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Catherine Simpson Bueker  
*Emmanuel College*

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**Resources, Relevance, and Relationships:  
Differential Motivations behind Local Civic Engagement over Park Usage**

Catherine Simpson Bueker, Ph.D.  
Department of Sociology  
Emmanuel College  
Boston, MA

Please direct all correspondence to Catherine Simpson Bueker, Department of Sociology, Emmanuel College, 400 the Fenway, Boston, MA 02115, [buekeca@emmanuel.edu](mailto:buekeca@emmanuel.edu).

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the considerable political activity that developed around the enactment of leash laws for dogs at a multi-use park in the Boston suburbs. Individuals on both sides of the issue held meetings, wrote letters to the editor, and attended public hearings, all illustrations of “engaged” citizenship. Some even ran for elected office. I interview 24 individuals who were engaged in the process from various sides of the debate, as well as review dozens of documents. I also attended public meetings. The data suggest strong support for both individual and group-level theories of political engagement, suggesting that what encourages formal political participation also influences other types of engagement, but to differing degrees. At the individual level, there is evidence of the resource or classical socio-economic model of political activity and the importance of personal relevancy to political engagement. At the group level, there is evidence of social bond and social capital theory, with such factors playing particularly important roles in this instance of non-electoral engagement. This study also advances the theoretical field by further delineating the relationship between the individual and the group in political and civic participation.

Key words: political engagement, political activity, civic engagement, engaged citizenship, social trust, social capital, parks, dogs

## Introduction

“...the goal is for citizens to participate more fully in the political decisions that affect their lives, and so come just a little bit closer to participatory democracy” (Alford 2003, 15).

Much hand-wringing has taken place for more than a decade over the issue of whether Americans are as engaged as they used to be (Putnam 1995 2000), whether our assessments of decline are really the result of faulty measurements (McDonald and Popkin 2001), or whether Americans are simply engaging in different ways (Sander and Putnam 2010; Dalton 2008). What can be agreed upon is that engagement matters to the lives of individuals, to the well-being of communities, and to the health of larger society. This project, based upon an in-depth case study approach, questions the premise of declining engagement, explores whether people are, perhaps, engaging in new ways, and examines what factors encouraged the engagement witnessed in this particular case.

I focus on one instance of hyper-local civic engagement, engagement by those who live in a well-defined community, around a specific issue of relevance to that group. In this case, the debate is over dog usage at a public park in the Boston suburbs. By interviewing 24 individuals who became engaged in the discussions, observing public meetings, and analyzing newspaper articles and public records on the topic, I find some challenge to the theory of a disengaged citizenry and I am able to see what factors led to the high level of civic and political participation. Better understanding what led to engagement in this case may allow scholars, policy makers, and the general public to better understand what can lead to engagement in other arenas, such as education or healthcare, and at levels beyond the immediate community. It may also allow us to expand the base of engaged citizens, thus avoiding situations where the loudest voices determine the debate.

## **Background**

In mid-October, 2008, the Natural Resources Commission (NRC), banned dogs from running off leash at Woodland Park,<sup>1</sup> an approximately five acre mixed use park in an upper middle class suburb of Boston, Massachusetts. The park includes a playground, a playing field used for both soccer and lacrosse practices and games, a baseball diamond, and a small basketball court. A paved walking path follows the perimeter.

The NRC stated the issues at the park: an increasing number of dogs, and as a result, dog waste, field damage, and noise (Letter to the Editor January 5, 2009; minutes from February 10, 2009, public meeting of the NRC). Increased traffic leading into the park was also cited by another member of the NRC (minutes from February 10, 2009, public meeting of the NRC) and had appeared as an issue to neighbors, abutters, and parents of small children in a letter to the editor as far back as 2006 (Letter to the Editor, April 26, 2006). These complaints had all grown increasingly worse in recent years (ID #103; ID #111; ID #113; ID #122; ID #134; ID #154).

Although neighbors and abutters seemed to have had problems with the way the park was being used for some time, it was the issue of sports that brought the problem to a head and forced town involvement. According to two people interviewed (ID #122, ID #134), two events had led to the complete ban on off-leash dogs in October 2008—an opposing team from another town refusing to play at Woodland Park because of dog feces on the field and in a separate instance, a verbal argument between a dog owner and a sports coach which nearly became physical. Though the sports issue was what led to the ban on dogs running off leash, the larger public

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<sup>1</sup> All proper names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

debate that ensued became one between the dog owners on one side and the neighbors and abutters on the other side, with the athletes and coaches largely staying silent.

