

The Transformation of American Community

Marc Dunkelman

OF LATE, A CERTAIN PESSIMISM has come to dominate the American mood. Many of us—of all ages, classes, races, and political persuasions—think our country is headed in the wrong direction. Our great temptation is to blame politicians, on the theory that Washington is failing a nation in search of answers. But is it possible that we have put the cart before the horse? Could it be that the nation has changed, and Washington is simply struggling to adapt?

Our political system takes for granted a particular understanding of life in America—and especially of American community. Towns and neighborhoods in the United States are not merely the subdivisions of a central bureaucracy, but rather are robust, thriving, and frequently diverse communities in and of themselves. Our original theory of government was built around the bonds that tie those individual units together—the trust borne in the connections forged between people mutually invested in their shared well-being. And it should not be lost on us that the character of those relationships represents one of the great anomalies of American life. Our spirit of community is an essential part of what makes the United States exceptional—or at least of what *made* the United States exceptional.

Over the past few decades, technological, social, cultural, and economic changes have revolutionized the structure of American community. Globalization, the information revolution, and the emerging pre-eminence of the service economy have begun to undo the bonds that long defined American villages, neighborhoods, and

MARC DUNKELMAN is a fellow at the Johns Hopkins Center for Advanced Governmental Studies.

suburbs—relationships that survived the nation's evolution from a collection of agrarian colonial outposts into an industrial global colossus. The transformation we are living through is, in many respects, changing American life for the better—but not in every respect. And whether the long-term effects augur a brighter future or not, one thing has been made clear: Many of our public institutions are failing to adapt.

Broadly understood, the developments of the past few decades have served to weaken the ties that once bound local communities together. In their place, we are, on one hand, now choosing to invest more time and energy in keeping in touch with our closest friends and family members, and, on the other, in trading bits of information with people we do not know very well but who share some single common interest. As a result, the relationships that stand between our most intimate friendships and our more distant acquaintances—the middle-tier relationships that have long been at the root of American community life—have been left to wither. By any measure, that transition has empowered us to be more socially discerning. But the end result has been a social framework that tends to be deep at the expense of being broad, and that is frequently internally cohesive without being particularly diverse.

There are myriad advantages to the new architecture of American community. Among its drawbacks, however, is the threat it now poses to the ability of our politics to solve the problems government needs to address. The new framework has created a political dynamic in which leaders in Washington find it much more difficult to collaborate. And it threatens to undermine some longstanding assumptions, embraced on both the right and the left, about how to shape effective solutions to the challenges that will face us in the decades to come.

A better sense of how American community has changed might provide us with a more satisfying answer to the question of why the nation's institutions—particularly its institutions of government—at times seem so hapless. But more important, sorting through the underlying changes to American life over the past several decades may yield a much better model for understanding why the public remains so dispirited despite the 21st century's broadened horizons. Amid the swirl of news and opinion, a new grounding may help to decipher where we are headed, and why.

THE RINGS OF SATURN

To begin, it is important to examine how American society has evolved over the past several decades—namely, how ordinary Americans have altered the choices they make when investing their time and attention. Imagine, for a moment, a model of the planet Saturn. If the planet itself represents an individual, the surrounding rings comprise his social universe—everyone he knows through the totality of his interactions. Each ring, depending on its distance from the planet itself, corresponds to the familiarity of each acquaintance. The inner rings stand in for the relationships that are the most intimate. The rings further out successively represent those that are less and less familiar.

Consider how the ring model might apply in the case of an ordinary American adult—let's call him Joe. The inner rings represent Joe's nuclear family and closest friends—the few people with whom his life is most intertwined. They are the people who would know if he had both a sick dog and a son struggling in algebra. Most likely, these inner rings would include Joe's wife or girlfriend, his parents or children, and the few close friends he speaks with several times each week.

