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Abstract

Concern about the topic of civic engagement has centered on the increasing reduction of voter turnout and the apparent alienation and "disconnect" of the general population with the process of government. This study, undertaken at the request of the leaders of a small town in southern New Hampshire is a two-step research plan (one quantitative, one qualitative). Results of both the survey portion of the research and the focus groups reveal an electorate (both adult and youth) which is concerned and informed, but mildly alienated and which register mild levels of efficacy. Suggestions made to try and build unity and an overall spirit of cooperation not just on the adult level but for the youth population as well, include the use of study circles increasing town wide involvement and opening a dialog among those who most acutely feel this disconnect.

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

Concern about the topic of civic engagement has centered on the increasing reduction of voter turnout and the apparent alienation and "disconnect" of the general population with the process of government. This study, undertaken at the request of the leaders of a small town in southern New Hampshire is a two-step research plan (one quantitative, one qualitative). Results of both the survey portion of the research and the focus groups reveal an electorate (both adult and youth) which is concerned and informed, but mildly alienated and which register mild levels of efficacy. Suggestions made to try and build unity and an overall spirit of cooperation not just on the adult level but for the youth population as well, include the use of study circles increasing town wide involvement and opening a dialog among those who most acutely feel this disconnect.

3/13/02 BEDFORD — Voters rejected a $44.96 million high school proposal yesterday and created a power shift on the Bedford School Board as a staunch supporter of the plan was voted out of office and an opponent won a seat on the board.

3/12/03 BEDFORD--Voters last night rejected a proposed high school tuition agreement with Manchester, defeating the warrant article by a margin of 3,946 to 2,663

3/16/03 BEDFORD--If teenagers had been allowed to vote, last week's vote in Bedford to reject a tuition contract with Manchester may well have had a different outcome.

11/2/03 BEDFORD —After months of planning, debate, discussion and compromise, the school district warrant articles for a tuition contract with Manchester and the construction of a high school and upper elementary school will go to voters on Tuesday.

11/5/03 BEDFORD--Not enough: Bedford needed 909 more ballots cast for a school vote to be valid.

3/10/04 BEDFORD--Voters rejected a high school and tuition proposal last night, leaving school board members to ponder what new direction the district should take.

6/3/04 BEDFORD — Many questions about the future of the town's public high school students and the future tax rate remain unanswered this week, since Tuesday's special election was declared invalid because fewer than 5,000 of the required 6,800 registered voters turned out. The only certainty after the election is that Bedford's option to sign a 20-year high school tuition contract, Article 1 on the special election ballot, has expired.

6/10/04 BEDFORD — Last night's town council meeting ended in a parking lot confrontation between Council Chairman Michael Scanlon and School Board Vice Chairman Daniel Sullivan, with both men accusing each other of ruining the town. Sullivan drove to the meeting around 10:20 p.m. after watching on television as the council vote 3-to-2 to ask its attorney, Barton Mayer, whether the council is obligated to sue the school board over the school district's current three-year tuition contract with Manchester.

3/9/05 BEDFORD — After decades of questioning whether Bedford should build its own high school, voters yesterday decided by a comfortable margin to leave Manchester's West High School in upcoming years and build a public middle school/high school. [1]

"It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried."
      Sir Winston Churchill

In the fall of 2000 the Bedford Town Council approached the New Hampshire Institute of Politics at Saint Anselm College (NHIOP) and asked for assistance in helping the town understand the reasons for a perceived decline in civic engagement and civility as well as advice concerning how to deal with both issues. Professor Dale Kuehne, then the Executive Director of the NHIOP and Professor Elizabeth Ossoff, Coordinator of the NHIOP's Jeanne D. Smith Center for the Study of American Democracy and Citizenship, accepted the town council's invitation and this paper is the result. After several consultations with the town council we embarked on a study of the civic life of Bedford using a survey on civic participation and several focus groups. In this paper we will provide some background relevant for understanding the civic life of Bedford, the results of our research, as well as some suggestions concerning for how the town might seek to re-energize its civic life while also making civic engagement more civil.

Bedford, NH

Bedford, New Hampshire is located in Southern New Hampshire on the western border of Manchester, New Hampshire's largest city. It was founded in 1750, and for most of its history it has been a rural town. In the past several decades, however, it has become one of New Hampshire's fastest growing suburban communities. Between the census of 1990 and 2000 its population grew 45% and it now totals over 20,000 residents. It is also one of New Hampshire's most affluent communities. In 1999, the median 4 person family income household income was over $91,000. Whereas for many years Bedford had a very stable population base, in the year 2000 25% of its population had lived in the community for 10 years or less (Economic and Labor Market Information Bureau, 2003).

Bedford's rapid change has impacted town governance. For over two centuries Bedford was governed by the traditional New England Town Meeting form of government, but its recent growth made that impractical, and accordingly it adopted a new town charter in 1987. Most recently, the town voted in 1992 to adopt a town manager/town council form of government. The annual town

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[1] Opening sentences of articles in the Manchester Union Leader.

meeting still exits, and is the venue where the annual budget for the town is approved, but increasingly the business of the town is now conducted by elected representatives, the town manager, and electoral referenda (Bedford, 2004).

Civic Life in Bedford

In their charge to us, the Bedford Town Council wanted us to help them understand the reasons why in recent years their town has experienced an apparent decline in civic engagement and civility. As students of American public life are aware, Bedford's experience in this is not unique. Indeed, Bedford appears to be an excellent illustration of Robert Putnam's (Putnam, 2000) account of the recent decline of social capital and civic participation in the United States. In *Bowling Alone* Putnam argues that in many communities throughout America not only has voting turnout decreased, but so has people's involvement in a variety of civic organizations. That is Bedford's story as well. In Presidential elections from 1960-2000, Bedford experienced a 16% decline in voter turnout. In non-Presidential elections the decline in that period has been almost 25% (State, 2004).