Within days of the ban, letters to the editor and guest columns appeared in the local newspaper, protesting the leash decision by the NRC. A lobbying group calling itself M-WOOF emerged, with three clear leaders who organized the several dozen “members” who provided their email addresses and worked to varying degrees on the issue. They began to meet regularly, write additional letters to the editor, and strategize about how best to respond to the NRC decision. At a December 16, 2008, evening meeting at Town Hall, more than fifty residents from both sides attended to discuss the situation at Woodland Park. The crowd was hostile to each other, and to the members of the NRC. The NRC was unprepared both for the number of people in attendance (the room could hold no more than about twenty), and the level of anger, frustration, and organization from both sides (researcher’s observation, December 16, 2008). A member of the NRC declared “There’s no reason to have this type of hostility occurring” (December 16, 2008). One resident who attended the meeting later wrote in a letter to the editor (December 25, 2008) “The Council members openly bickered amongst themselves as to how best to proceed.”

Later public meetings followed in January and February, again with dozens of people turning out to voice their concerns. The NRC held additional small group meetings with representatives of the various factions. A compromise program was piloted in late winter 2009, which includes: limited off-leash hours in the mornings and evenings, with the schedule varying by season; a limit of eight dogs off leash at any one time during the off-leash hours; a limit of two dogs per person; a requirement that all dogs be under voice control at all times; a residency requirement for all dog owners who have their dogs off leash; and a strict ban on dogs in the tot

lot (minutes from February 10, 2009, public meeting of the NRC). Fines of up to \$200 could be levied for the failure to meet any of these requirements. The program was to be revisited periodically at open meetings with input from town residents (minutes from August 12, 2010, public meeting of the NRC; minutes from September 21, 2010, public meeting of the NRC). As of fall 2011, this program remained in place.

Both those who wanted restrictions placed on the dogs and those who did not want such restrictions exerted considerable effort, showed high levels of civic engagement, and illustrated an ability to achieve, at least in part, their desired outcomes. In addition to the letters and articles written to the local newspaper, the attendance at public and private meetings, and a petition circulated, two members of M-WOOF ran for town-wide office (they both lost) and an additional member took an open position on a town-wide board. What motivated such active political engagement? Was the individual engagement driven by individual or group-level factors? Were individuals on each side similarly or differentially mobilized?

This research advances the field by exploring whether theories that have largely been developed to explain electoral participation can also explain instances of informal engagement. I test these theories through an analysis of in-depth interviews, letters to the editor, guest columns, other relevant articles, public records, and participant observations. An additional advantage of the qualitative approach utilized in this study is that we are better able to discern connections between the individual and the group by understanding the mechanisms at work.

### **What Makes People Engage?**

#### **At the Individual Level: The Resource Based Model of Political Participation**

Robert Putnam's now famous book, *Bowling Alone* (2000), documents the decline of civic and political engagement in American society over the past several decades. Through an

analysis of multiple large-scale, national data sets, Putnam identifies a downward trajectory in everything from voting to volunteering to visiting with neighbors, painting a picture of a disengaged and fragmented society.

Although a compelling argument, it is not a settled one. The decline in voting, for example, may be the result of changing demographics, with fewer eligible voters (McDonald and Popkin 2001). Alternatively, people may be engaging in new ways, as a result of changing technology (Dalton 2008; Sander and Putnam 2010). Certain sub-sets of Americans, particularly the younger generation, are more likely to participate in instances of “engaged” citizenship that is more direct and self-expressive, rather than “duty-based” citizenship which comes in the form of voting or jury duty, for example (Dalton 2008).

What is more broadly accepted is that the various forms of citizenship engagement that have been identified are most strongly predicted by individual level socioeconomic characteristics (Verba and Nie 1972; Milbraith and Goel 1977; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie 1993; Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1994; Putnam 2000; Sander and Putnam 2010; Dalton 2008).

