

***Research Note***  
**Social Groups, Sport and Political  
Engagement in New Zealand**

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Many prominent social theorists contend that memberships in voluntary associations make major contributions to making citizens more engaged with democracy. Although substantial attention has been directed at the potential role of sports groups, previous studies using survey data have not found membership in sports groups to be associated with political activity. New Zealand presents an important context for testing this theory, given its high levels of public participation in sports groups. We find that membership in sports and other social groups is associated with higher levels of political engagement. We discuss how these findings advance our understanding of the role that specific group memberships may have in democratic societies.

Many scholars expect private social groups to make major contributions to building social capital that makes citizens more engaged with democratic politics—particularly groups that have no overt political missions such as sports clubs and choirs

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(Putnam 1993; Putnam 1995a,b; see also Almond and Verba 1963; Pateman 1970; Barber 1984; Barber 1995, 281; Verba et al 1995; Norris 1996). Kim (2000) refers to this group of scholars as the neo-Tocquevillians. The effects of group memberships and activity in voluntary groups have typically been discussed in terms of trends in aggregate-level indicators, yet there are, or at least should be, clear individual-level implications of the phenomena.

As Hooghe (1999) notes, there is surprisingly little empirical work on the individual-level effects of civic associations. One of the few attempts at testing the political effects of social capital in western Europe concluded that they are 'interesting, but irrelevant' (van Deth 2000). This contrasts with the work of Verba et al (1995) who find political engagement in the USA as being driven by group membership, most importantly membership in church groups. This raises the question of how much we can generalise beyond the case of the USA. Specifically, does a model of political engagement that takes account of the effects of group membership 'work' outside the USA, or are there amendments that need to be made? Furthermore, if we model the effects of activity in voluntary groups, are effects the same for all groups? Is membership in a group sufficient for producing greater political engagement, or are effects limited to the most active group members?

We answer these questions by examining individual-level political engagement in New Zealand. The New Zealand case provides a rare opportunity to test for effects of group activity on citizen engagement with politics. First, it provides us with an ability to test how the neo-Tocquevillian arguments might apply outside of the USA. Second, the 1999 New Zealand Election Study is one of the only national surveys of political behaviour to ever include a large battery of questions designed to measure the social group affiliations of citizens, as well as the amount of time they spend meeting in social groups.

### **Social Groups and Political Engagement**

One underlying assumption of participatory democratic theory is that citizens are not isolated beings, and that social organisations play an important 'educative' role in teaching them how to interact and work together and how to act socially as well as politically. Citizens are socialised to learn democratic norms by participation in social groups, workplaces, and other forums (Pateman 1970, 42–6; Mansbridge 1980, 236). Warren (1992, 8) offers a similar theory that proposes that social participation transforms individuals and makes them more public-spirited.

Coleman (1990, 302, 1988) and other neo-Tocquevillians social theorists (Fukuyama 1995; Inglehart 1997) advance similar propositions using the rubric of social capital—a resource that enhances a polity's ability to act collectively. Putnam stresses the importance of individual-level, non-political participation as a means for providing the social capital that a nation needs to maintain healthy democratic practices. His study of Italy (Putnam 1993) gave particular importance to the effects of participation in football clubs and choral groups. According to this theory, participation in such organisations generates social interactions among people that cut across narrower private interests associated with religion, class, race, income or other divisions. By joining social groups, citizens learn democratic norms, and thus establish the basis for effective democratic practices—if not greater engagement with political activities and greater interest in politics.

Central to the debates about the importance of voluntary membership in social groups is the causal proposition that membership in voluntary associations produces certain democratic virtues—such as politically active citizens. To a large degree, however, the causal and even correlational properties of key elements of these participatory democracy and social capital theories have been left untested. Although attempts have been made to refine the theories into clear causal statements, they have not yet been tested very thoroughly (Newton 1997; Hooghe 1999).

The question remains open as to whether some groups are better than others as incubators of democratic virtues or whether all groups are equally good in that regard. Seemingly quite different groups, such as bowling leagues and choirs, are often lumped together as exemplars of the kinds of informal association that generate political engagement. For Tocqueville, the expectation seems to be that any group is just as good as any other. Putnam (1993, 90) noted that Tocqueville wrote that ‘serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute’ organisations alike would instil the habits of democratic practice. But this may not be the case; some groups may be better at encouraging political engagement than others. Labour unions, human rights organisations (Amnesty International) and environmental groups (Greenpeace), for example, have an obvious political dimension. It is not so obvious that sports groups (membership in a soccer club) or arts groups (choirs) have such a dimension.

### **Prospects for Variation in Group Effects**

Recent work has begun to identify that groups differ in their internal diversity and in the solidarity they may breed (Stolle and Rochon 1998; Eastis 1998). Stolle and Rochon (1998, 57) observed different effects of group membership on trust and optimism in three nations, and cautioned that ‘a generalised enthusiasm for the effects of association membership must be tempered by a specification of what types of groups we are talking about.’