Outside of this one measure, however, there is very little quantitative data which assesses either civic engagement or civility in Bedford. Anecdotally, it is the opinion of several clergy that per capita church involvement has declined since 1960's.[2] Additionally, those involved in several Bedford public associations report that membership and involvement has also declined since 1960, and it is their belief that this decline has been experienced during this period by most similar groups in town.[3] Moreover, both the clergy and the civic leaders report, consistent with Putnam, that the average age of those who are engaged in their organization has risen dramatically, with most members over 40 years of age.

According to the literature on social capital, social capital is the glue that holds society together. The relationships built through people's involvement in politics, community life, and civic associations creates the social capital that is the means by which people can work together individually and as a community to successfully address the challenges which they face (Moy, Schueufele, & Hobert, 1999). Hence, a decline in social capital has the consequence of destabilizing public life by robbing the community of resources necessary to mediate conflict and help make decisions in a constructive, deliberative manner.

Related to the concept of social capital is the idea of social and political connectedness. Social connectedness tends to refer to how associated one is to others in the community or how deep one feels one's "roots" are in the community. Political connectedness is linked to the individual's investment in the electoral outcome, i.e. his or her interest, concern, and overall participation in the

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[2] Interview with Bedford Clergy (Names Withheld on Request)
[3] Interview with Bedford Public Association Leaders (Names Withheld on Request)

political process (Lyons & Alexander, 2000). Both of these ideas relate to two measurable components addressed in the literature, political efficacy and political alienation. Research on these constructs has revealed direct influences of their levels on voting behavior (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990; Southwell & Everest, 1998). We therefore felt it was important to relate these constructs to our investigation of the Bedford situation.

Given what we see from the literature about issues of social capital and related constructs it is not surprising therefore, that many of Bedford's leaders report not just a decline in civic engagement but also the quality and tone of public debate and spirit. While no adequate quantitative data yet exist to test their perceptions, it is the belief of several involved in Bedford politics that town politics is significantly more vicious, personal, and mean-spirited now than it was 4 decades ago.[4] Indeed, in our research we can point to no town resident who disputed this perception.

The tremendous population growth Bedford has experienced the past few years has confronted the town with many issues related to growth; including various zoning issues and public school bond issues. The most controversial zoning issue concerned the development of Joppa Hill Farm, but the most significant issue facing the town in the past decade has been the question of whether to build a town public high school. Issues such as these are typical of a town that has experienced recent rapid growth. Work done looking at the phenomenon of local growth shows that as a community increases in size, its interest in local politics declines (Oliver, 2001; Salamon, 2003). The sense Oliver (2001) found in his study of suburban America is that residents feel that "others" will take care of the issues at hand and as a result of this idea that someone else will take care of the issue, a type of "bystander effect" is created with the focus shifting for individuals from community problems to those centered on childrearing (Salmon, 2003).

Therefore, if Putnam and other social capital theorists are correct, we would expect to find that Bedford will have an increasingly difficult time resolving this and other difficult issues, and we would see evidence of this through measures of political connectedness like political efficacy and political alienation and other related items. As the news report epigraphs on the high school issue from the first pages of this paper demonstrate, the expectation of the social capital theorists has been prophetic. Even though the High School bond issue passed, there is no evidence to suggest that the challenges facing Bedford have passed with it. The decline in social capital, civic engagement, and voting is real. Indeed, it may be that the High School issue kept Bedford voting rates even higher than they might otherwise have been, masking an even greater decline in

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[4] Interviews with Bedford Politicians (Names withheld on request)

voting rates than has occurred. While time will tell, the evidence suggests that Bedford is increasingly ill-prepared to deal with the next major divisive issue.

Our Research

If the social capital theorists are correct, the responsibility for the decline in civic participation and civility in Bedford is connected directly to the decline in Bedford's social capital. Moreover, it is the paucity of social capital that makes the resolution of these issues increasingly difficult. As the limited data on civic engagement or civility in Bedford affirms the town council's twin concerns, we designed a research study that would allow us to get some quantitative and qualitative data concerning political and civic attitudes and behavior in Bedford, among both young people and adults. Then, with this data, we hope that we might better understand some of the causes of this decline and make some recommendations for addressing it.

Method

Overview. In terms of specific research design, we sought to investigate the issue of what the relevant factors are in determining who participates and becomes involved in the civic process. Therefore, a two-prong approach was employed, one quantitative, one qualitative. A sample of registered voters and a sample of young people were selected to receive a survey designed by the authors to assess different factors possibly related to issues of civic participation, such as level of political knowledge, sources of political information and media use, as well as the constructs political efficacy and political alienation. The second phase of this study was to conduct two focus groups (one of young people, one of a cross-section of registered voters) to look at certain issues raised by the survey.

This qualitative phase of the study was implemented to understand in more detail, concerns of the residents of the town regarding civic participation and civility in general. Focus groups help researchers gain insight as to individual opinions in greater detail and specificity than a survey allows. They also allow for the compilation of a large amount of information in a short period of time and can be used to complement other methodologies (Gibbs, 1997). The ability to generalize from focus group data is limited; they can help identify trends in opinions first suggested by the survey data. The questions used in these groups were derived from the quantitative analysis of the responses from the town-wide survey. These groups were run by an associate of a professional pollster who lent her services pro bono for this project.

Phase One - Survey

Participants. In an effort to gain an adequate representation of the town, surveys were sent to 1200 of Bedford's registered voters. Participants were randomly selected from each voting block group in Bedford. These block groups are all constructed of equal population, and an equal number of registered voters (from lists provided by the town) were selected. A maximum of 198 were returned over a period of approximately 8 weeks. Of those that did respond, 42% were male,

54% were female and had a mean age of 49.56 years. Respondents were fairly evenly distributed across all areas of Bedford (19% from the north, 31% from the central area, 24% from the south, and 27% from the west). The mean number of years respondents reported living in the town was 15.08 years. The sample was a highly educated one with 79.9% of the respondents reporting an education level of college and beyond, and the sample is an affluent one with 50.5% reporting a yearly household income of over $100,000 a year. These numbers are consistent with the overall demographics of the town as reported from the last town census in 1999 and 2000.