The hypothesized mechanisms are multiple: those with more education better understand the importance of such engagement and the way the political process works. Education also breeds efficacy; people feel their involvement actually matters and can make a difference (Niemi, Craig and Mattei 1991). Education may also cultivate skills that are particularly helpful in the public arena: skills of public speaking, letter writing, and organizing, (Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1994).

People with more money have more access to technology, one of the new ways people are engaging with the state (Dalton 2008; Sander and Putnam 2010). Those with more money



have more time to engage, as they have the ability to outsource time consuming tasks. The lack of free time, due to increased commutes, working multiple jobs, and having two adults in the workforce, has severely curtailed the inclination and ability of many people to participate (Putnam 2000).

The role of socio-economic status goes beyond predicting who will engage. It also helps us to understand *how* people will engage. Greater levels of education may encourage the shift from the more traditional forms of engagement, what Dalton (2008) calls the “duty-based” forms of citizenship, to more “engaged” citizenship. Internet-based communities, volunteering, and interest in politics and civic affairs have increased among the younger, more affluent members of society (Sander and Putnam 2010). As individuals receive more formal education, they increasingly question those in power, leading to more active and direct forms of engagement, with a growing civic engagement gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” in American society.

Be it formal participation, such as voting, or more engaged citizenship such as working with a civic group, the largest predictors identified in decades of quantitative studies are individual-level socioeconomic factors (Verba and Nie 1972; Milbraith and Goel 1977; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie 1993; Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1994; Putnam 2000; Sander and Putnam 2010; Dalton 2008). There is less that has been done in the way of qualitative research of engaged citizenship, an avenue of interaction with the state that must be better understood. This study explores whether the classical resource based model of participation, developed to explain electoral activity, explains the high level of civic engagement witnessed in this case-study of public park usage. How do socio-economic resources play a role in this illustration of engaged citizenship?

Does socio-economic status appear to trump all else, as it does in the quantitative studies, or are other factors equally or more important in this case of civic participation? Finally, does socio-economic status appear to influence those on opposing sides in equal measure?

### **At the Individual Level: The Rational Actor**

Rational choice theory argues a different “economic” explanation of individual behavior. Individuals conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether their engagement is worth the time or effort such engagement requires (Schumpeter 1950; Verb, Schlozman and Brady 2000; Edwards 2009). If one follows a rational choice argument, much civic participation does not make sense on the surface. For example, voting requires the time to learn about the issues and candidates, as well as the time it takes to vote. Given how little impact an individual vote will have on the outcome, even in a local election, voting simply does not make sense from a rational choice perspective, unless the value of voting comes from the act itself.

The beauty of rational choice theory is in its simplicity. It is a mathematical model through which one can calculate the costs versus the benefits of participating. The model will produce a number which suggests whether one is more or less likely to engage.

The very beauty of its simplicity is what also begs for criticism. Some see it as a theory that can twist itself to be “right” under any circumstances, that it is essentially tautological in nature—if it is what the individual chooses to do, then it is internally rational (Blais 2000; Goldfarb and Sigelman 2010). In a related vein, the model is viewed as simply failing to account for a sufficient number of considerations, such as other aspects of personal preference or the larger context. Goldfarb and Sigelman (2010) argue conceptually that the “civic duty” motive must be incorporated into any mathematical model. Individuals feel a sense of obligation, or “civic duty” and they feel guilty when they have not engaged in that duty. Contextual issues,

such as feelings of racial and ethnic identity or a sense of responsibility to the larger community, also play a role in individual decision making and are not incorporated into a rational choice model (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins 2004; Jang 2009). Others see it as having methodological, rather than theoretical limitations. It is potentially harder to calculate the benefits of participation, which may accrue over time, versus the shorter term costs of engagement (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 2000).

Due to the basic mathematical structure of the theory, it is highly difficult to test in a qualitative study. At the same time, qualitative work generally and this study specifically can contribute to the field of rational choice theory by examining how individuals see and explain the costs and benefits of engagement in an interpretive manner (Hampsher-Monk and Hindmoor 2010). Do individuals frame their decision in terms of costs and benefits? Does there appear to be a “civic duty” motivation, à la Goldfarb and Sigelman (2010)? Further, rational choice theory is most often used to understand voting, but does it play a role in other forms of civic engagement, such as the types of engagement outlined here? And what role does it play in a small scale setting, where individual acts may make a difference? To more fully understand how costs, benefits, and obligations, in the vein of an expanded rational choice theory, may impact the individual and play a role in her decision to become engaged, it is critical to turn to an examination of the group level theories of civic engagement and political participation.

