little of the variation (R^2 = .023) of the key social capital variable ***interpersonal trust*** is explained by the combined effect of civil society and the control variables. This contrasts with the higher explained variation of ***political knowledge*** (R^2 = .284) and the political capital variables (R^2s between .079 and .146). ***Interpersonal trust*** thus emerges as a weak reed among Central American urbanites—elevated a bit by ***standard of living***, depressed a bit by ***repression***, but with less than 1% of its variation accounted for by civil society.

Table 3's findings clearly demonstrate the importance of evaluating the intervening impact of contextual and demographic variables. One of the contextual variables, level of ***repression***, depresses both social capital variables (***information*** and ***trust***) and sharply reduces all four political capital variables (***democratic norms, voting, contacting***, and ***campaigning***). This clearly indicates that political context shapes civil society and the formation of social and political capital.

On the other hand, while we expected one of the other context variables, GDP per capita, to correlate positively with social and political capital, Table 3 demonstrates that it does not. When other factors are controlled, lower

[13]Indeed, for our sample the zero-order correlation of educational attainment with democratic norms is .23 and with campaigning .14; standard of living correlates with democratic norms at r = .23 and with campaigning at r = .16.

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TABLE 3

The Impact of Civil Society Activism on Social Capital and Political Capital, with Demographic and Contextual Controls[a]

	SOCIAL CAPITAL			POLITICAL CAPITAL		
	Political Information	Interpersonal Trust	Democratic Norms	Voting	Campaign	Contact
Group activism	.080****	.022	.095****	.051**	.118****	.158****
Communal Activism	–.009	.077****	–.013	.048**	.013	.192****
Standard of living[b]	.202****	.082***	.072***	.031	–.059**	–.018
Educational attainment[c]	.307****	.034	.126****	.034	.084****	.043*
Sex (M = 1, F = 2)	–.200****	.026	–.035*	–.069****	–.121****	–.058***
Repression level[d]	–.037*	–.054**	–.289****	–.240****	–.350****	–.112****
GDP per capita[e]	–.232****	–.016	–.095****	–.016	–.057**	.007
R^2	.284	.023	.146	.079	.152	.094
Standard Error	.896	.929	1.831	.591	.862	.823
F	219.09	13.12	90.89	45.54	95.82	55.16
Probability of F	.0000	.0000	.0000	.0000	.0000	.0000
(N)	(3867)			(3738)		

[a]Significance levels: * = ≤ .05; ** = ≤ .01; *** = ≤ .001; **** = ≤ .0001; (NS) = not significant.

[b]Living standard measures family wealth based upon owning color televisions, refrigerators, washing machines, telephones, and automobiles; range 0–15.

[c]Years of formal education completed.

[d]Index of systemic repression level for decade prior to and time of survey; range 1–5; higher score = greater repression (Booth and Richard 1996).

[e]Gross domestic product per capita, 1990 (UNDP 1993, T. 1).

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levels of ***political information, democratic norms***, and ***campaigning*** in Central American nations are associated with higher economic development levels.[14]

Demographic factors have mixed effects. Table 3 indicates that, although ***sex*** does not affect ***interpersonal trust***, women have significantly less ***political information*** than men (even controlling for ***education*** and ***living standard***) and lower levels of political capital. Educational attainment and higher standards of living tend to enhance social and political capital. The former positively affects political information levels and three of four political capital variables. The latter positively affects both social capital variables, as well as voting and campaigning.

Turning to the independent effect of the civil society variables in Table 3, other factors controlled, we see some changes from Table 2. Two positive, signifiant relationships remain—that of ***formal group activism*** on ***political information***, and that of ***communalism*** on ***interpersonal trust***. ***Communal activism's*** significant negative association with ***political information*** (Table 2) becomes insignificant in Table 3.[15] ***Formal group activism's*** independent effect upon ***interpersonal trust***, however, disappears entirely in Table 3. This contradicts one of Putnam's main arguments about how civil society builds interpersonal trust among citizens. While participation in communalism contributes slightly to interpersonal trust, participation in formal groups does not.