In addition to the adult survey, a similar version was sent to a sample of 800 14-18 year olds living with their parents or guardians. These names were also randomly selected from voter registration lists provided by the town and cross-indexed with listings of Bedford residents provided by the public high school and three local parochial schools in the area. A total of 43 responded (22 males, 21 females) with a mean age of 15.9 years.

Materials. The primary instrument used in the first phase of this study was a survey created by the authors. The instrument included demographic information as well as more detailed questions about the nature of their political knowledge (at both a national and local level), opinions on various issues, level of political participation and media use, political ideology, level of political alienation and political efficacy as well as more broadly based opinions on issues specific to their town and their concerns about the level of cooperation and overall civility perceived in the discussion of town matters.[5]

The survey sent to the youth sample asked questions similar to those of the adult version, including items asking about level of political knowledge, participation preference, media use, concern and interest in the political system, as

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[5] Most questions were answered on a Likert-type scale of one to five or one to seven with varying assignment of the levels of the anchors to prevent respondents' assigning blanket choice of one pole or the other. The scales for political efficacy and political alienation were selected from the volume *Measures of Political Attitudes* edited by Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman (1999). The political efficacy scale (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) is a 5 item scale with respondents answering each item on a 4 point scale from 1 (no attention at all or none at all) to 4 (a lot of attention or a lot). Responses were totaled for an overall efficacy score which ranged from 5 to 20 with higher numbers indicating higher levels of efficacy. The scale by Verba, Schlozman, & Brady has been shown to have good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .79), and good convergent and discriminant validity with only minor overlap with other measures of political engagement also assessed in this study. The political alienation scale used was developed by Davis and Smith (1996). It is a 6 item scale (two items are reversed for scoring) where respondents either answer yes (scored as a 1) or no (scored as a two). The answers are added together for an index of alienation (ranging from 6–12) with higher scores indicating less alienation. This scale by Davis and Smith has also shown good reliability (Cronbach's alpha=.74, and good convergent validity with other measures.

well as levels of political efficacy and alienation.[6] Also included in this survey respondents were asked information about their civics courses and their level of interest in politics pre and post the events of the terrorist attacks of 9/11/01. This was done to investigate any surge in young people's interest and as part of another study specifically looking into young people's responses to the events of 9/11. *Click here for samples of both surveys*.

Procedure. Participants were mailed surveys in the spring of 2002 and were asked to return them promptly. Reminders were sent out approximately 4 weeks after the initial mailing, and all surveys used in the study were received approximately 6-8 weeks after the initial mailing. Included with the survey was a letter explaining the purpose and intent of the survey and assuring respondents that all data would be kept in group form with no identifying information. Surveys sent to youths included parental consent forms. Surveys were color coded to identify respondents as either registered voters who had voted in the last election, registered voters who had not voted in the last election, or youth surveys.

Results

Adult Sample. Descriptive statistics depict the respondent sample as well educated (college and beyond 79.9%), upper middle class (50.5% at over $100,000 yearly income), mostly Republican (49.5%) and moderately conservative (a mean of 4.7 on a 1-liberal to 7-conservative scale). Respondents were fairly evenly distributed across the areas of town, and have lived in the town a mean of 15.08 years.

Political Connectedness. An issue we were interested in investigating was the concept of political connectedness. As stated earlier, this sense of connectedness refers to the voter's roots in his or her political party and to the political system in general. Lyons and Alexander (2000) found connectedness to be integral to understanding generational differences in voting patterns, and Bimber (1999) saw connectedness as an integral component to predicting civic engagement. Ways to assess this connectedness would include the individual's level of participation and investment in the political system at both a local and national level. We sought to do this in a number of ways. We assessed the level of participation, interest, concern, knowledge, political efficacy and political alienation, views of overall involvement, as well as a number of individual questions designed to determine Bedford respondents' views on their relationship with their town and its system of governance.

Respondents in the adult sample portray themselves as above average in their interest in political events, they also consider themselves to be both concerned and aware of town issues and politics as well as concerned and aware

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[6] The political efficacy scale was modified slightly so as to be relevant for this sample, e.g., the term "school government" was inserted to replace "state or local government" in one item and an additional item was added to this scale to assess their perception of their influence over school government issues.

of national issues and politics national politics. *For all tables in the analyses click here*

In terms of political knowledge, although respondents viewed themselves as relatively well-informed on a local and a national level, their overall level of political knowledge is reported as much higher for national figures and events than for local ones[7] (see table 1). An overall index of knowledge was also calculated adding the individual items together. The overall mean level of knowledge for the sample was 5.19 (sd=.84). This overall measure showed reasonable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha= .84).

Respondents' participation in various political activities and use of media for political information follows a similar pattern (see table 2). These overall measures also showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha=.81 for overall participation and .77 for overall media use). These are people who are very busy with their everyday lives (their average commute is 47.7 minutes, with a mean of 6 hours a day spent at home, not including sleep). They follow salient local topics like the local high school issue and try and keep abreast of national issues. Consistent political participation apart from following events on television or discussing them with family and friends does not seem to be in their repertoire.

The overall level of political efficacy was a moderate one with a mean of 12.26 (N=187, scale: 5 - low efficacy to 20 – high efficacy), as was the overall level of alienation, mean =9.45 (N=173, scale: 6 = more alienated to 12 = less alienated). Respondents' views of overall involvement in democracy was that it was important (mean = 3.55 on a 4 point scale from 1 = not at all important to 4 = very important). These numbers reveal a group of people who are moderately satisfied with the overall political process and feel that it is an important one to be involved with. However, there is no overwhelming sense of faith in this process, nor a strong sense of empowerment.