Farther out, the middle rings represent acquaintances who are not quite so intimate, but are regular contacts nonetheless. These rings, for Joe, might begin with members of his extended family, work buddies he meets for lunch now and again, neighbors he knows from community meetings, or fellow parishioners from church. In essence, the middle rings would comprise the broad spectrum of people with whom Joe is familiar, but not intimate; friendly, but not close.

These middle-ring relationships are what Robert Putnam lionized in *Bowling Alone*, the book he published in 2000 exposing what he termed the “collapse” of American community: bridge partners, brothers in the Elks club, fellow members of the PTA. But the middle rings also comprise more ephemeral relationships. Moving farther out, they would encompass the relationship Joe has with the tailor who has hemmed his pants since his graduation from middle school, or the waitress at the diner he visits every Sunday afternoon after church.

Finally, there are the relationships represented by the outer rings, which are less intimate still, and include the acquaintances whose lives are the least intertwined with Joe's. A preferred eBay vendor might be placed in the outer rings, or the cashier at the grocery store, or a

long-lost elementary-school friend whose updates show up on Joe's Facebook newsfeed. Many of these relationships might be considered nothing more than transactional. And in many cases, the acquaintances represented by the outer rings are met through a single shared interest, without which Joe would be unlikely to engage with them at all.

This model illuminates an important change in American community life: Over the past several decades, Americans have abandoned the investments that previous generations made in the middle rings. Instead, we have begun to devote more time and energy to the relationships found in the inner and the outer rings. We are not, as some argue, *abandoning* community. But the relationships that have become more prevalent—more superficial friendships on Twitter, for example—are of a character fundamentally different from those that were more common a generation or two earlier. The result has been a dramatic change in the architecture of American community—with major implications for our economy, culture, and politics.

Before examining these implications, it is essential to consider how the middle rings became, in essence, the missing rings.

Perhaps most important, the advent of new technologies and media has empowered younger generations to opt out of experiences that were once shared across a multitude of communities. New, better-tailored services have emerged to serve each niche's discrete demands. Information technology aimed at the mass market frequently works to splice it up. And the upshot is that Americans today can bypass many of the relationships that we once *had* to maintain, enabling us to double down on those we value most, and also on those rooted in a single common interest.

Consider, for example, how the past several decades have expanded our opportunities to invest more heavily in inner-ring relationships. Waving goodbye while running out the door in the morning no longer means you won't be in touch until dinner. Mobile phones and Blackberries allow spouses to keep tabs on one another throughout the day. Parents off on business trips can use Skype to read *Goodnight Moon* to their toddlers. College students can text their "helicopter" moms to consult about whether to order a burger or a salad in the cafeteria.

At the same time, the past several decades have provided Americans with new opportunities to focus on the outer-ring relationships that most pique their interest. Sports fanatics need not read a general-interest newspaper, because blogs cover their preferred stories in greater depth. Television programs catering to broad audiences (think of *The Ed*

Sullivan Show) are being replaced by networks (*Lifetime*, for example) focused squarely on particular sets of demographics. Local bookstores are suffering because readers can have titles shipped to them via Amazon, or better yet, directly to their iPads or Kindles.

The sum effect has been to free Americans to be more discerning about where they invest their time and energy. Why hang out with the random assortment that frequents the neighborhood pub when you can join a discussion group comprised exclusively of people who share your love of crochet? Why join the ladies down the street for lunch when you know your daughter is going to call from college between classes? Why endure the mixed membership of the local Kiwanis club when you can fundraise and kibitz online with activists who share precisely your vision of political change?

To be sure, the transformation spans beyond the world of online technology. As Bill Bishop explained in *The Big Sort*, the past several decades have also empowered us to cluster in communities with people who have similar backgrounds and outlooks. Neighborhoods have become increasingly monolithic, as people who share the same tastes have herded together and joined the same institutions. We have largely abandoned the diversity of major downtown commercial districts, opting instead to frequent retailers who cater more specifically to our tastes and budgets. Our kids no longer encounter an assortment of other children at the city's YMCA; they instead join the local suburban soccer club. We now worship in congregations that reflect our own vision of religion, even within the same denomination.