The independent effect of ***formal group activism*** upon political capital, controlling for context and demographics, changes little. The positive independent association of group activism with each of the political capital variables remains, albeit with betas somewhat diminished by the controls introduced. ***Communal activism's*** apparently negative links to political capital (Table 2) have vanished with the introduction of demographic and contextual controls (Table 3). Communalism now reveals a direct, positive link to ***voting*** and ***contacting*** as predicted by H_2, and the significant, negative betas for ***democratic norms*** and ***campaigning*** have disappeared.

To ascertain which of the control variables most affect the ***communalism–democratic norms*** relationship, we ran a series of regressions between them, adding the control variables one at a time. As we speculated above, ***education*** and ***standard of living*** proved to be the responsible variables. Poorer, less educated Central Americans—the more active communalists—have weaker com-

[14]This somewhat counterintuitive finding may merely be an artifact of conditions specific to Central America. Table 1, for instance, reveals that Honduras and Nicaragua, the region's poorest nations, have above-average levels of group activism and democratic norms.

[15]Exploration of this effect suggests that the main intervening variable between political information and communalism is the lower educational level of communalists. Sex (women's lower political information levels) and the lower living standard of communalists also intervene and account for some of this effect.

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mitment to democratic liberties than their more prosperous and more educated fellow citizens. Thus, the apparently negative influence of communalism upon democratic norms is an artifact of the intervening effect of socioeconomic status. ***Education*** and ***standard of living*** similarly affect the association of ***campaigning*** and ***voting*** with ***communalism***.[16]

In sum, Table 3 provides further and more convincing evidence to support positive links between Central Americans' civil society activity and our political capital variables (H_2). Evidence linking civil society and social capital (H_1) is shakier. Controlling for demographics, repression, and development levels, ***formal group activism*** increases ***political information*** levels but not ***interpersonal trust***, while **communal activism** does just the opposite. ***Formal group activism*** independently boosts all four political capital variables, and ***communalism*** increases two of four—***voting*** and ***contacting***. Civil society activism's effects on political capital are thus more robust and consistent than its effects on social capital.

The regression results in Table 3 support our argument in H_2 that civil society activism through participation in community organizations augments political capital. The independent variables in Table 3 account for between 7.9% (voting) and 15.2% (campaigning) of the variation of the political capital variables. The independent and powerfully depressing effect of ***repression*** upon social and political capital also stands out sharply. This finding underlines the importance of considering such relevant political contextual factors as repression when evaluating civil society comparatively, especially in situations of rapid political change. This makes sense because repression's purpose is to curtail citizen activity, organization, and demands upon government. Repression thus directly affects the likelihood that citizens will form or join associations, how associations will behave, and thus the further development of social and political capital.

We turn now to H_3–H_5, which predict positive associations between levels of civil society, social and political capital, and ***levels of democracy***. Here we apply Putnam's contention that civil society, acting through social capital, contributes to democracy within the Central American milieu. We have added to the social capital argument by identifying political capital variables (democratic norms and political participation impinging upon the state) that we posit promote higher levels of democracy.

We employ Vanhanen's (1992, 32–35) index of democracy to group the Central American countries by level of democracy. This index yields scores that indicate three distinct ***levels of democracy*** among the six nations (see Table 4 for details). We consequently assign El Salvador and Guatemala to the lower level,

[16]Each of the other control variables also makes a small but significant contribution to the communalism–democratic norms linkage.

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TABLE 4

Links between Civil Society, Social Capital, and Political Capital and Levels of Democracy, with Controls for Repression and Demographic Factors.

Variable	Level of Democracy[a] Low	Medium	High	Significance[b]
CIVIL SOCIETY				
Group Activism	.50	.60	.76	****
Communal Activism	1.27	1.10	1.02	(NS)
SOCIAL CAPITAL				
Political Information	.94	1.20	1.13	****
Interpersonal Trust	.76	.94	.85	****
POLITICAL CAPITAL				
Democratic Norms	5.62	6.89	6.87	****
Voting	1.45	1.67	1.89	****
Campaigning	.21	.66	.97	****
Contacting Public Officials	.36	.37	.66	****

[a]Level of democracy obtained by grouping countries based upon mean national democracy scores in Vanhanen 1990. Mean score for lower democracy group (Guatemala and El Salvador) = 7.65, for the intermediate group (Nicaragua and Panama) = 13.90, and for the highest democracy group (Costa Rica and Honduras) = 20.25.