Data in Table 1 reveal substantial variation in rates of participation in several voluntary social groups in New Zealand. Some of the groups represented in the first column of Table 1 (such as cultural organisations, hobbies clubs, youth groups, and sports groups), moreover, have far less overt political content than others (such as political parties, or interest groups). The second column of numbers in Table 1 lists the percentage of all respondents who reported membership in each of ten groups that were listed in the 1999 New Zealand Election Study questionnaire. As Table 1 illustrates, there is substantial variation in the propensity for citizens to join associations, and in the types of associations that they join. The most common voluntary, non-political groups that New Zealanders join are sports groups. We observed this same result in a study of Western Europeans, circa 1990 (Bowler et al 2003). Indeed, in New Zealand, as well as Europe, more respondents claimed to be members of sports groups than church groups or unions. By international standards, New Zealanders appear to be avid sports enthusiasts, with 47% reporting membership in sporting groups.

Table 2 compares New Zealand’s levels of sports membership to twelve European nations (using 1990 survey data). Only the Dutch and Danes come close to New Zealand in terms of the proportion of citizens in sports groups.

After sports clubs, hobbies groups, church groups, and ‘social’ groups are the

**Table 1.** Voluntary group memberships in New Zealand

| Group                | Of all respondents:   |                           | Of group members, percent who: |                                     |                                    |                   |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|
|                      | Total number of cases | % Who are member of group | Attend no Meetings (%)         | Attend 1 or 2 meetings per year (%) | Attend at least once per month (%) | Attend weekly (%) |
| <i>Social groups</i> |                       |                           |                                |                                     |                                    |                   |
| Sports club          | 3917                  | 47.7                      | 24                             | 23                                  | 36                                 | 16                |
| Hobbies              | 3855                  | 39.7                      | 26                             | 13                                  | 42                                 | 19                |
| Church               | 3885                  | 38.9                      | 24                             | 14                                  | 25                                 | 37                |
| Social club          | 3809                  | 36.0                      | 29                             | 19                                  | 42                                 | 10                |
| Community svc.       | 3824                  | 30.2                      | 35                             | 12                                  | 39                                 | 13                |
| Cultural org.        | 3647                  | 24.7                      | 46                             | 16                                  | 30                                 | 7                 |
| Youth group          | 3669                  | 16.6                      | 77                             | 6                                   | 10                                 | 7                 |
| <i>Other groups</i>  |                       |                           |                                |                                     |                                    |                   |
| Union                | 3903                  | 35.1                      | 41                             | 36                                  | 21                                 | 1                 |
| Interest group       | 3755                  | 22.8                      | 64                             | 18                                  | 17                                 | 2                 |
| Political party      | 3743                  | 19.2                      | 76                             | 18                                  | 6                                  | 1                 |

*Note:* Values in the first column are the total number of survey respondents, per question. Additional cell entries are percentages. The first column reports the percentage of all respondents answering that they were members of the listed group. Other columns list the frequency of participation among those who report being a member of the group.

*Source:* New Zealand Election Study (1999).

next most commonly cited memberships in New Zealand. Over one-third of all New Zealanders who responded to these questions are members of these groups. Moreover, a majority of members of these four types of groups also report that they take the time to attend at least one meeting per month. In contrast, members of unions, which are often compulsory rather than voluntary, as well as members of political groups such as parties and interest groups, report much less activity corresponding with their membership.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the bulk of memberships reported here, as well as time spent with groups, appear in the realm of the non-political voluntary social groups that are expected to lead people to become engaged with politics.

We test if memberships in these groups differ in their association with political engagement, and compare the effects of these voluntary social groups to memberships in two other groups: unions and interest groups. The non-political voluntary social groups (sports clubs, cultural groups, churches, social clubs, youth groups, community service groups, and hobbies groups) are not alike in how they bring people together, and not all social theorists are sanguine about the beneficial effects that certain voluntary social groups might have on democracy.

Sports clubs, in particular, is a category that likely captures a broad range of possible social interactions, since this category includes competitive and non-competitive participatory activities, as well as groups that are organised for spectators who support specific sports teams such as local rugby clubs. Putman (1993, 115) stressed that the 'civic' regions of Italy were distinguished by the presence of amateur soccer teams, and other social groups that were organized 'horizontally,

<sup>1</sup> The interest group membership question specified 'interest, pressure group, environmental group'.