To be sure, ladies still lunch, Kiwanis clubs still volunteer, and strangers still meet while bellied up to the bar. In the aggregate, however, Americans have chosen over the past several decades to take advantage of new opportunities to re-allocate their time. In so doing, they have skewed their attention toward relationships represented by the inner and outer rings, to the exclusion of those in between. The landscape that once forced Americans to interact with acquaintances who were familiar, but not close, has begun to disappear. And, with it, so has the place that middle-ring relationships once occupied in American life.

THE HONEYCOMBED SOCIETY

Many of the effects these developments have had on American life are fairly obvious. In combination, however, they have stealthily eroded

something very deep—the long-settled character of the nation itself. This is not to suggest that American society has not always been divided in some way: Since the beginning, there have been fissures along the lines of, for instance, class, ethnicity, and race. But girding those sub-sections in many cases was a spirit of community that bound each pocket to the others, encompassing towns and neighborhoods that boasted a broad range of skills and worldviews.

Over the past few decades, however, that patchwork tapestry has fragmented into smaller and smaller pieces, each of which is increasingly isolated from those nearby. The result is that American society has come to resemble a sort of “honeycomb”: Small segments of like-minded acquaintances now live next to other small pockets, but despite their proximity—or even the ease by which they might connect online—each remains effectively walled off from the others.

In this sense, the way in which we organize our lives today represents a major departure from the architecture that has characterized most of American history. Writing in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville opened *Democracy in America* by highlighting a crucial distinction that separated American communities from those in Europe. In France, power flowed from the monarchy out to the provinces—so that local government was frequently answerable more to its masters in Paris than its subjects at hand. The United States, on the other hand, was sub-divided into towns and counties, which selected their own leaders and then channeled power from the ground up. American citizens (or at least those given the franchise) controlled their own “townships,” as Tocqueville called them, and local communities then selected representatives to the state and national legislatures.

The effect was to make villages and towns the basic building blocks of American society. *Geography*—not some ancient rite of nobility or any formalized religious hierarchy—defined the structure of political power within the nascent republic. Despite the fact that the founding fathers were themselves culled from a sort of colonial aristocracy, a sense of autonomy became ingrained in each American subdivision in ways largely absent from the monarchical structure that dominated most of Europe. When an 18th- or 19th-century European thought of his “little platoon,” he tended to think of his class or rank. (Indeed, Edmund Burke, who coined the term, was referring to distinct economic classes.) When Americans thought of *their* platoons, however, they tended to

think of their neighborhoods, or their villages or towns—each of which often contained its own diverse mix. Collaboration among neighbors who had entirely distinct sensibilities became a staple of everyday American life. In turn, the relationships formed between the interdependent residents of each township became the lifeblood of American democracy.

No doubt, in every village in every corner of the globe, relationships are struck between the guy who acts as the local constable and the bigwig who runs the local bank; between the woman who teaches at the local primary school and the family that manages the local hardware store. But in the United States of Tocqueville's day, those relationships—middle-ring relationships—were pre-eminent.

There were important drawbacks to the community architecture Tocqueville described. Living among people who harbored distinct views of the world wrought disagreement and occasional gridlock. Americans with different points of view were perpetually forced to confront one another face to face. But this same push and pull, jockeying for power, and demand for compromise necessitated constant collaboration and, in the end, fertilized American dynamism. As Arthur Koestler wrote in the mid-1960s, "All decisive events in the history of scientific thought can be described in terms of mental cross-fertilization between different disciplines." The same has often been true of American life. And that marks one of the township community's greatest contributions: The relationship structure at the center of the American experience laid the foundation for fresh, new ideas.