In an effort to get a more specific sense of the respondents' attitudes and feelings towards particular issues that may impact civic life, 11 items designed to address these concerns were presented. The means for these items reveal an electorate that is fairly comfortable with most aspects of the governance of their town, but are ambivalent about their town's ability to work effectively to resolve certain important issues. It seems that although Bedford residents are somewhat confident that people have opportunities to know and become informed of the issues, the ability to agree and act on those issues is in question (see table 3). This is even more apparent when the percentages of agreement with two statements presented to respondents are examined. Respondents were asked in two separate items which of two statements they agreed with. These statements centered on the community's ability to resolve differences and the perception of participation

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[7] The exception to this pattern was the debate over whether to build a local high school.

in town decisions (see table 4). It is apparent from these results that the people in this community see some serious problems arising from their inability to work together and come to solutions for this community's problems which are amenable to the overall electorate. This is where we see the most glaring evidence of a lack of not just civic participation, but civility in general.

Given these descriptive statistics one would expect a relationship among them that would better help us to understand what could be creating a town that seems to want to engage in the political process, but from anecdotal and documented (the High School issue) reports, seems unable to. When correlations are calculated between barrier and facilitator variables like total commuting time, time spent at home, income, years lived in Bedford, and education, and civic engagement variables like interest, concern, efficacy and alienation, an interesting pattern emerges. Table 5 shows us that as commuting time increases, interest, concern over national politics, knowledge, and participation all decrease at a significant rate. Also, the years lived in Bedford show us an older population that is more alienated and less concerned with politics in general. Other variables like income and education seem to facilitate aspects of the process as expected (see table 5).

A more detailed analysis using regression reveals that the only significant predictors of participation are knowledge, and interest in the political process (see table 6). The variables of number of years in Bedford, commuting time, income, education, time spent at home, alienation, efficacy, or concern about local or national politics had no significant effect. Perhaps the people in Bedford, given their many obligations, rely on how knowledgeable they perceive themselves to be and how interested they are in the process to drive their participation. This issue of obligation and the residents' interpretation of it are further addressed in the focus group data.

Youth Sample. Demographic information for the youth sample mirrored the adult in terms of their representation from the town. The mean age of the sample was 15.9 years, with 22 males and 21 females responding. Out of 43 respondents, 40 report planning to register to vote when of age, 3 were not sure. Of those under age for party registration, 18 report an intension to register as republican, 5 as democrat and 20 as independent. As far as their preference with respect to the major parties, they fall midway on the scale between republican and democrat as well as describe themselves as moderate in their ideology (liberal/conservative).

Political Connectedness. We had similar interest in political connectedness in the youth sample as we did with the adult sample. Measures of interest, concern, knowledge, participation, media use, efficacy and alienation were assessed. The respondents in the youth sample report themselves to be moderately interested in political events (mean=4.07, on a 1=not interested to 7=very interested point scale). These youths are also moderately concerned (mean = 5.07) and consider

themselves somewhat informed (mean = 4.84), (on a 1 not at all concerned or informed to 7=very concerned or informed scale).

To assess the level of political knowledge of this sample we asked two things. One, we asked them to give us the names of courses they had taken dealing with civic or political issues and topics. In answer to this question we found 17 civics courses taken, 4 U.S. History, 5 law related courses, and 4 economics courses. The second item was designed to assess their level of knowledge involved their level of familiarity with national political figures and events.[8] We took their individual ratings for these persons and events and created an overall mean level of political knowledge with good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha=.91). These students considered themselves to be moderately knowledgeable with a mean of 3.73 (sd=1.26, on a 1=never heard of or know to 7=very familiar with person or event scale). The students' overall participation in political events was also assessed as similar to the adult sample and we find fairly low participation (as would be expected with this age group)[9].

We found their overall levels of political efficacy and alienation to once again mirror their parents. There was a moderate level of political efficacy and alienation for this sample. The mean efficacy score was 14.1 (N=40, scale: 6=low efficacy, 24=high efficacy). The mean alienation score was 9.4 (N=40, scale: 6=low alienation, 12 high alienation). Despite these moderate measurements, when asked how important they felt one's involvement in democracy is, 95.4% of the sample felt that it was somewhat or very important. So although they may not feel terribly empowered in the political process, and may feel somewhat estranged from it, they still recognize how important their role may someday be.

In addition to this information we also asked about this youth sample's use of various media sources for the purposes of political information. In doing so, we tried to ascertain if this information seeking had expanded after the events of September 11th. Again we asked them their use of different media sources in ways similar to the adults. Each of these means had good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha for pre 9/11 measure equaling .82 and post 9/11=.80). We in fact found that the average level of media use for the purposes of gathering political information had increased, and significantly so . Whether this increase will last and whether it will increase their later levels of political involvement remain to be seen. In the meantime, it is interesting that this group is

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[8] It was our belief that this sample would have little to no familiarity with local politicians; we were more interested in a more global political measure in this sample rather than drawing comparisons with the adult sample.

[9] An overall mean of this measure was also created, each on a 1(never) to 7 (many times) scale. This sample had a mean participation score of 2.47 (sd=1.14), and good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha=.87).

seeking more political information, perhaps in an effort to assuage fear, perhaps to just be better informed; only time will tell.

In addition to measures taken similar to the adults, we also asked the youth sample to indicate the type and number of civics related courses they had taken thus far. These courses included traditional "civics" courses as well as courses about law, political philosophy, U.S. government, U.S. History, economics, social studies, speech and debate courses. We might expect to find that there would be some sort of relationship between the total number of civic courses taken and levels of civic engagement. That was not the case (see table 8). Only marginal correlations exist between the total number of courses taken and measures of interest and concern over the political process. And in fact, regression analyses reveal only knowledge, concern, media use and alienation emerge as significant predictors of overall participation. The total number of civics courses taken had no significant effect.