**Table 2.** Levels of membership in sports groups: New Zealand in comparative perspective

| Nation        | Members of sports group/club (%) |
|---------------|----------------------------------|
| New Zealand   | 47.7                             |
| Netherlands   | 35.2                             |
| Denmark       | 34.8                             |
| W. Germany    | 27.9                             |
| Norway        | 27.2                             |
| Ireland       | 25.6                             |
| Great Britain | 23.8                             |
| Belgium       | 21.9                             |
| France        | 16.1                             |
| Portugal      | 11.5                             |
| Italy         | 10.2                             |
| Spain         | 8.3                              |
| Greece        | 6.5                              |

*Note:* Cell entries are percentages of respondents claiming membership. In New Zealand, respondents were asked: 'Are you a member of any of the organizations or associations listed below?' See Footnote 4 for the list of groups offered ( $n = 3917$ ). In Europe, respondents were asked 'which, if any, of the following groups or associations do you belong to?' They were shown a card listing the following: charities, religious or church groups, cultural/arts groups, trade union or professional association, human rights organisations, nature conservation/ecology groups, youth groups, consumer groups, sports club or associations, and 'other specific groups.' Samples in European nations ranged from 996 to 1511 cases.

*Sources:* New Zealand Election Study (1999; Eurobarometer (1990).

not hierarchically.' If much of the groups in this sport category simply reflects the boosters of sports clubs, we would not expect that participation in such groups generates the kinds of interactions that Tocquevillian theorists anticipate. After all, media images of European soccer fans often do little to offer encouragement for the hypothesis that membership in such groups is associated with civic virtues. Even sports groups that require more active participation (ie playing sports) may have questionable effects on civicness, since one of the primary social interactions that the group experiences is competition. However, competitive sports may also inculcate norms that carry over and affect how a person behaves in other spheres of life. Such norms might include respect for an adversary, a sense of fair play, an appreciation for playing by 'the rules of the game', and the ability to accept victory or defeat gracefully.

'Social' clubs, hobbies groups, and cultural organisations also capture a wide range of variation in types of groups—and include theatre groups, quilting bees, music performance groups, literary societies, choral groups, dance groups, folk art groups, car enthusiasts, coin collectors, and the like. Stolle and Rochon's empirical observations from Germany, Sweden and the USA found that members of 'cultural' groups (a broad category that included arts groups, and cultural/regional heritage

**Table 3.** Frequency that citizens engage in various political acts, New Zealand

|                                     |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Voted                               | 86% |
| Signed a petition                   | 82% |
| Discussed politics                  | 78% |
| Boycotted product or service        | 36% |
| Joined legal protest march          | 22% |
| Wrote to newspaper                  | 16% |
| Phoned talkback show                | 8%  |
| Worked on recent political campaign | 3%  |

*Source:* New Zealand Election Study, 1999 (post-election study).

groups) had greater trust and optimism than members of other associations. Verba and colleagues place particular emphasis on the value of church membership, and Protestant churches in particular (Verba et al 1995, 320–5).

### Hypotheses, Measures, and Model Specification

The discussion so far has largely cast the problem in terms of testing a neo-Tocquevillian argument about the importance that membership in groups has in contributing to political engagement. We proceed from questions posed in Newton's (1997, 583–4) attempt to clarify the causal process implicit in the social capital literature: do voluntary organizations engender civic virtues, and if they do, what sort of groups are best for generating them? As Newton (1997) and Hooghe (1999) point out, any statistical tests will ultimately be unable to establish exactly what the direction of the relationship may be. Still, testing the theory with available cross-sectional data advances our understanding of the role that group membership has in democratic societies. Data used for the analyses reported below are from the 1999 New Zealand Election study post-election survey. This survey not only provides responses to appropriate questions of political engagement and participation, but also asked respondents about their activities in social groups.

Social capital theory leads us to expect that members of groups will be more engaged with politics than non-members, since group membership is supposed to provide personal skills and resources that give an individual increased abilities and incentives to act in the political arena. Social group memberships, furthermore, are expected to build trust and social networks that make a person more likely to act for a collective purpose. Political engagement, from this perspective, is a sort of spillover effect of social group membership, and refers to something larger than standard conceptions of political participation such as voting. Voting may be an element of political engagement, but political engagement is assumed to be part of a larger attachment to civic life and interest in public affairs.

We represent political engagement in terms of eight questions that asked respondents if they engaged in various 'forms of political action' that tap different varieties of activity. Respondents were asked if they had voted in the last election, worked on a political campaign, discussed politics with others during the campaign, participated in a protest march, signed a petition, written to a newspaper, phoned a radio talk back show, or participated in a boycott. Table 3 lists the frequency of

**Table 4.** Principal components analysis of measures of political engagement

| Variables          | Factor Loadings | Active dimension | Passive dimension |
|--------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Signed petition    |                 |                  | 0.68              |
| Discussed politics |                 |                  | 0.66              |
| Voted              |                 |                  | 0.54              |
| Boycott            |                 |                  | 0.51              |
| Wrote newspaper    | 0.65            |                  |                   |
| Called talk radio  | 0.61            |                  |                   |
| Worked on campaign | 0.55            |                  |                   |
| Protested          | 0.52            |                  |                   |

*Note:* Rotated component matrix. Analysis produced two significant factors (eigenvalue > 1.0). Factor loadings over 0.40 reported.

responses to each of these questions.<sup>2</sup> We see that most people report having voted or signed a petition, while very few claim to have worked on a campaign or spoken publicly on radio.<sup>3</sup> Some actions are relatively common and probably involve minimal commitment of time or resources (such as signing a petition). Others certainly involve greater expenditures of time and resources (working on a campaign, writing to a newspaper). On their face then, some of these acts appear relatively demanding, while others do not.

