

there is little evidence of discrimination. On the contrary, universities now give minorities preferential treatment in admissions, and though hard evidence of cause-and-effect is lacking, the overall increase in minority enrollments has been “striking.” While recent studies indicate that black college students, on average, have lower college grades and graduation rates than whites, those at more selective schools perform better than they would at less selective ones. With minority “special admits” to medical school, there is a further benefit: Minority physicians are more likely to treat patients who are minorities and poor.

As for whether minority set-asides in government contracting and procurement prop up weak companies, the evidence is mixed, the authors say. Some studies have found that minority firms that “graduate” from such programs have no worse failure rates than other firms. “On the other hand, there is some evidence that minority business enterprises deriving a large percentage of their revenue from local government are relatively more likely to go out of business.” The cause, however, may be that some of these firms are only fronts set up to exploit the programs for the benefit of large, nonminority enterprises.

Bowling with Uncle Sam

“A Nation of Organizers: The Institutional Origins of Civic Voluntarism in the United States”
by Theda Skocpol, Marshall Ganz, and Ziad Munson, in *American Political Science Review*
(Sept. 2000), 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

To hear some conservatives and communarians tell it, big government and its “top-down” efforts to do good have sapped America’s civic health, turning a once proud land of bustling volunteers, active with friends and neighbors in multitudes of tiny local groups, into a nation of isolated, self-absorbed slackers, mindlessly clicking their remotes. Instead of “a thousand points of light,” millions of TV screens glowing in the social dark. The solution: Turn off the set, stop looking to government, and join . . . a bowling league. But wait! cry Harvard University sociologist Skocpol and her colleagues. Government can help! After all, they argue, it served in the past as a model for voluntary membership organizations.

They cite a classic 1944 article, “Biography of a Nation of Joiners,” by historian Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. Voluntary groups were few in colonial America, he wrote, but the struggle for independence and then the adoption of the Constitution taught lessons in cooperation. In the early 1800s, Americans began to organize associations along the lines of the federal political system, “with local units loosely linked together in state branches and these in turn sending representatives to a national body.” Subsequently, the Civil War heightened national feelings, giving “magnified force” to association building in the late 19th century.

Buttressing Schlesinger’s analysis, Skocpol

and her colleagues dredged up historical data on large-membership organizations from an ongoing study of the origins and development of volunteer groups, as well as from historical directories, then looked at the local groups listed in 1910 city directories for 26 cities. “In every city,” they write, “most of the groups listed in the directories were part of regional or national federations, ranging from a minimum of 63 percent in Boston to a maximum of 94.5 percent in Rome, Georgia.”

Looking further at groups listed in city directories between 1890 and 1910 in eight small cities, the authors found that religious congregations and local chapters of large federations (other than labor organizations) were “quite stable,” while strictly local groups tended to come and go. “Once founded, churches and chapters linked to the largest federations took firm root and became the enduring core of civil society in modernizing America.” The chapters flourished, they say, thanks in part to the efforts of national and state federation leaders, such as Thomas Wildey of the Odd Fellows and Frances Willard of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, who “were constantly on the move,” spreading ideas and recruiting members.

If large federations growing “parallel to the institutions of national republican government” first made the United States “a civic

nation,” conclude Skocpol and her coauthors, then Americans worried about civic decay today must look beyond bowling leagues and

soccer moms. They must seek to revitalize “representative democracy as an arena and positive model for associational life.”

PRESS & MEDIA

Get Me Drama, Sweetheart

A Survey of Recent Articles

News (or what passes for it) is always breaking now, wave after wave surging ceaselessly from the Internet, television, and radio, hitting the battered shore of consciousness—and leaving more and more Americans feeling that they can get along just fine without the lengthy elaborations the next day’s newspaper will bring.

To win back readers, newspaper editors have tried almost everything, from color and jazzy graphics to pious “public journalism” promoting civic betterment. But circulation has kept tumbling. Since 1993, even the thick, ad-rich Sunday papers have been losing readers.

Now there’s a new remedy: “narrative journalism.” It uses some of the techniques of fiction—such as building a central narrative, deploying characters, and setting scenes—to deliver the news in the form of an unfolding drama. Enthusiasts and skeptics debate the merits of this approach in *Nieman Reports* (Fall 2000), published by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University.

The “voice” that the reader “hears” in traditional news stories is bland and impersonal, but it can be made more engaging to readers “without threatening the crucial mission of newspapers,” contends Mark Kramer, a professor of journalism at Boston University. Gripping, revealing, and accurate narratives can be crafted, he says, that appeal to readers’ “civic” emotions.

In many narrative-minded newspapers these days, news stories often have an anecdotal “lede” (lead), with the point of the story buried in a “nut graf” below. Other, more ambitious narrative news stories, at the risk of seeming pointless, have no explicit point at all. A 15-part series about racial relations in the United States that appeared in

the *New York Times* last June and July concentrated on the stories of many individuals and deliberately avoided drawing any broad conclusions.

Some narrative journalism has proven compelling. Sales of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* jumped by 20,000 in 1997 when a month-long series by reporter Mark Bowden appeared, reconstructing in dramatic detail the battle four years earlier in which 18 U.S. soldiers died in Mogadishu, Somalia. Enhanced with audio and video clips on the *Inquirer’s* Web site, the series drew increasing “hits” each day—until the daily number reached 40,000, causing a server to crash.

Successful narrative journalism has even been done on tight daily deadlines. At Florida’s *St. Petersburg Times*, after months of background research, Thomas French and two other reporters covered a murder trial by turning out narrative “chapters” in the continuing saga each day—chapters in which the day’s “news” was disclosed not right away, as it would be in a traditional news account, but only gradually, as it would be in a novel. “The verdict itself,” French notes, “was revealed on the third jump page, in the 112th paragraph.” Two readers complained, but hundreds of others lauded the unusual coverage.

The news does not always lend itself to narrative journalism, however, and adding a dollop of narrative to news stories does not necessarily make them more engaging. Indeed, it can make them less useful, former *Washington Post* columnist Nicholas von Hoffman points out in the *New York Observer* (Oct. 16, 2000). The *New York Times*, he complains, “is now larded with meandering, verbose stories” with “long-way-around-the-barn” human-interest leads.