Given that knowledge was a significant predictor, along with media use, the findings may speak more to the content of these more traditional courses in terms of their lack of ability to provide input into the process. Students are apparently getting their "knowledge" from some other source. Perhaps this content issue should be further investigated to determine the most effective curriculum for the mainstream courses, as these traditional courses do not seem to spur their desire to engage in the process.

Phase Two – Focus Groups

Participants. Two focus groups, one of adults (N=12, 6 males, 6 females), one of youths aged 14-18 (N=9, 5 males, 4 females) were held the summer following the analysis of the survey results. The participants were recruited by a professional screener (New England Interviewing) and were compensated for their time.[10] The adults were recruited from the list of registered voters provided by the town, and the youths were recruited from the original list of youths used in the survey portion of the study.

Procedure. The focus groups were led on a pro bono basis by a member of the Hart Research Group who is an alumnus of Saint Anselm College. A discussion guide was used to direct the conversation of the group. This guide touched on broader issues first, such as the groups' interest and awareness of national and local issues, including the upcoming presidential election, as well as more in-depth types of issues specific to the concerns of the study such as the importance of voter participation and specific and general community concerns regarding civic engagement and civility. The participants of the focus groups were videotaped (with their permission) and the tapes were later reviewed for analysis.

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[10] Adults were paid $50.00 for a two hour session; the youth were given $15.00 gift cards to a major book and record store for their one and a half hour session.

Results

The data gathered from the focus groups were viewed and categorized separately by the researchers for general themes emerging from the topics probed during discussion. This qualitative analysis revealed several themes that we believe are very telling in the progression this community has made away from civic engagement. Some of these themes were specific to the particular age groups and some were common to both groups.

Adults. One significant theme which emerged from the adult group was the distinction in their minds between civic "involvement" and "citizenship". Those who can call themselves good "citizens" are ones who act in the best interest of the local community, someone who votes, and someone who doesn't "drag the community down." Those who are "involved" are those who actively take part in the daily running of the town, and those who participate in youth and family related activities that will impact them directly. Essentially the role of parent drives the definition of involvement. Once the child-rearing days are over for a community member, they move from being "involved" to just being a "good citizen." It was clear in this part of the discussion that the group felt that family is the key to "involvement."

A second theme which emerged from the adult group discussion was that those who are "involved," on the various issues and boards in the town are perceived to be the same small group of people. The impression is that the same few individuals are occupied with each major issue that impacts the town, be that development concerns or the hotly contested high school issue which, as mentioned earlier, had served to deeply divide the town. This perception seems to create in individuals a certain loss of control and adds, on a local level, to the disconnect they may feel on a national level. It is also important to add that this perception that the same individuals are always involved with every issue is one that is shared by the youth focus group.

Perhaps related to the theme that the same people are always involved is the theme that the adults saw themselves as too busy to get involved. This finding is mirrored in the survey results which show the long commute of the average respondent (47.7 minutes with an average of 6 hours spent at home) and follows national trends for a general lack of interest in politics as measured in 2000[11]. Clearly these people feel that their time is precious and that political issues, local or national, are not high on their daily priorities. This perceived lack of time combined with the sense that the same people are always involved and that those who should be "involved" are those with a family, combine to create in the mind of the average resident that their individual role in the political process is one

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[11] This trend is changing as can be seen in the survey numbers from the Pew Research Center as of 7/8/04. Nearly one half of Americans (47%) now say they are interested in politics, which is up from 38% as measured in 2000.

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Adults. One significant theme which emerged from the adult group was the distinction in their minds between civic "involvement" and "citizenship". Those who can call themselves good "citizens" are ones who act in the best interest of the local community, someone who votes, and someone who doesn't "drag the community down." Those who are "involved" are those who actively take part in the daily running of the town, and those who participate in youth and family related activities that will impact them directly. Essentially the role of parent drives the definition of involvement. Once the child-rearing days are over for a community member, they move from being "involved" to just being a "good citizen." It was clear in this part of the discussion that the group felt that family is the key to "involvement."

A second theme which emerged from the adult group discussion was that those who are "involved," on the various issues and boards in the town are perceived to be the same small group of people. The impression is that the same few individuals are occupied with each major issue that impacts the town, be that development concerns or the hotly contested high school issue which, as mentioned earlier, had served to deeply divide the town. This perception seems to create in individuals a certain loss of control and adds, on a local level, to the disconnect they may feel on a national level. It is also important to add that this perception that the same individuals are always involved with every issue is one that is shared by the youth focus group.

Perhaps related to the theme that the same people are always involved is the theme that the adults saw themselves as too busy to get involved. This finding is mirrored in the survey results which show the long commute of the average respondent (47.7 minutes with an average of 6 hours spent at home) and follows national trends for a general lack of interest in politics as measured in 2000[11]. Clearly these people feel that their time is precious and that political issues, local or national, are not high on their daily priorities. This perceived lack of time combined with the sense that the same people are always involved and that those who should be "involved" are those with a family, combine to create in the mind of the average resident that their individual role in the political process is one

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[11] This trend is changing as can be seen in the survey numbers from the Pew Research Center as of 7/8/04. Nearly one half of Americans (47%) now say they are interested in politics, which is up from 38% as measured in 2000.

They recognize the incivility of their community, but identify the source of it in the personal moral failings of a few individuals. They do not see that the creation of a civil society has a corporate dimension, nor do they acknowledge their own responsibility in working in concert with others to create it. They are focused on their own interests and living morally and responsibly, and they believe if everyone is so focused the common good will occur. That citizenship and the common good have a communal dimension is unacknowledged and unrecognized.