Pattie et al (2002) note in their analysis of political participation in Britain that there are distinct dimensions of activism, with most people engaged in lower cost acts. This being the case, we cannot assume that responses to these questions represent a single dimension of engagement with politics. Indeed, a principal component analysis shown in Table 4 reveals that responses are structured by two distinct dimensions.<sup>4</sup> The four least common and more challenging activities load on one factor (worked on a campaign, joined a protest march, wrote a newspaper, phoned a talk-back show), while more routine activities that place less demands on citizens loaded on a second factor (discussed politics, voted, signed a petition, participated in a boycott). Each factor represents a unique form of political engagement; one that is relatively active, one that is relatively more passive.<sup>5</sup> We

<sup>2</sup> Respondents were asked: 'there are forms of political action that people take. For each one, have you actually done it, might you do it, or would you never?' They were coded 1 if they ticked the box indicating they actually did a particular act (signing a petition, writing to a newspaper, phoning a talkback show, boycotting, and going on a protest march). Other responses were coded as 0. They were also asked: 'during the election campaign, did you do the following?' Those who ticked 'discuss politics with others' and 'worked for a political party or candidate' were coded 1, respectively, or otherwise coded as 0.

<sup>3</sup> Seyd et al (2001) used a larger battery of questions to measure political activity in Britain. Their results are similar to these from New Zealand, with voting, signing petitions and boycotting having the highest reported levels of participation among items asked in both surveys.

<sup>4</sup> Principal Components Analysis is often referred to as Factor Analysis. The 'principal components' are actually linear combinations of observed variables (in this case our measures of political activity), with the components assumed to be somewhat distinct from each other. The components are also assumed to reflect some underlying factor that cannot be observed directly (in this case, two realms of political activity we label passive and active). We used an orthogonal rotation to produce the two principal components.

<sup>5</sup> Consider the face validity of this passive versus active distinction. Boycotting a product simply requires that the actor do nothing (or cease doing something). Writing a letter, in contrast, requires time invested in generating an idea, composing a letter, and mailing it.

use individual scores on each factors to measure two distinct forms of political engagement, and use these as separate dependent variables. Our reference to the second factor as ‘passive’ is not meant to denigrate this dimension of political engagement. It is important to note that higher scores on either dimension represent citizens who are more engaged politically—in terms of the behaviours represented by the respective factors. When we consider the second dimension of engagement relative to the first, however, it appears to reflect less activist—if less time-consuming—forms of political behaviour.

If membership in informal social groups has a causal, non-spurious effect on engagement with politics, we would see a significant association between group membership and an individual’s score on these political engagement factors. We estimate each dimension of political engagement with models that include measures of group membership, while controlling for the effects of other individual-level forces operating on engagement.<sup>6</sup>

Turning to consider our independent variables, the key variables of interest are, of course, group memberships. As we noted, information about ten different kinds of group membership are available in this survey, including church groups, unions, and other groups.<sup>7</sup> Some of our measures of *voluntary* social group membership in particular—those associated with membership in cultural, community, church, hobbies, sports and youth groups—are of special interest since these are not as obviously ‘political’ as most of the other types of groups represented in our models.

We test the hypothesis that membership in voluntary groups has a positive association with political engagement even after we control for other individual-level factors associated with engagement. Further, the social capital literature leads us to expect this hypothesis will hold across all types of groups, for both obviously ‘political’ groups (interest groups), self-interested economic groups (unions), as well as not so obviously political groups (hobbies groups, churches, and sports clubs). We use OLS regression to estimate two models of each dimension of engagement to test this hypothesis.

The first model includes several dummy variables that reflect membership in individual groups, along with a set of demographic and attitudinal controls. The second model includes the same controls, but, rather than estimate the effects with a dichotomous measure of group membership, we use an ordinal measures of activity in each group as the key independent variables. The ordinal measure reflects responses to a question that asked how frequently a person meets with a group they were a member of in the last year.<sup>8</sup> This allows us to see if group

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<sup>6</sup> Use of these factor scores as dependent variables makes the presentation of our results much more parsimonious. Tables are available from the authors detailing logistic regression results for estimates of eight individual items in the index, showing effects of membership (eight estimations) and of number of meetings attended (eight estimations). Results from these estimations are consistent with the substantive results presented in this article.

