

Social Capital and Support for Public Funding of the Arts

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I. Introduction

We test the hypothesis that social capital is an important determinant of popular support for public funding of the arts.¹ We employ data from the 1998 General Social survey in order to analyze individual responses to questions relating to public funding of the arts in general, as well as at the federal, state and local level. Multivariate statistical models reveal that neither individual or state level measures of social capital are significantly related to support for public funding of the arts. This result is robust to several alternative measures of social capital and to different sets of co-variables in the statistical model.

II. Art and Social Capital

The arts have been described as a tool to inspire civic pride, foster community cohesion, spur civic reform, and strengthen democratic institutions; in short a “uniquely enjoyable way to build social capital” (e.g., Goss 2000, Center for Arts and Culture 2001, Putnam et al. 2003, and Strom 2001).

But to what end? The celebration of art as a means to invest in social capital presupposes a causal link

¹Recent estimates of total government support for the arts in the U.S. range between \$1.2 billion (Cohen 2002) and \$3 billion (Cohen and Wyszomirski 2002). These estimates do not appear to include the value of tax expenditures for individual and corporate donations, or for the non-profit status of many producers.

between art and social capital, as well as the existence of a causal link from social capital to well-being. However, there is reason for caution on both counts.

What is Social Capital?

Social capital is most often described by non-economists as an attribute of a group that facilitates cooperation within the group (e.g., Robert Putnam 2000). In contrast, economists typically define social capital as an individual attribute. However, because much of the empirical evidence regarding the consequences of social capital is based upon comparisons of aggregate social capital and outcome variables across countries or states, the question of whether social capital is an individual attribute or a group attribute remains open. In addition, social capital in a country or state is usually measured by averaging individual survey responses to questions about social trust (e.g., agreement with “...most people can be trusted”) and membership in voluntary organizations; studies of individual social capital employ these same types of survey questions, most often from the General Social Survey (GSS).

The study of social capital is still in its infancy, so much so that there is some debate about the reliability of the most common measures of social capital. For example, Glaeser et al. (2000) find that vague attitudinal measures about trust, of the sort employed in the General Social Survey, do not predict subjects behavior in simple trust experiments. However, more recent experimental work by Anderson et al. (2004) finds that the most common survey instruments on trust and membership do predict cooperative behavior in both public goods and trust experiments.

Determinants of Social Capital

Only recently have social scientists taken to the task of identifying the determinants of social

capital. Alesina and La Ferrara (2000, 2002) model individual trust and participation as function of both individual and metropolitan area attributes. They find that ethnic, racial and income heterogeneity at the metropolitan-level reduces an individual's level of social trust and participation in voluntary membership organizations, even after controlling for individual attributes such as socioeconomic status. This detrimental impact of heterogeneity on group cohesion, an important component of social capital, has also been found in other contexts. For example, Costa and Kahn (2003) show that rates of desertion from the Union Army during the American civil war were positively associated with the diversity in occupational backgrounds of soldiers within each company. In a unique laboratory experiment, Anderson et al. (2003) find that inducing inequality in show-up fees among human subjects reduces contribution levels in a classic public goods experiment.

The general acknowledgment of the importance of inequality and difference for the formation of social capital is attested to by the recent distinction between bridging and bonding social capital in the academic literature. Art is often touted as a means to create bridging social capital within heterogeneous groups. The report "BetterTogether" is replete with assertions about how the arts are an engine of civic renewal and a "unique means of connecting to our common humanity," but there is a decided dearth of systematic evidence that the arts are in any way related to the formation of social capital.