This same basic sociological architecture endured throughout the 19th century, and then through most of the 20th century. Even during the Industrial Revolution, as Americans settled into urban neighborhoods, a similar sort of framework—steeped again in the middle rings—governed social interaction. In a Chicago neighborhood full of Italian immigrants, for example, residents might have shared the same heritage, but bakers, teachers, doctors, and politicians would have all known one another, lived near one another, and built a web of middle-ring relationships inside their own cloister and, to some extent, with the broader urban community. In the wake of World War II, as bedroom communities emerged around large cities, the "township" structure persevered. The routines that put dry cleaners and lawyers in touch with grocers and plumbers kept communities together.

But during the Cold War era and the period after, something happened. That basic, middle-ring-oriented community architecture—the one heralded by urban-planning scholar and activist Jane Jacobs in her descriptions of neighborhoods in New York City in the 1950s and '60s—was upended. The changes that defined the latter half of the 20th century—the digital revolution, the growth of the service sector, globalization—overwhelmed the *township* structure, which had been replete with middle-ring relationships. In its place, a *cluster-networked* system emerged, spurring Americans to invest their time and energy in the inner and outer rings at the expense of the middle. As a result, for the first time in American history, the sociological architecture Tocqueville identified faded in significance.

THE CARIBBEAN'S CAUTIONARY TALE

In 2009, Stanford business school professor Peter Blair Henry and one of his students, Conrad Miller, published a Brookings Institution study comparing Barbados and Jamaica. The two Caribbean island nations have a great deal in common: Both were colonized by the British during the 17th century, and were settled in large part by slaves brought from Africa to work on sugar plantations. Both won their independence during the 1960s, and maintained many of the same institutions that framed politics and commerce in the United Kingdom. Both islands embraced parliamentary democracy, private-property rights, and the common law.

Nevertheless, as Henry and Miller argued, in the four decades following independence, the two nations traveled along remarkably different trajectories. Barbados is, today, a global success story, having maintained a relatively steady rate of growth and a rising standard of living. Jamaica, by contrast, has long struggled with high unemployment and runaway inflation. Measured in 2002, nearly 40 years after each had emerged from British rule, the growth of Barbados's per capita gross domestic product had outpaced Jamaica's by a factor of three, and the gap between the two nations' per capita incomes had expanded by a factor of five. Moreover, while Jamaica had struggled for more than 20 years to recover from the oil crisis of 1973, Barbados had proved itself to be resilient.

In trying to explain the divergence, Henry and Miller paid particular attention to the way in which each nation reacted to a monetary crisis during the early 1990s. When the Barbadian government was faced with the prospect of having to devalue the nation's currency—a step that

would have diminished each citizen's spending power and chilled foreign investment—the labor and business communities forged a dramatic compromise: The unions submitted to relatively drastic wage cuts, and employers approved a plan to narrow their profit margins. Both sides agreed to endure short-term pain in order to avoid the prospect of long-term stagnation, marking what was, by any estimate, a triumph of mutual understanding. The Barbadian economy soon recovered.

Faced with similar problems, the Jamaicans proved unable to forge similar consensus. The divisions between different classes and groups in society were simply too deep. The suspicion harbored by small-business owners who were regularly bullied by the police typified the sort of animosity that had rippled through Jamaican society; the country's political leadership had long been viewed as corrupt. And so the suggestion that inimical elements of Jamaican society should join together in mutual sacrifice for common benefit was beyond the pale. Jamaica ended up devaluing its currency, and the island's economy has continued to suffer.

The important element to note here—a distinction absolutely crucial to understanding the islands' divergence—is the success the Barbadians had in bridging the divides that separated the nation's distinct classes. Citizens from different pockets of society negotiated with one another, revealing a real appreciation for the fact that they were all in the same boat. This underlying societal trust empowered the elites, who would likely have been stymied by mutual antagonism, to collaborate on a way forward. Those who represented laborers accepted lower wages without fear of reprisal. Those who represented small businesses agreed to lower profit margins without having to worry that member business owners might revolt. And representatives of the government could contribute to the compromise without being paralyzed by the prospect of severe political recrimination.