<sup>7</sup> Respondents were asked: ‘Are you a member of any of the organizations or associations listed below? If so, how often have you attended any meetings in the past 12 months?’ The list included: (1) ‘Trade unions, farmers, employers, professional association’, (2) ‘Political party, political organization, or movement’, (3) ‘Interest, pressure group, environmental group’, (4) ‘Sports club or association’, (5) ‘Cultural organisation’, (6) ‘Church or religious organisation’, (7) ‘Social club’, (8) ‘Youth group’, (9) ‘Community Service Group’, (10) ‘Hobbies group or club.’ Multiple responses were permitted.

<sup>8</sup> As illustrated in Table 1, there are four categories of response for this variable. Non-members are coded 0, members who go to no meetings are scored 1, those going to one or three meetings in the

membership alone is associated with greater political engagement (estimated with dummy variables in Model 1 for both measures of engagement), or if a person's level of participation in the group matters (estimated with an ordinal measure of time spent meeting with the group in Model 2 for both engagement measures).

Demographic and attitudinal factors also affect political involvement and engagement, and must therefore, be controlled for in our models. Measures of educational attainment, gender, income, class, age, religion, and race are all included as control variables in the models. Verba et al 1995, 320–5) found that Protestant churches associated with greater levels of voluntary activity in America. Religion is coded with three dummy variables for Catholics, Protestants, and other religions, respectively. The reference category for religion is those who reported having no religious affiliation.<sup>9</sup> Following Anderson and Guillory (1997), we also control for the effect of supporting a winning party, as electoral losers tend to be less engaged with politics (also see Listhaug 1998).<sup>10</sup>

For age and income, we take advantage of our degrees of freedom and use categorical measures to test for any non-linear effects associated with these variables. Age is represented by five categories, with four dummy variables reflecting the age cohorts that each contain about youngest 20% of the sample. The reference category is those between 48 and 57 years old, as they tend to have the highest levels of engagement. This use of dummy variables for age allow us to control for life-cycle effects—the possibility that the very oldest and very youngest citizens are the least active politically, and are least engaged with politics. Dummies for income represent the lowest third of income earners, the middle third, and the upper third. The reference group for income are those who refused to report their income level. Working-class individuals and Maori are represented by dummy variables representing self-identification. Our general hypotheses for the control variables are that the independent effects of higher education, higher income, being non-working class, being non-Maori, being Protestant, and supporting a winning party, will each be associated with higher levels of engagement—other things being equal. To make the tests even more rigorous in terms of isolating any effects social groups have on engagement with politics, we also control for self-reported levels of political interest.

## Results

There are 2973 cases available for analysis. Tables 5 and 6 present results of OLS estimates of our models of political engagement among New Zealanders. Table 5 reports estimates of how social groups are associated with the active dimension of engagement, while Table 6 reports estimates of the relatively passive dimension of engagement. Model 1 in each table includes dummy variables representing the

*Footnote continued*

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year are scored 2, those attending at least one meeting per month are scored 3, and those who attend weekly meetings are scored 4.

<sup>9</sup> Other religions (11.8% of the sample) include Latter Day Saints, Ratana, Independent fundamentalist, 'other Christian' and 'non-Christian'. Protestants include Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists. Twenty-five percent are in the reference category of no religious affiliation.

<sup>10</sup> Respondents who cast their party and electorate votes for parties that failed to form government are coded as electoral losers.

**Table 5.** Effects of group memberships on active political engagement

| Variables            | Model 1<br>Effect of membership |            | Model 2<br>Effect of frequency of meeting |             |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|------------|---|-------------|
|                      | coef.                           | s.e        | coef.                                     | s.e         |
| Interest group       | 0.061                           | (0.079)    | 0.205                                     | (0.024) **  |
| Union                | 0.109                           | (0.034) ** | 0.039                                     | (0.019) *   |
| <i>Social groups</i> |                                 |            |   |             |
| Community group      | 0.196                           | (0.055) ** | 0.041                                     | (0.014) **  |
| Cultural org.        | 0.185                           | (0.062) ** | 0.042                                     | (0.018) *   |
| Sports group         | -0.020                          | (0.040)    | 0.001                                     | (0.011)     |
| Hobbies group        | -0.062                          | (0.044)    | -0.026                                    | (0.011) *   |
| Social group         | -0.044                          | (0.046)    | -0.014                                    | (0.013)     |
| Church               | -0.045                          | (0.047)    | 0.003                                     | (0.011)     |
| Youth group          | -0.199                          | (0.083) *  | -0.022                                    | (0.027)     |
| Protestant           | -0.170                          | (0.040) ** | -0.170                                    | (0.040) **  |
| Catholic             | -0.124                          | (0.058) *  | -0.149                                    | (0.057) *   |
| Other religion       | 0.003                           | (0.065)    | -0.052                                    | (0.065)     |
| Gender (1 = male)    | 0.041                           | (0.036)    | 0.055                                     | (0.029) ^   |
| Age 37 or less       | -0.211                          | (0.051) ** | -0.217                                    | (0.055) **  |
| Age 38- 47           | -0.013                          | (0.051)    | -0.029                                    | (0.051)     |
| Age 58 - 67          | -0.036                          | (0.062)    | -0.058                                    | (0.061)     |
| Age 68 or more       | -0.225                          | (0.065) ** | -0.224                                    | (-0.064) ** |
| Education            | 0.087                           | (0.015) ** | 0.087                                     | (0.015) **  |
| Lowest income        | 0.071                           | (0.063)    | 0.068                                     | (0.062)     |
| Mid income           | -0.030                          | (0.061)    | -0.033                                    | (0.064)     |
| Highest income       | -0.052                          | (0.065)    | -0.068                                    | (0.065)     |
| Maori                | 0.072                           | (0.060)    | 0.059                                     | (0.059)     |
| Electoral winner     | 0.113                           | (0.035) ** | 0.087                                     | (0.034) **  |
| Working class        | -0.074                          | (0.044) ^  | -0.071                                    | (0.042) ^   |
| Constant             | -0.960                          | (0.114) ** | -0.926                                    | (0.112) **  |
| Adjusted $R^2$       |                                 | 0.098      |   | 0.120       |
| Number of cases      |                                 | 2973       |   | 2973        |