Efficacy of Social Capital

The concept of social capital and its potential importance for the human condition has captured

the imagination of both the academic and policy communities.² Putnam (2000) remains the best known and most comprehensive treatment of the general efficacy of social capital, but many other researchers have shown that measures of civic participation and trust are associated with many different indicators of well-being, including economic growth (e.g., Knack and Keefer 1997, and Zak and Knack 2001), the quality of government (e.g., Knack 2002) and even teen births (Gold et al. 2002) and gun ownership (Hemenway et al. 2001). In addition, several recent studies have documented a statistical association between state-level measures of social capital and either mortality, health status or violent crime (Galea et al. 2002, Kawachi and Kennedy 1997 and 1999, Kawachi et al. 1999, Kennedy et al. 1998, Kawachi, Kennedy and Wilkinson 1999, Mellor and Milyo 2003, Putnam 2000, Wilkinson et al. 1998).³

Despite these empirical findings, there is much skepticism about the efficacy of social capital. The very term remains somewhat nebulous; different authors sometimes use the term to describe different phenomena. In addition, much of the evidence regarding the effects of social capital on well-being comes from ecological studies of a single cross-section of countries or states, often with few — or even no — controls for other factors. Consequently, there remains a need for much more in the way of rigorous research on the question of whether social capital is indeed related to well-being. Nevertheless, there is a large contingent of social scientists willing to make policy recommendations based on the existing evidence.

²For example, see the World Bank website on social capital and development at <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/index.htm>.

³In a recent review of the public health literature on social capital, Lomas (1998) concludes that social capital is “probably the most important determinant of our health.”

Policy Implications

One of the primary explanations for how social capital might negatively influence well-being is through its hypothesized effects on the content of public policy; in particular, several authors argue that group cohesiveness and trust are critically related to popular support for expenditures on public goods and social programs [e.g., Kaplan et al. 1996, Wilkinson 1996, Knack and Keefer 1997, and Kawachi et al. 1997]. Specific policy recommendations include not only the creation of open spaces and front porches in residential communities, but also income redistribution in order to remedy class differences that are assumed to rend the social fabric and thereby reduce support for the provision of public goods and social programs (e.g., Wilkinson 1996, Baum 1997, Kawachi et al. 1997, Kawachi and Kennedy 1997, Kennedy et al. 1998, Lomas 1998, Lynch and Kaplan 1997, Putnam 2000).

Social Capital and Support for Public Funding of the Arts

Previous research has found that evidence consistent with the hypothesis that social capital is related to support for the provision of public goods. To the extent that this reflects a causal relationship and to the extent that art is viewed by people as a public good, there should then also be an association between social capital and support for public funding of the arts. This hypothesized relationship is expected to hold all the more so, given that art is thought by many to have a unique and important connection to social capital. We now turn to our test of this hypothesis.

III. Data and Methods

The 1998 General Social Survey included several questions about public support for the arts (n=843); we focus on four questions that deal directly with public funding (see Table 1 for descriptive

statistics). First, we examine responses to “are we spending too much, too little or about the right amount” on “the arts.” For this trichotomous variable, we estimate ordered probits. Survey respondents were also asked whether federal, state or local government should assist arts organizations; for these dichotomous variables we estimate probit models and report marginal probability derivatives. For all of these dependent variables, positive values indicate support for public funding of the arts.

In each specification we control for several individual attributes, including age, race, sex education, and income (see the appendix for descriptive statistics for all co-variates). In some specifications we also control for an index of support for other public goods or redistributive programs (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

We investigate the effects of two types of social capital on support for public funding of the arts. First we follow much of the literature by using Putnam’s (2000) state-level measure of social capital. In addition, we control for an index of individual responses to questions on trust, participation and voting; this index is then an individual level measure of social capital much in the spirit of Putnam’s state level index. Finally, we normalize both indices so that they range between 0 and 1.

IV. Results

We first examine determinants of support for the arts other than social capital; in Table 2 we report our results for government support of the arts in general. The four columns report estimated ordered probit coefficients for nested models. In column one we control only for demographic and socioeconomic attributes of individuals. In the next two column we add controls for political party and

region; these additional controls are jointly significant, so all subsequent models include the full set of co-variates in column three of Table 2. In the final column of Table 2, we add controls for support for public goods and redistributive social programs. These last two controls may themselves be determined by social capital, so in all subsequent analyses we present results with and with out these variables included as controls.