[b]Significance of main effects for analysis of variance, with controls to remove intervening effects of respondents' sex, education, and living standard, plus national repression scores. Significance levels: **** = ≤ .0001; (NS) = not significant.

Panama and Nicaragua to the intermediate level, and Costa Rica and Honduras to the higher level of democracy groups.[17]

We employ differences of means and analysis of variance to test the hypothesized relationships between civil society, social and political capital, and systemic democracy. Table 4 presents the mean levels of each group of variables by ***level of democracy*** in Central America.[18] Because systemic repression and certain demographic traits influence the civil society and social and political cap-

[17]We selected the Vanhanen (1992) index for 1990 as the democracy criterion because it was an objective measure of structural characteristics of the polities (based on election turnout and presidential election competitiveness). This seemed preferable to a delphic measure based on the authors' estimates of democratic performance, especially since we have already employed a delphic repression measure and the risk of contamination between them seemed high. Even so, a prior analysis employing simple ordinal ranking of nations from Vanhanen's raw scores revealed some collinearity between the system-level repression measure and the democracy rankings. Because repression has proved so important, we preferred not to drop it as a control variable. Grouping nations into three categories by democracy levels and employing analysis of variance as the analytical technique eliminated this collinearity problem.

[18]Analysis of variance measures association between a nominal category and a continuous variable. The direction of association and linearity across nominal categories must be ascertained from inspection of means. Significance tests refer to the likelihood of differences in variance explained

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ital variables, controls for systemic ***repression, sex, living standard***, and ***education*** were introduced into an analysis of variance between the independent variables and the dependent variable, ***level of democracy***.

Table 4 demonstrates that higher levels of ***formal group activism*** associate positively and significantly with higher ***levels of democracy***, partially validating H3. However, the connection between communal-level civil society activity and systemic democracy is in the opposite direction of that hypothesized. We believe this pattern, even though statistically insignificant, suggests the power of context to shape civil society activism. The three countries with the most ***communal civil society*** (Table 1) fall into the lowest (Guatemala and El Salvador) or intermediate (Nicaragua) democracy groups. These three countries have experienced destructive civil wars that have created great poverty and infrastructure damage, which in turn generate communal activism. They have also had intense repression levels that discourage political participation and formal group activism much more than communalism. We have argued elsewhere that communalism's self-help orientation may insulate it from the effects of such repression (Booth and Richard 1996, 1221).

The social capital variables relate in a complex fashion to democracy levels. While higher means of both ***political information*** and ***interpersonal trust*** are found in the higher-level democracy countries than in the lowest-level democracy countries, both peak in the intermediate-level democracy countries. The analyses of variance reveal these differences to be statistically significant, but the means in Table 4 do not perform as expected (thus not confirming H_4's prediction that social capital serves as the mediating mechanism between civil society activity and democracy).

As regards the political capital-democracy link predicted in H_5, Table 4 strongly confirms our expectations. Progressively higher levels of all three participation variables associate significantly with successively higher ***democracy levels***. ***Democratic norms*** are sharply lower in the lower-level democracies than in the intermediate- and higher-level ones (whose citizens share virtually identical levels of democratic norms). Political capital variables—attitudes favoring democracy and citizen behavior that engages the state through elections and contacting—thus appear directly and positively related to levels of democracy in Central America.

In sum, we have found evidence that higher levels of citizen activity in formal associations contribute directly to higher levels of democracy in Central America, even controlling for political repression and individual characteristics. However, no similar direct effect occurs through citizens' engagement in community level groups. The analysis strongly suggests that political capital

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among categories (not to direction or linearity of association). The particular utility of analysis of variance as the analytical technique here is that it permits the introduction of multiple control variables in order to filter out the effect of intervening effects between the dependent and independent variables.

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variables may indeed play the role we predicted—that of mediating between civil society activism and democracy. Putnam's social capital variables appear to have a less clear and probably nonlinear relationship to levels of political democracy, although in general terms the citizens of intermediate- and higher-level democracy countries have higher mean levels of social capital than those of the less democratic countries.