Significant at \*\*  $P < 0.01$ ; \*  $P < 0.05$ , ^  $P < 0.10$  (two-tail).

*Note:* OLS regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. 'Effects of membership' estimates use a dichotomous measure of being a member of a group (or not) for the group member variables. 'Effects of frequency of meeting' estimates use a four-category, ordinal measure of time spent meeting with a group as the group member variables.

unique effect of group membership on each measure of engagement. The second model in each table estimates how frequency of attendance at a group's meetings is associated with political engagement.

Our main interest lies with the effects of group membership. Clearly, not all groups are alike in terms of their association with political engagement in New Zealand. Looking at the first column in each table, it is important to note that the relative substantive magnitude of group membership effects can be assessed by comparing the size of regression coefficients representing any dummy variable in either estimation of Model 1. Not surprisingly, Table 5 illustrates that membership in unions has a significant association with the active dimension of political engagement ( $b = 0.109$ ). Membership in community groups and cultural organisations are also associated with the active dimension of engagement, with the size of the effect for each of these social groups being larger than the effect of being a union member. To put the substantive magnitude of these membership effects in

**Table 6.** Effects of group memberships on passive political engagement

| Variables               | Model 1<br>Effect of membership |            | Model 2<br>Effect of frequency of meeting |            |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|------------|---|------------|
|                         | coef.                           | s.e        | coef.                                     | s.e        |
| Interest group          | 0.107                           | (0.078)    | -0.018                                    | (0.024)    |
| Union                   | 0.027                           | (0.034)    | 0.050                                     | (0.019) ** |
| <i>Social groups</i>    |                                 |            |   |            |
| Sports group            | 0.169                           | (0.039) ** | 0.043                                     | (0.011) ** |
| Community group         | 0.089                           | (0.052) ^  | 0.013                                     | (0.014)    |
| Hobbies group           | 0.078                           | (0.044) ^  | 0.010                                     | (0.011)    |
| Social group            | 0.069                           | (0.046)    | 0.023                                     | (0.013) ^  |
| Church                  | -0.075                          | (0.048)    | -0.033                                    | (0.011) ** |
| Cultural org.           | -0.235                          | (0.062) ** | -0.047                                    | (0.018) ** |
| Youth group             | -0.244                          | (0.082) ** | -0.033                                    | (0.027)    |
| Protestant              | 0.046                           | (0.040)    | 0.052                                     | (0.040)    |
| Catholic                | 0.121                           | (0.040) *  | 0.108                                     | (0.057) *  |
| Other religion          | 0.062                           | (0.064)    | 0.113                                     | (0.065) ^  |
| Gender (1 = male)       | -0.215                          | (0.035) ** | -0.227                                    | (0.036) ** |
| Age 37 or less          | -0.073                          | (0.050)    | -0.093                                    | (0.050) *  |
| Age 38 to 47            | 0.045                           | (0.050)    | 0.058                                     | (0.051)    |
| Age 58 to 67            | -0.087                          | (0.061)    | -0.067                                    | (0.061)    |
| Age 68 or more          | -0.299                          | (0.064) ** | -0.283                                    | (0.064) ** |
| Education               | 0.107                           | (0.015) ** | 0.119                                     | (0.015) ** |
| Lowest income           | 0.306                           | (0.062) ** | 0.283                                     | (0.062) ** |
| Mid income              | 0.223                           | (0.061) ** | 0.199                                     | (0.061) ** |
| Highest income          | 0.327                           | (0.064) ** | 0.315                                     | (0.064) ** |
| Maori                   | -0.202                          | (0.059) ** | -0.215                                    | (0.059) ** |
| Electoral winner        | 0.099                           | (0.034) ** | 0.107                                     | (0.034) ** |
| Working class           | -0.075                          | (0.043) ^  | -0.089                                    | (0.043) *  |
| Constant                | -1.841                          | (0.112) ** | -1.852                                    | (0.112) ** |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> |                                 | 0.192      |   | 0.198      |
| Number of cases         |                                 | 2973       |   | 2973       |

Significant at \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \*  $P < 0.05$ , ^  $P < 0.10$  (two-tail).