In Table 3 we report ordered probit coefficients for our social capital variables entered into the statistical model individually and jointly. In every case, neither state or individual level social capital is statistically significant, nor are these variables jointly significant. In contrast, the indices of support for public and social programs are both strongly related to support for the arts (individual social capital is significantly related to support for public goods, but not social programs; see appendix); however, the estimated effects of social capital are not influenced in a substantive way by the inclusion of these indices in the model.

In Table 4, we present the estimated marginal probabilities from probit models employing the same model specifications. Once again, support for government funding of the arts is not significantly related to either measure of social capital (social capital is weakly associated with local support, $p < .15$), nor is this absence of an association greatly influenced by the inclusion of indices of support for public goods and social programs as controls.

Sensitivity Analysis

We have replicated this analysis with several different measures of individual and state social capital (e.g., membership or trust only); in addition, we have explored instrumental variables estimation (in linear probability models) of the effects of social capital. However, in no case do we find stronger

support for the hypothesis that either individual or state level social capital influences support for the arts.

V. Conclusion

Social capital is not a determinant of support for public funding for the arts; this is consistent with the absence of overwhelming evidence that social capital is a substantively important determinant of support for public or social programs (see appendix). Given that the content of public policy is one of the primary mechanisms by which social capital is thought to influence well-being, these results suggest more caution is warranted in calls to invest in social capital. Further, more scrutiny should be given to the strong claims about the unique connection between the arts and social capital. We find little evidence that social capital increases an appreciation for the arts, at least as measured by support for public funding. This also suggest that future work more carefully investigate whether the arts and culture are indeed a means to build social capital, as well as more seriously address the question or “to what end?”

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Selected Variables

Variable Name	Mean	S. D.	Min.	Max.
Public spending on the arts	.034	.065	-1	1
Federal assistance	.440	.496	0	1
State assistance	.549	.498	0	1
Local assistance	.558	.497	0	1
Putnam state social capital index	.344	.200	0	1
Individual social capital index	.405	.300	0	1
Average of support for spending on public goods	.156	.282	-1	1
Average of support for spending on social programs	.386	.350	-1	1

Table 2: Determinants of support for public spending on the arts

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Age in years	.019 (1.29)	.018 (1.20)	.019 (1.10)	.011 (0.74)
(Age squared)/100	-.027 (-1.84)	-.025 (-1.74)	-.027 (-1.85)	-.02 (-1.21)
Female	.183 (2.24)	.162 (1.97)	.154 (1.86)	.147 (1.72)
Black	.061 (0.53)	-.025 (-0.20)	.038 (0.31)	-.103 (-0.81)
Other race	-.218 (-1.21)	-.271 (-1.48)	-.302 (-1.64)	-.346 (-1.85)
Hispanic ethnicity	.182 (1.11)	.141 (0.86)	.106 (0.63)	.195 (1.14)
Married	-.126 (-1.01)	-.120 (-0.96)	-.098 (-0.78)	-.137 (-1.07)
Divorced, separated or widowed	-.201 (-1.57)	-.214 (-1.67)	-.192 (-1.49)	-.209 (-1.60)
Number in Household	-.057 (-1.70)	-.056 (-1.66)	-.067 (-1.96)	-.069 (-1.98)
High school degree	-.064 (-0.54)	-.102 (-0.85)	-.100 (-0.82)	-.111 (-0.90)
Associate or junior college degree	.126 (0.71)	.141 (0.79)	.113 (0.63)	.132 (0.73)
College degree	.439 (2.79)	.485 (3.07)	.482 (3.01)	.475 (2.93)
Graduate degree	.384 (1.91)	.394 (1.95)	.358 (1.75)	.258 (1.24)
Household income \$20,000 - \$29,999	.008 (0.06)	.000 (0.00)	.002 (0.01)	-.058 (-0.46)