In Jamaica's case, however, that same sense of public trust was elusive: The island nation was bereft of the resilience borne in the middle rings. In Barbados, where small-business owners and the working classes intermingled, leaders were able to bridge the chasms that separated divergent interests. But in Jamaica, where class divisions were more all-encompassing, proposals to share sacrifice proved to be a bridge too far. The strength of their middle-ring relationships thus accounted for a great deal of the difference between the two islands' fates.

GRIDLOCK AT HOME

How do the lessons of Jamaica and Barbados apply to the United States? Consider the trajectories of California and New York, two states that once stood at the cutting edge but are now suffering through periods of extended turmoil. To be sure, both states still house some of the most dynamic communities in the world—places where the “creative class,” as Richard Florida has labeled the well-educated elite, are choosing to congregate. But even amid the steady draws of Silicon Valley and the Financial District, West Hollywood and Brooklyn Heights, the two states’ capitals are, with little exception, in perpetual disarray. Consumed by the seemingly unending paralysis of parochial politics, Albany and Sacramento are blamed for failing, year after year, to put each state’s fiscal house in order. Time and again, the entrenched interests in each capital seem to stymie the public’s interest in fundamental reform.

When trying to identify the cause of each government’s apparent dysfunction, observers are prone to cite a familiar litany of complaints. Gerrymandering is a cancer on the body politic. Politicians are spineless. The rules governing the state’s budget are impossible to navigate. Powerful lobbyists and campaign financiers demand such fealty from legislators that those seeking re-election cannot afford to broker a reasonable compromise.

Of course, many of those complaints are valid. Inevitably, politicians serving in Sacramento and Albany are self-dealing. Gerrymandering, by any evaluation, insulates many incumbents from any real sense of political accountability. Special interests, by most estimates, play an outsized role in setting the agenda. And as *Big Sort* author Bill Bishop might argue, clustering has driven voters to the political extremes.

But beneath the process-oriented complaints that typically dominate any discussion of political gridlock is an explanation that lies outside of either state’s capitol building: The architecture of community in both states has evolved away from the Barbadian model to resemble the sort found in Jamaica. The middle-ring relationships that once tied Tocquevillian townships together have been loosened by the changes in the routines of American life. And despite all the benefits of globalization, the information revolution, and the rise of the service economy, the transformation of community has left California and New York, like much of the rest of the nation, much more difficult to govern.

At its root, that antagonism is driven by the fact that the constituencies that elect individual members of each legislature are, for the reasons explored above, less in tune with the interests, grievances, and concerns of those elsewhere in the state. The “creative class” professionals who live in San Jose and the Upper West Side are less apt to have sustained exposure to the struggles facing communities in California’s Central Valley and in upstate New York. Because they live within their own clusters, the bankers and lawyers who work in the financial districts of New York City and San Francisco are less likely to mingle with the school teachers and firefighters who live in the outer boroughs and the relatively less expensive pockets of the Bay Area. The Chinese immigrants and their children who settled in Flushing and the Vietnamese-American families who have made a home in Garden Grove are less likely to share common experiences with the Hispanic communities that live near each.

And that evolution is not driven by the fact that Americans have become more prone to prejudice. Middle rings in California, New York, and around the country have disappeared because new technology has allowed members of *all* of these communities to double down on the relationships they prize most. The circumstances that might have compelled younger generations to invest in relationships that bridged ethnic gaps, or that provided some shared context—in wide-ranging civic associations, along the aisles of department stores, in reading the same newspaper columns, or in watching the same television programs—have been subsumed by the new routines of American life.