An even more striking picture emerged from the youth focus group. It is a picture of the children of the community who feel profoundly disengaged and powerless while the adults seem unaware or unconcerned with their complaint. The focus groups give the picture of a community of adults who believe they are engaged in community, but are really engaged in the living of their individual lives, and the individualism is so pronounced that not only are they unaware of what citizenship might mean, they are also unaware or unsympathetic to the significant aspects of the attitudes of their own children.

What results is an adult community which pays taxes to their town, provides handsomely for the material needs of their children, yet do not have a great deal of time to give and are in denial or oblivious to the consequence this has for civic and family life. They express great frustration at the consequences of this behavior, but do not understand their own culpability in the cause. The perceptions these community members have of their obligations to the political process and their children's understanding and contribution to the political process is colored by a lifestyle which is defined by job, adult activities, and child duties. There seems to be a disconnect between themselves and an active civic or political life. While this is a critical picture, we do not believe the citizens of Bedford are unique, but a snapshot of suburban America today.

Certainly the literature cited earlier in this paper on political connectedness in the guise of political efficacy and political alienation is in concert with our findings. Individuals who experience a lack of efficacy and are alienated from the political process, in effect "disconnected" from the process, may experience a lack of control over their immediate political surroundings. From the psychological literature we know there are dire consequences for this perceived lack of control (Rodin & Langer, 1977). We are not suggesting that the citizens of Bedford have these particular consequences to fear, but that this lack of control expressed by the adults and the youth sample particularly in the focus groups may indicate a situation which is unconstructive to say the least.

Renewing Civic Life and Civility in Bedford, NH. In addition to trying to understand what has happened in Bedford and why, it is also our charge from the town council to provide some recommendations concerning how to improve civic engagement and elevate the level of civility in town life. Strictly speaking, while our research suggests some possible avenues for the town to pursue, much additional research

needs to be done to provide a richer and deeper basis for these suggestions. Nevertheless, we believe that a two pronged strategy aimed at adults and youth can assist in helping the town address the problems it sees.

Adults. The foundational element of our recommendation to re-engage adults and elevate civil discourse is to involve the Bedford in a comprehensive community building program. Past research has found that increasing the amount and quality of public discourse increases political interest, participation, critical analysis of important issues, and social trust (Gastil, 2004; Oliver, 2002; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002; Wallis, Crocker, & Schechter, 1998; Wyatt, Kim, & Katz, 2000). We recommend that the town consider two programs designed to do this that have been shown to work in other New Hampshire communities: Study Circles or the Community Profile.

According to the Study Circles Resource Center (2004),

> a study circle is a group of 8-12 people from different backgrounds and viewpoints who meet several times to talk about an issue. In a study circle, everyone has an equal voice, and people try to understand each other's views. They do not have to agree with each other. The idea is to share concerns and look for ways to make things better. A facilitator helps the group focus on different views and makes sure the discussion goes well. In a large-scale study circle program, people all over a neighborhood, city, county, school district, or region meet in diverse study circles over the same period of time. All the study circles work on the same issue and seek solutions for the whole community. At the end of the round of study circles, people from all the study circles come together in a large community meeting to work together on the action ideas that came out the study circles. Study circle programs lead to a wide range of action and change efforts. (Study Circles Resource Center, 2004)

One of the strengths of the Study Circle process is its ability to involve a large number of citizens in a grassroots method that utilizes small groups to enable each citizen the opportunity to have significant input in shaping the agenda and outcomes.

The Community Profile is a procedure used throughout New Hampshire in a process inspired by the National Civic League's Civic Index and developed by the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. In this process a large cross section of community leaders and citizens are invited to take part in a two day event in which the participants are involved in dreaming and visioning for the future, choose to focus on 5 key issues, and then work in small groups to develop

a plan for addressing these issues. This process has been used with considerable success in a large number of New Hampshire communities.[12]

Study Circles and the Community Profile lead our list of recommendations because we believe that the most important first step to deal with the decline in social capital is to find away to re-engage citizens of Bedford in a conversation on this topic with each other. Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses in this regard. The Study Circle process is a grassroots approach that is more inclusive that the Community Profile approach. It is less prone to criticisms of being elitist; its process is most likely to develop an outcome with the widest degree of community ownership. It is a deliberative, not adversarial process, but it is, however, a much slower deliberative method. The Community Profile approach has the advantage of more quickly developing a list of recommendations and an action plan. Either approach would provide the citizens of Bedford with an opportunity to consider the problems with which they are confronted, particularly the problem in the decline of social capital, and think together about some new, more effective responses. In fact, work by the Harwood Group developed a framework of nine factors that mirror many of the attributes of these programs and has found success (Wallis, Crocker, & Schechter, 1998). Other researchers who have looked into the effectiveness of study circles and similar programs report their success, primarily in terms of their ability to reestablish citizens' connection with their community and each other (Bloom, 2000; Leighninger, 2002; Morse, 1992).

There are many additional suggestions we could make concerning how Bedford might address their challenges, but as effective as any idea we could put forward might be, what is necessary for success is that the citizens of Bedford embrace whatever initiatives are implemented. That embrace must be expanded to include those individuals who may not have been part of the process before. Those who have a family and a home already have a stake in the process and can be expected to participate (Lewis & McCracken, 1994, Oliver, 2001). However, it is also important to include a diverse range of individuals who have a variety of factors at stake, like local business owners and service providers where townspeople may already congregate to discuss local issues (Tolbert, Irwin, Lyson, & Nucci, 2002). These individuals serve to reinforce the network of connections that already exist in town and may introduce an additional vehicle to tie the younger community in school to the older, more alienated segment, thus increasing efficacy for both and allowing broader community issues to be identified and discussed.