Household income	-.069	-.044	-.018	-.045
\$30,000 - \$39,999	(-1.70)	(-.032)	(-0.13)	(-0.32)
Household income	-.152	-.144	-.115	-.156
\$40,000 - \$49,000	(-1.02)	(-0.97)	(-0.77)	(-1.03)
Household income	-.194	-.166	-.148	-.224
\$50,000 - \$59,000	(-1.16)	(-0.98)	(-0.87)	(-1.31)
Household income	-.361	-.359	-.337	-.297
\$60,000 - \$74,999	(-2.07)	(-2.05)	(-1.91)	(-1.66)
Household income	.126	.133	.130	.145
\$75,000 - \$89,999	(0.57)	(0.60)	(0.58)	(0.64)
Household income	.019	.069	.025	.017
\$90,000 and up	(0.11)	(0.40)	(0.15)	(0.10)
Democrat		.092	.081	.052
		(0.94)	(0.82)	(0.52)
Republican		-.278	-.247	-.202
		(-2.74)	(-2.43)	(-1.96)
Northeast			.136	.179
			(1.10)	(1.43)
South			-.244	-.233
			(-2.35)	(-2.22)
West			.094	.079
			(0.76)	(0.64)
Average support for spending on public goods				.824 (5.37)
Average support for spending on social programs				.571 (4.43)

Notes: Ordered probit coefficients and associated t-statistics.

Table 3: Social Capital and Support for Public Spending on the Arts

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Putnam state social capital index	-.029 (-0.41)		-.032 (-0.44)	-.039 (-0.58)		-.040 (-0.58)
Individual social capital index		.111 (0.72)	.113 (0.64)		.025 (0.16)	.027 (0.15)
Avg. support for public goods				.825 (5.10)	.822 (5.33)	.823 (4.93)
Support for social programs				.571 (3.87)	.571 (4.44)	.571 (3.87)

Notes: Estimated marginal probabilities; t-statistic in parentheses. Other control variables included are: age, sex, race, Hispanic ethnicity, marital status, number in household, education, income, political party, and region.

Table 4: Social Capital and Federal, State or Local Assistance to the Arts

	Federal		State		Local	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Putnam's state index	-.057 (-1.20)	-.061 (-1.31)	-.030 (-0.65)	-.035 (-0.75)	.030 (0.61)	.029 (0.60)
Individual index	.054 (0.68)	.031 (0.41)	.092 (1.16)	.065 (0.82)	.110 (1.57)	.089 (1.24)
Average support for public goods and social programs	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes

Notes: Estimated marginal probabilities; absolute value of t-statistic in parentheses. Other control variables include: age, sex, race, Hispanic ethnicity, marital status, number in household, education, income, political party, and region.

Table A1: Descriptive Statistics for Other Independent Variables

Variable Name	Mean (Standard Deviation)
Age in years	44.9 (16.8)
Age squared	2291 (1700)
Number in Household	2.48 (1.41)
Female	.528
Black	.148
Other race	.069
Hispanic ethnicity	.087
Married	.459
Divorced, separated or widowed	.288
High School degree	.467
Associate or junior college degree	.089
College degree	.159
Household income \$20,000 - \$29,999	.170
Household income \$30,000 - \$39,999	.133
Household income \$40,000 - \$49,000	.113
Household income \$50,000 - \$59,000	.083
Household income \$60,000 - \$74,999	.081
Household income \$75,000 - \$89,999	.042
Household income \$90,000 and up	.098
Democrat	.325

Table A2: Social Capital and Support for Spending on Public Good or Social Programs

	Average support for public goods	Average support for social programs
Putnam state social capital index	.026 (0.42)	-.006 (-0.10)
Individual social capital index	.109 (3.11)	.002 (0.05)
R2	.078	.141

Notes: OLS coefficient estimates; t-statistic in parentheses. Other control variables included are: age, sex, race, Hispanic ethnicity, marital status, number in household, education, income, political party, and region.

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