By any measure, there are incredible opportunities to be had in the new architecture of community. Given the choice, who would turn down the opportunity to be in more frequent touch with his closest friends and family? All things being equal, why not invest more heavily in relationships with those who share a common interest? Certainly it is not hard to see *why* people would abandon the middle rings for relationships that offer both greater and lesser intimacy.

But in California and New York, the new architecture’s effects on government have been stark. The spirit of compromise has been sapped from politics. Each individual section of each state’s honeycomb is less aware of the struggles or frustrations felt by communities living just across the highway. Politicians, in turn, represent constituents less interested in negotiation, and more suspicious of those who live in increasingly alien pockets nearby. Leaders willing to strike a compromise

are accused of apostasy, rather than lauded as keepers of the peace. In sum, the transformation of American community has robbed each state's politics of a key element of the American community Tocqueville described in the 1830s: an appreciation—made so apparent in contemporary Barbados—of the value of shared sacrifice.

Given that underlying revolution, the causes of gridlock in Sacramento and Albany are less difficult to identify. For one, younger generations of public servants—themselves the products of communities starved for middle-ring connections—will not be nearly so willing to strike meaningful compromises with their counterparts across the aisle or those joined to another faction in an intra-party fight. But much more important is the attitude taken by their constituents: Absent a connection to those living in other segments of the honeycomb, fewer voters are willing to stomach political compromise. And public servants, aware of the vitriol in the electorate, will be more tempted, time and again, to obey the absolute marching orders they receive at the ballot box.

POLITICS IN THE HIVE

These very same influences also play a role in our national politics—and go a long way toward explaining the nation's enduring frustration with Washington. Indeed, one of the most popular refrains of our day—that Washington is fundamentally broken—is heard from activists at both ends of the political spectrum, and at every point in between. Even after several successive elections in which the public seemed to reject the status quo, the squabbling that appears to have hamstrung the political process never seems to let up. In mid-April, a *New York Times*/CBS News poll found that 70% of Americans believe that the country is on the wrong track. Asked specifically about the budget deficit, 63% disapprove of the way Republicans in Congress are handling the issue and 57% disapprove of the White House's approach. In essence, the pessimism extends across the aisle. And, as a result, the question that is repeated *ad nauseum* by the punditry and the public alike is whether the institutions of American government are capable of navigating through the challenges of the 21st century.

A familiar list of explanations has informed the conventional wisdom about the causes of the nation's political morass. As in Sacramento and Albany, the influence of “special interest” groups, which champion their parochial concerns primarily through campaign donations, is often a prime target. The influence of gerrymandering, which insulates

many members of the House from any real sense of political jeopardy, is said to obscure the public interest. The shrill and partisan tone of journalism has borne a fair share of the blame. And, most recently, the filibuster—which effectively requires legislation to win a supermajority of support before being considered on the Senate floor—has been flagged as a major culprit.

To be sure, were any of these choke points to be cleared away, Washington might well operate at a somewhat more efficient clip. But none of these explanations exposes the root of the problem. After all, most of these scapegoated institutions have a long tradition in Washington. One need only read Robert Caro's *Master of the Senate* to understand how powerful campaign contributors were during the purportedly halcyon days of the 1950s and '60s. Technology may have made the process of redistricting more vulnerable to political scheming, but gerrymandering is so established an institution as to be named after a founding father (Massachusetts governor Elbridge Gerry), and has been unpopular for nearly two centuries (the term first appeared in 1812 in the *Boston Gazette*, which illustrated the "Gerry-mander[ed]" district around Boston in a cartoon and labeled it "a new species of monster").

The more partisan tone of the national media harks back to the role reporters played for most of the nation's history, before the ethos of balanced journalism emerged during the age of Walter Cronkite. In the early days of the republic, after all, major newspapers operated as explicit organs of the political parties. And, maybe most important, while it is true that the filibuster has been employed more frequently of late—the political scientist Barbara Sinclair claims that the percentage of major bills subject to the filibuster has grown from 8% during the 1960s to 70% today—it is not so clear *why* members chill debate in the Senate so much more frequently.