*Note:* OLS regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. 'Effects of membership' estimates use a dichotomous measure of being a member of a group (or not) for the group member variables. 'Effects of frequency of meeting' estimates use a four-category, ordinal measure of time spent meeting with a group as the group member variables.

further perspective, the effects of being in a community group ( $b = 0.196$ ) or cultural group ( $b = 0.185$ ) are larger in absolute terms than the effect of being working class, or supporting a winning party. Furthermore, the effect of membership in either of these groups is equal to that associated with the difference between having a secondary level of education and a university degree.<sup>11</sup>

When we estimate the active dimension of political engagement with the

<sup>11</sup> The slope for the effect of education in Table 5 is 0.087. Education is a six category measure (1 = no education/incomplete primary, 2 = completed primary, 3 = secondary, without UE or sixth-form certificate, 4 = completed secondary, 5 = non-degree post-secondary/professional, trade, technical, or tertiary qualification, 6 = university degree). With a distance of two ordinal categories between secondary and university education, the effect of moving from a secondary degree to a university degree is  $0.087 \times 2 = 0.174$ . Another way to consider substantive effects is note that membership in a community group produces a 0.196 standard deviation increase in a respondent's score on the active political engagement measure.

measure of frequency of attending group meetings, the results are not much different. There is, however, one important exception to this. Mere membership in an interest group shows no association with the active political engagement dimension. This probably reflects that the vast majority of interest group members never interact with other people in these groups (see Table 3). This null effect for the interest group membership measurement is consistent with Putnam's point (1995b) that any rise in interest group membership (typified by cheque-book participation) is a hollow replacement for the face-to-face interactions associated with traditional social groups. The second model in Table 5 accounts for this—interest group members who actually do attend regular meetings score much higher on the measure of active political engagement. The relative effect of a one category shift in frequency of attending interest group meetings ( $b = 0.205$ ) is five times greater than the same shift in frequency of attending union meetings ( $b = 0.039$ ). However, as Table 3 demonstrates, very few interest group members report attendance at meetings.

Comparing results in Table 5 to Table 6, we can see clear differences in how social groups are associated with these dimensions of political engagement. Membership in community groups and unions has fairly consistent effects on both dimension of engagement. Sports groups, however, are associated with higher levels of the dimension of engagement that includes voting and discussing politics—but not with the activist dimension of engagement estimated in Table 5. We see the same pattern with the effect of being a member of a hobbies group, and, when frequency of attending meetings is considered, with social groups. Like sports groups, both are associated with higher levels of political engagement on the passive dimension, and neither are associated with higher scores on the activist dimension. Indeed, frequent hobbyists, while more engaged with voting and discussing politics, scored significantly lower on the active engagement dimension. Conversely, whereas Table 5 shows a positive effect for cultural group membership on the active dimension, membership in cultural groups displays a negative association with an individual's score on the measure of passive activity. Yet, for the most part, membership in most of these voluntary social groups does appear to be associated with higher levels of political engagement in one form or another. The substantive effects reported in Tables 5 and 6 remain unchanged in other specifications of these models. The effects of group memberships hold, for example, when we replicate these models while omitting the union and interest group measures, and while omitting measures of interest in politics.<sup>12</sup>

The effect of membership in sports groups on this second dimension of engagement ( $b = 0.169$ ) is particularly noteworthy. In absolute terms, it is twice the size of the effect of identifying as working class, and it is larger than the effect of being an electoral winner. Moreover, it rivals the magnitude of effects of gender ( $-0.215$ ) and of identifying as Maori ( $-0.202$ ). The effect a one-unit shift in frequency of meeting with sports groups ( $b = 0.043$ ), furthermore, is similar to the effect on an identical change in frequency of attending union meetings (0.050).

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<sup>12</sup> These estimates are available from the authors. Earlier versions of the paper also reported estimates of a single uni-dimensional, additive, six-item index of political engagement. These estimates showed no effects for hobby and social groups, yet they showed significant effects on engagement for membership in community groups, cultural organizations, and sports groups. These estimates are also available from the authors.

Thus, while the fit of these models ( $R^2 = 0.19$ ) is relatively low, the substantive effects of membership in social groups rivals the effects of other factors known to be associated with political engagement.<sup>13</sup>

Some notable exceptions to the neo-Tocquevillian thesis about the effects of group memberships are found with youth and church groups. Simply being a member of these groups is not associated with a higher score on either measure of political engagement. The significant, inverse association with youth group membership and political engagement makes some sense, given that members of such groups (the young) have had less exposure to opportunities for political activity—and given very few members of these groups interact at meetings (see Table 3).