Conclusions

Our findings confirm that among urban Central Americans, civil society activism helps form both social and political capital. The apparent anomalous finding that communal-level civil society activity actually lowered electoral involvement and support for democratic norms disappeared when we included controls, especially for the intervening effects of socioeconomic status variables. The contribution of communal-level participation (of the sort suggested by Putnam's bowling metaphor) to the formation of social and political capital is a bit weaker than that of formal group activity, but generally operates as predicted.

The most distinctive political capital–forming effect of ***communal-level activism*** is that it contributes strongly to ***contacting public officials*** (Table 3). Citizens who work together at the communal level thus manifest a strong tendency to convey their demands to government. In contrast, the other type of civil society participation—***formal group activism***—contributes to higher levels of all the political capital variables, with especially marked effects upon ***campaigning*** and ***contacting public officials***.

We have shown that more ***formal group activism*** and higher levels of political capital of urban Central Americans associate with higher ***levels of democracy***. This supports the argument that civil society may influence the state, but it considerably refines Putnam's notion of how that influence is actually exercised. The attitudes and behaviors stimulated by organizational membership that most clearly shape state performance (in this case the level of democracy) are those with an explicit political referent or impact. Those who are organizationally active are more likely to have strong democratic norms, to vote, to campaign, and to contact public officials. In contrast, participation in formal groups contributes to urban Central Americans' ***political information*** but not to their ***interpersonal trust*** levels, while ***communal-level civil society activism*** does the reverse. Moreover, citizens' ***interpersonal trust*** and ***political information*** bear less clearly and less directly upon ***levels of democracy*** than the political capital variables do.

In sum, ***communal group activism*** in urban Central America does not contribute to ***system-level democracy*** as hypothesized, despite its positive links to ***interpersonal*** trust, ***voting***, and especially to ***contacting public officials***. Why might this be so? We suspect that this impact may be absent because communal organization occurs in poorer communities and neighborhoods throughout Central America, sometimes arising spontaneously but often mobilized by gov-

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ernments (democratic and not), charitable organizations, and interest groups seeking to promote local development or repair the ravages of civil war. Its success in promoting the contacting of officials suggests that, while communal civil society has people "bowling together" and trusting each other more, it may nevertheless spawn a fairly narrow exchange between communalists and regime. Specifically, we suspect that governments may, at least in the short run, coopt such local groups on a demand-by-demand basis rather than becoming more broadly democratic. This and other findings further lead us to speculate that, contrary to the expectations of the developmentalists who promote communal organizations and the theorists who laud them as fonts of democracy, communalism per se may not generate the anticipated systemic democratization because it helps regimes buy off local activists.

A final issue warrants consideration here—that of the direction of causality among civil society, social/political capital, and government performance. Putnam contends that civil society shapes government performance. Many students of civil society, however, note that sociopolitical context constructs and constrains civil society activism and social capital formation. They question how the freedom to participate affects citizens' propensity and willingness to organize, and how the behavior of the state itself stimulates organizations and various attitudes.[19] Our analyses here and elsewhere (Booth and Richard 1996, 1998; Richard and Booth 1995) confirm that repression affects associational activism, various kinds of political participation, and democratic norms, while actions of regimes can contribute to erasing sex differences in participation. The causal sequence, while not definitively established, appears interactional, not linear.

We believe it not only possible but likely that system-level democracy promotes civil society activism. We suspect that system-level democracy and associational activity have reciprocal effects. For example, less democratic polities may stimulate type II civil society—the antityrannical sort—which in turn may lead over time to higher levels of systemic democracy. At the same time, more democratic, and therefore less repressive, polities may foster higher levels of the civility-reinforcing type I civil society, which in turn should produce the political capital that reinforces regime democracy. Since these reciprocal causations are political processes that unfold over time, testing these conjectures and resolving the direction-of-causality questions requires more cases and different types of data and analyses than we have available. Yet for these Central American nations, five of which have passed from authoritarian to democratic rule since 1981 and four of which have suffered violent civil conflicts, such longitudinal issues about context–civil society interaction processes over time may be the most interesting questions of all.

[19]Along this line, Muller and Seligson (1994) have shown that rather than high levels of interpersonal trust causing democracy, as some argue, the causality is the opposite: democratic regimes promote interpersonal trust.

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