Given that many of the institutions blamed for political gridlock are vestiges of earlier eras, the essential question becomes: Why does contemporary politics seem so particularly prone to paralysis? The answer can largely be traced back to the missing middle rings.

To some degree, that gridlock is a reflection of the politicians now elected to Congress. Raised in an increasingly honeycombed society and legislating, in turn, without the deep exposure previous generations had to the interests of *other* constituencies, today's partisans are more loath to agree to some mutual accommodation.

More than that, politicians today are being elected by voters who are themselves children of the honeycombed society. Without middle-ring relationships to ground the broad understanding that an integrated society will be more dynamic than one in which opposing interests perpetually snipe at one another, voters are more militant in their demands that their representatives champion their own respective causes, and are more prone to the sort of stridence that refuses to find common ground. Senators are not more prone to filibuster today simply because members of that body are more vituperative than their predecessors. The preferences of the voters whom they represent have also changed.

So, much as we can blame the political process for the gridlock that bedevils Washington, we should acknowledge that the transformation of American community lies at the root of the problem. The middle rings and the institutions of township community that influenced the political process through most of American history have been subsumed by the new rhythms of American life. And, as evidenced by the public's broad pessimism, the result is undermining the nation's faith in our system of government.

REPAIRING COMMUNITY

If so much of our collective frustration is wrapped up in the broader evolution of American community, how should we react? To the degree that we can alter our national trajectory, what, if anything, should be done?

First, it is important to acknowledge that the depletion of middle-ring relationships may eventually hit a tipping point of sorts. The suburban sprawl that fueled the housing industry for the better part of the past few decades contributed greatly to the honeycombing of American society. Today, a new embrace of "sustainable" development includes a focus on building neighborhood hubs, meant to organize suburbs that foster the same sorts of relationships Jane Jacobs prized in mid-century New York. The redevelopment of Shirlington, Virginia, outside Washington, D.C., incorporated the sort of diverse, walkable features that are being embraced in communities throughout the country, from San Antonio, Texas, to Santa Monica, California. If planners and developers throughout the United States embrace the same approach to urban design—generally categorized under the umbrella of the "New Urbanism"—the routines of everyday life in much of America may help to foment the creation of more middle-ring relationships.

Moreover, crises of public policy may *force* Americans to re-invest in township community. Few dispute that the aging Baby Boom generation's claims on our health-care infrastructure will, without some sort of intervention, bankrupt the government. But the fact that the nation's hospitals and nursing homes were designed to address *acute* conditions, not to handle the *chronic* issues that will become the greater burden for an older society, provides a window of opportunity. America's social-service providers—the local organizations like Catholic Charities and Jewish Family Service that frequently operate in piecemeal fashion—have the capacity to serve at the vanguard of an effort to create a practical alternative to institutional care. With some coordination, the doctors, nurses, social workers, meal providers, van coordinators, activity facilitators, grocery services, and other organizations might be able to compile, collectively, a real-world alternative. In turn, the connections forged among community organizations could develop into a new set of middle-ring relationships.

A groundbreaking new project outside Buffalo, New York, called a Town Square for Aging, is designed to spur just that sort of development. By creating a hub of kiosks for the broad range of providers who serve an individual locale, it will enable the elderly to find a wide array of services available to them in one place. The idea is also that the service providers, who so frequently operate in a sort of cantonized environment, would begin to build partnerships on their own. And those relationships might then extend to the rest of the community.

Third, education reform may also need to be adapted to the new architecture of American community. While no single legislative program can engineer the re-creation of middle-ring relationships, public policy can, at a minimum, equip future generations with the tools required to bridge the chasms that separate neighbors with disparate points of view. The nation's vast system of public schools may prove to be the most convenient mechanism employed toward that aim. What some have termed “emotional intelligence”—broadly speaking, the ability to withstand emotional impulses, build human connections, and remain focused amid distraction—is a crucial element of any middle-ring relationship. Both explicitly and implicitly, many of the nation's most celebrated education programs—like the Knowledge is Power Program and the Harlem Children's Zone—are designed to imbue students with those very skills. To the degree that the nation's public schools can produce graduates with

more emotional intelligence, future generations will be better equipped to build middle-ring relationships.