These null effects for church groups are interesting findings, since these groups are identified in the neo-Tocquevillian literature as exactly the sort needed to promote political engagement. Our results contrast with those of Verba et al (1995) for the USA. Of course, New Zealand and the USA each have a unique religious context, which makes comparisons difficult.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, although it seems clear that some group memberships are associated with increased political engagement, not all groups are equally important. Of non-political voluntary groups that are of great interest to neo-Tocquevillians, cultural and community groups in New Zealand have much stronger associations with the active dimension of political engagement but sports groups do not.

There are also other significant individual-level effects on political engagement, in addition to the effects of membership in groups. Education, lack of religious affiliation, age, class, and being on the winning side of the recent election are significant predictors of scores on the active dimension of engagement. As expected, the eldest and youngest respondents scored significantly lower on the active dimension of political engagement. High scores on the active political dimension thus reflect people with more education who are middle aged (38–67), non-religious, male, and who are not working class. High scores on the second (passive) dimension of political engagement reflect a somewhat different mix of these factors. On average, women score higher than men on this dimension, Maori score lower than non-Maori, and youth has much less of an effect depressing scores. Likewise, the effects of religion are different, with Catholics scoring higher than non-religious respondents. Each income group is about equally more engaged than the reference group (those who do not report income) on this second dimension. Class, education, being over 68 years old, and being an electoral winner have similar effects on both forms of political engagement.

### **Discussion: Widespread Effects of Sport in New Zealand**

This study of New Zealand provides some of the first systematic evidence of an individual-level link between joining sports groups, and engagement with politics. At first glance, the magnitude of the relationship between sports membership and

<sup>13</sup> Membership in sports groups produces a 0.169 standard deviation increase in a respondent's score on the passive political engagement measure.

<sup>14</sup> Specifically, the largest religious denomination in New Zealand is Anglican (24%), with 25% claiming no religious affiliation. Anglicans are quite rare in the USA, where 62% claim to be Protestant (34% of American Protestants are Baptist) and just 9% claim no affiliation. Moreover, Baptists are a rare denomination (2.6%) in New Zealand.

'passive' political engagement in New Zealand might make sports groups to appear as less consequential than the other social groups we find associated with high scores on our measure of active political engagement. This should not, however, lead us to understate the potential role that sports groups may play in inculcating democratic virtues in New Zealand. As we note above, the size of the effect compares to that of gender, class, ethnicity, or an additional level of education.

There are additional reasons why the seemingly subtle effect of sports membership in New Zealand should be taken seriously. First, despite the importance that Putnam attaches to bowling leagues in the USA and soccer clubs in Italy, previous research (Bowler et al 2003) has found little association between sports groups and political engagement in Europe. We believe that part of the reason that we find the effect here, while they are not found in a similar study of Europe, is that New Zealanders who are members of sports groups are particularly active members. When asked how frequently they met with sports groups they joined, 52% reported they attended at least one meeting with the group per month.

Second, although the relative size of the effect for sports groups might be smaller than the effects of cultural and community groups (see Table 5 and 6), nearly twice as many New Zealanders are members of sports groups than cultural organisations, and they spend more time with sports groups (see Table 1). This means that any potential effects that sports group memberships has on political engagement may be much more widespread in society than the effects of membership in cultural or community groups.

Finally, New Zealanders would appear to be sports-mad, by international standards, with 47% reporting membership in sporting groups. In contrast, a 1990 Eurobarometer survey found that, of Europeans, only the Dutch and Danes come close to New Zealand in the proportion of survey respondents claiming to be members of sports groups (Eurobarometer 1990). New Zealanders are twice as likely to be members of a sports group than the British. Sport, it would seem, may play a different role in the life of New Zealanders than it does in the lives of citizens in other nations. Put differently, any relationship that sports groups may have with democracy in New Zealand appears to be wide-spread relative to other social groups in New Zealand, and they may also be more widespread relative any similar relationship that sport might have with political engagement in other nations.

The results of our analysis support the view that membership in voluntary social groups is, in general, positively associated with political involvement across a range of groups. The nature of the group membership matters, however, as does the type of political involvement. Only one type of social group (of seven we test for effects) is associated with greater involvement on both dimensions of political engagement. Some groups have a weaker association with political engagement than others, and some have no systematic, positive association.

In summary, our analysis has shown evidence consistent with the argument of Putnam and the neo-Tocquevillians. That is, we see individual-level evidence that membership in private, non-political associations corresponds with greater political engagement in New Zealand. Although correlation does not establish causation, we have controlled for various alternative explanations so as to suggest that membership in these groups generates higher levels of political activity. However, of those social groups that are expected by neo-Tocquevillians to be breeding-grounds for

democratic virtues, membership in church groups may be less consequential than membership in sports groups, cultural groups and community organisations.

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