Although researchers like Oliver (2001) have found that the larger the community the lower the interest in local politics, the people of Bedford clearly

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[12] Bloom, David A., "The Civic Profile: A Case Study of Community Building in New Hampshire," National Civic Review (89:4, Winter 2000) pp. 287-3000

care about their town and these study circles may create the initial medium that will serve to create the sense of closeness and intimacy that Oliver also found lead to more involvement (2001). Such "buy-in" is best achieved when they are the product of an intentional deliberative process and not imported from the outside. As William Hastie said in 1940, "Democracy is a journey, not a destination." For the civic life of Bedford to be revitalized, it must come from within and cannot be manipulated from without. In this way the citizens regain their sense of control and possibly increase their sense of political efficacy and reduce their political alienation to a point where they can feel more connected to the process. Hence, the central importance and potential of employing a deliberative process such as study circles.

Such an approach provides a structured mechanism by which people can come together to talk, listen, and begin to think and dream in concert about their community, their challenges, and possible responses. It is not our place to tell the citizens of Bedford how to "solve" their problems, especially if the primary source of the problem is the lack of social and civic interaction. We believe that the citizens of Bedford themselves can create the social capital necessary to address the challenges they face, and that there is no shortcut to civility and civic engagement other than the time and effort it takes to have the personal conversations necessary to build civic relationships, partnerships, and institutions. Hence, we recommend that the town council launch a comprehensive, voluntary study circle initiative in which the goal is to get 5% of the community involved. We realize this is an ambitious goal, but we believe it is precisely this sort of effort that can pay the dividends they seek. We further recommend that the town council seek to provide some incentives for involvement in these circles.

Our recommendation to provide incentives for involvement may strike some as contrary to the spirit of citizenship. Alexis de Tocqueville, however, in describing the genius of American civic engagement in the 1830's pointed out that self-interest was at the heart of American involvement in public life.

> The Americans … are fond of explaining almost all the actions of their lives by the principle of self-interest rightly understood; they show with complacency how an enlightened regard for themselves constantly prompts them to assist one another and inclines them willingly to sacrifice a portion of their time and property to the welfare of the state. (Toqueville, 1990, 122)

Any "solution" to the problems faced by Bedford must take into account the very busy lives of its inhabitants. Some citizens of Bedford have expressed skepticism that our goal of 5% is attainable. They may be correct. Hence, something will

need to be done to get people together to talk, and providing some incentives is important.

While we believe study circles are the most effective first step in addressing the challenges facing Bedford there is one additional step that the town council might embrace to improve the level of civic discourse. We recommend that the town council consider adopting a voluntary code of civility. There is little question that the current environment of public discourse in Bedford is poisoned. People can, however, talk with one another about important and emotional issues in a manner that maximizes the possibility of listening and finding common ground. The Town Council could improve the quality of discourse at their meetings and set an example for citizens and other groups by formulating and adopting such a code.

Youth. Clearly the most disturbing piece of information to emerge from our focus groups was profound sense of disempowerment expressed by the young people. Our focus group facilitator said that she had not witnessed anything like this in her professional career. By all accounts this was a group of young people who have tremendous resources at their disposal. They live in a very wealthy area, come from families of power and privilege, and have the expectation of going to college. Nevertheless, not only did they fit into the norm of their cohort by expressing disdain for politics and institutional involvement (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999), the sense of powerless they expressed was intense, especially as it came from a group of young people who in the future will likely be part of the economic elite.

Hence, as important as it is for the adults of the community to engage in a study circle initiative to develop a common vision for Bedford and begin redeveloping lost social capital, it is essential that a comprehensive initiative be established to seek to empower and train the young people of Bedford for citizenship and politically connect them to the process. We know this is important not just from our own findings and those of others cited earlier pertaining to adults, but also because research which has specifically focused on the youth as a political group find this to be important. When students are given the opportunity to express themselves on important civic issues their political engagement increases (Hahn, 1999). To accomplish this we propose a threefold strategy focusing on family, schools, and community.

The focus groups reaffirmed the fundamental importance of the family in civic education. The young people consistently referenced their own sense of disenfranchisement from their family life and almost never to schools or broader society. Hence, a change in family life may bring a significant change to young citizens and we believe much can be achieved through a process that starts with family conversation. Political discourse not only energizes adults (Gastil, 2004; Oliver, 2002; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002; Wallis, Crocker, & Schechter, 1998;

Wyatt, Kim, & Katz, 2000) but young people as well. When parents talk with their children about politics, those children learn about the process and that, in turn, boosts parents' involvement because they come to recognize the stake they have in the process and become more likely to vote (Lewis, & McCracken, 1994).

Bedford's young people consistently reported that their parents did not care what they thought. Given the time demands reported by the adults it is not surprising if the quantity and quality of family conversations are suffering as a result. Just as conversation is needed at the community level to rekindle community life and social capital, so it is needed in families, especially for the children. While conversation on any topic relevant to all the participants is important and productive we believe that it is especially important for parents to talk with their children about current events, and especially the high school debate. Such conversation will not only help all participants better understand the issues, but if done right, can help children learn that their ideas do matter and that adults care, even if they don't always agree (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999).

In addition, parents can help train their children for citizenship by giving them increased responsibility and appropriate power over their lives as they mature. The young people involved in our focus groups were so secure and well-cared for, that they almost seemed bored. These gifted and able young people are capable of handling some if not a great deal of responsibility and decision-making. Parenting toward such an end can help young people entering the adulthood in possession of the attitudes and skills necessary to citizenship and success in many areas of life.