Finally, the question of how policymakers might respond to the broad re-organization of American community extends beyond legislative specifics. The challenges posed by our evolving society will require legislators to revisit the basic assumptions that have girded almost all of the nation's policy debates over the past half-century—in other words, to re-examine the assumptions embraced on *both* sides of the aisle about the role of government in the decades to come.

The central claim of the right has long been that bureaucracy is the chief impediment to free enterprise—that big government too frequently gums up the works of a society that would be much more productive if left alone. As President Reagan put it in his inaugural address in 1981, “government is not the solution to our problem, government *is* the problem.” Conservatives have, in turn, argued that government undermines the core values of hard work and perseverance that arise naturally in flourishing communities—that bureaucracy disrupts the innovative spirit that might otherwise thrive.

The left, on the other hand, is inspired by a different view: that lack of opportunity is the nation's most pressing challenge, and that government has an important role to play in steering the nation toward a more widely shared prosperity. Notwithstanding a new focus on the culture of poverty, liberals have largely argued that better education, nutrition, health care, and infrastructure are crucial elements of the public mandate.

Both arguments, however, are predicated on the same notion: that the country should pursue a strategy that allows more Americans to tap into the strength and innovative spirit that is organically borne in their local communities. While conservatives may argue that the best thing government can do is get out of the way, and liberals may believe that the proper strategy is to provide additional opportunity, *both* sides presume that the spirit of Tocquevillian community fuels the society at large. But in a nation bereft of middle rings, that assumption may no longer apply.

This is not to suggest that the nation needs to pursue some sort of new-fangled social engineering. After all, no matter what one thinks about the appropriate role of government, few will argue that it is well equipped to build an entire stratum of relationships across society. But this reality does suggest that the old political debates of right and left may increasingly

become stale, and that thinkers at all points along the spectrum may need to build policy platforms that address a whole new set of assumptions.

21ST-CENTURY CHALLENGES

By now, the advantages of the digital revolution have become abundantly apparent. As former Google CEO Eric Schmidt once explained, in the course of a single lifetime, the world has moved from one in which most everyone had very limited access to *any* information, to one in which most everyone has access to nearly *every* piece of information in the public domain. In turn, a new architecture of innovation has emerged to be a more central element of the nation's greater economic strength.

But an inadvertent consequence of the changes that tracked the latter years of the 20th century and the very beginning of the 21st—some of them technological, but others driven by the evolution of everyday American life—has been to dismantle the basic sociological architecture that persisted throughout much of our history. And the frustrations that Americans feel today—the sense, among many, that the United States is a nation in decline—are largely driven by that transformation.

In the 1830s, Tocqueville advised his readers that there was no point in debating whether we should favor or oppose the advance of democracy—it was a *fait accompli*, and the question was how to make the most of it. In the 1990s, observers like Thomas Friedman offered the same advice about globalization—that a new economic system was here, whether we wanted it or not. So it is with the shift of social capital away from the middle rings. Our challenge is not to argue about whether this change should come. It has come. But its consequences—and its potential for both good and harm—remain ours to grapple with and resolve.

The challenges wrought by the emergence of an increasingly interdependent world have left many Americans confused and unsettled, and for good reason. Many of the institutions that were built on the now eroding foundation of township community no longer function as we might once have hoped and expected. Our temptation, time and again, will be to find scapegoats and assign blame. But we would be wiser to accept that American life has undergone a deep and consequential change. It will therefore be incumbent upon new generations to adapt the institutions of American democracy to the contours of a transformed society.