While the family is of central importance in the training of citizenship, schools also have an important role to play. There may have been a day in the United States where citizenship was taught without educational institutions having to intentionally focus on it. For instance, the generation described by Tom Brokaw in *The Greatest Generation*, and praised by Putnam for its civic contributions did so in an era where schools may have done less than they do now to teach citizenship. That era, however, is now past. Citizenship is no longer, if it ever was, absorbed from the family, home and religious environment. Today civic education requires a greater intentionality on the part of schools and scholars argue compellingly that it works (Abislellan, 2000; Hahn, 1999). Indeed research has shown that civic education of several types leads to greater civic engagement (for a review, see Galston, 2001). Fortunately, there is a wide variety of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular educational initiatives schools can adopt to enhance civic understanding and engagement of young people. The New Hampshire Legislature recently published a report on the status of civic education in New Hampshire. They identified 7 different approaches to civic education currently being used in New Hampshire schools:

1. The History-Curricular Approach

This approach stresses knowing and respecting our nation's social and political history, founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Federalist papers, and the Constitution and the visions of freedom that our country was founded upon. It asserts that the history curriculum is the primary vehicle for true civic education.

2. The American Government-Curricular Approach

This approach asserts that the primary reason for the disengagement of young people is their lack of knowledge of American Government. It proposes that every student take at least a one semester civics course that focuses on teaching students the structure of American government, the law-making process, campaigns, elections, public policy and current events. Such a curriculum will help students understand government and politics and thereby remove the obstacle to involvement created by ignorance of these matters.

3. The Critical-Thinking Pedagogical Approach

This approach emphasizes critical thinking. It asserts that the decline in voting and civic engagement is the fault not of the curriculum, but the foundational pedagogical approach to modern education. Having students sit in classrooms, listening to lectures and reading books only as instructed creates passivity that is antithetical to democracy. Proponents believe that a new curriculum is not needed but a whole new approach to education in which students take an active part in learning. This entails giving them meaningful involvement in the creation of curriculum, classroom like, and school organization and governance. Such an approach teaches by practice.

4. The Community Service Approach

This approach emphasizes the way to re-engage young people as citizens are to encourage/require them to participate in community service in an extra-curricular manner during evenings and weekends. Part of the reason students are disengaged is due to the segregated nature of modern life. It is very easy for young people today to be utterly disconnected from the broader world of social need, and ignorant of the agencies and institutions that seek to address these needs and problems. Community service gets students involved in public life, exposes them to people and agencies responding to need, and shows them how to live in as an engaged, responsible citizen.

5. The Service-Learning Approach.

This approach bears many similarities to community service, except that rather than viewing community service in an extracurricular context, it is seen as an extension of the curriculum and a component of traditional coursework. Teachers involve students in deliberately designed community service

learning experiences that complement and connect directly with classroom learning and are incorporated into the grading process. Such experiences help students understand the world better, create frames of reference that will enable their classroom learning to be effectual, and create the opportunity for students to learn the meaning of citizenship.

6. The Public Achievement Approach.

This approach also bears similarities to the previous two approaches. What is unique about this approach, pioneered by Harry Boyte at the Humphrey Institute of the University of Minnesota, is its emphasis that it is not enough to involve students in service-oriented projects that adults create and organize. Rather, students need to be taught to learn how to work together in small groups to identify real issues of a public nature that interest and affect them personally (like repairing a playground), and then learn how to work within existing political and social institutions to resolve the issue. Public Achievement accomplishes this by getting an adult mentor to work with groups of 5 or 6 (K-12) students.

7. The Voter Training and Mentoring Approach.

This approach emphasizes the need to make voting the focus of our efforts, with education and training directed at the actual process of voting, and the issues surrounding elections. They argue that the real impediment to voting is a lack of understanding of the process, a lack of mentoring by family and society and a lack of education surrounding election issues. The way to resolve this is by registering students to vote in the classroom, designing classroom curriculum to help educate students about electoral issues (using newspapers, TV news, or the internet news in the classroom is a primary approach), and involving students of all ages in very realistic mock elections. The hope is that by the time students turn 18, they feel educated enough to participate in campaigns and elections (State of New Hampshire, 2003, 3-4).

We believe that each of these approaches has something significant to offer, and that rather than recommending one approach over another, we would recommend that as the Bedford School Board develops a civic education plan for the future, they consider developing a program that draws from several of these programs. Again, the foundation of an effective citizenship program on every level is rooted in community dialogue and ownership.

Finally, there is also a town initiative that may well be very beneficial to promote the civic education and engagement of Bedford's youth: the Bedford Kids Council. Several years ago the Bedford Town Council founded a pilot program that established a kids' town council. Its purpose was to both teach the children how town government worked, as well as give them an opportunity to have input on issues. We believe that this initiative has great potential to help address many of the concerns raised by the youth in the focus group concerning

empowerment and the genuine concern of adults for the ideas of youth. We would recommend that the town council reinvigorate this initiative by re-establishing it as an elective youth body with some limited power and a limited budget. Young people, like adults, want to invest in things that can make a difference. In fact, programs like "Kids Voting" have shown that empowering young people increases voter turnout (Simon and Merrill, 1998). If the Kids Council was empowered to make a difference, it has the potential to be a powerful tool not only for youth education and involvement, but to make Bedford an even better place to live.

Conclusion

Clearly, Bedford is faced with many challenges in terms of civic engagement and civility. Yet they are not alone. Bedford faces challenges similar to what communities across the United States are also experiencing. Since, however, the community is asking the right questions, there is great hope that answers can be found. While it may sound both simplistic and a reach, we believe the first step forward involves getting the citizens to dialogue together. Putnam at the end of his work *Bowling Alone* (2000, p. 414) says, "In the end, however, institutional reform will not work - indeed, it will not happen - unless you and I, along with our fellow citizens, resolve to become reconnected with our friends and neighbors." It is this very reconnection in the form of dialogue that we have stressed in our recommendations. We know Bedford to be a community of remarkably talented and gifted people. We have every confidence that the town possesses within itself all that is necessary to address the challenges they face.

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