### **At the Group Level: Tying the Individual to the Group**

Individuals are embedded within larger social structures and networks. Institutions, from the parish to the workplace to the family, influence individual attitudes on issues, whether we vote, and how we vote (Huckfeldt, Plutzer and Sprague 1993; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987,

1991). The social relationships or networks that develop within these structures provide discussion partners who influence our ideas (Huckfeldt, Mendez and Osborn 2004; Huckfeldt and Mendez 2008); they serve a normative function through a system of rewards and sanctions (Coleman 1993); and they act as conduits for social capital (Jang 2009; Coleman 1993; Putnam 2000).

Social bond theory argues that being enmeshed in a social network and having strong social relationships within that network encourages participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Stern and Fullerton 2009). Not surprisingly, people who are more settled in a community are more likely to connect to others and develop such bonds. An increase in mobility, resulting from the types of economic upheavals and restructuring we have seen in the United States since the 1970s, leads to a fraying of community bonds, and is thought to be one of the factors behind the decline in political and civic participation (Putnam 2000).

Intimately tied to the development and strengthening of social networks, and the resultant increase in civic and political engagement, is the level of trust that exists between parties. The correlation between levels of trust and civic engagement has been identified at both the individual (Putnam 2000; Sander and Putnam 2010) and the societal level (Putnam 1995; Fukuyama 1995, 2011; Pharr, Putnam and Dalton 2000; Rothstein and Uslaner 2005), although the direction of effect remains somewhat murky (Edwards 2009).

Social trust is what encourages individuals to behave in particular ways through the normative pressure that exists in social networks. Smaller groups translate into more direct contact with other members, and thus the strengthening of group bonds, social trust, and the greater power of incentives and sanctions (Olson 1971). Individuals feel a greater sense of responsibility to others within the network to “hold up their part of the bargain.” Their part of

the bargain may mean turning out to vote, picking up trash at the park, attending a PTO meeting, or signing a petition. Even if a member of the network appears to have little to gain, has little interest in the outcome, or would rather just stay home, the relationship with other members of the network and the trust that exists may encourage engagement.

Trust also comes in various forms. It may be “particularized” trust, which is extended only to those in a particular group, or it may be more “generalized,” granted to a broader range of individuals (Fukuyama 1995). In the former case, the ties may be deep and strong, but fewer in number. More generalized trust is weaker, but may yield more benefits to the individual and the larger community. Uslaner and Conley’s (2003) study of participation and trust among Asian immigrants finds that more generalized, weaker trust actually translates into broader engagement. As Uslaner and Conley state “generalized trusters are also more likely to be engaged in activities, such as volunteering, and more willing to serve on a jury...” (2003, 335).

Trust is not easily developed. It thrives best among more racially and ethnically homogenous communities in which individuals make certain assumptions about their neighbors and acquaintances (Simpson, McGrimmon, and Irwin 2007; Putnam 2007). Trust also thrives in more affluent and better educated communities (Putnam 2000; Putnam 2007; Sander and Putnam 2010). Those in the lower economic rungs of American society have seen jobs outsourced, benefits cut, and divorce and out-of-wedlock births rise. The result has been a subsequent decline in social trust for those struggling the most (Sander and Putnam 2010), accompanied by a decline in engagement.

Social capital theory examines trust, as well as knowledge, money, time, leadership, contacts and other factors as resources that exist at the group level. It is both the networks that exist and the collection of accessible resources that exist within a network and benefit the larger

group (Coleman and Hoffer 1987; Coleman 1988; Lin, Cook, and Burt 2001; Putnam 2000).

Some of these characteristics, such as skill set, education, or money, may be individual in nature, but when individuals are embedded within a larger network, these resources benefit everyone.

Social capital exists in the areas between individuals, tying them together (Coleman 1988).

Researchers argue social capital is important for everything from beneficial school outcomes (Coleman 1988; Oseguera, Conchas and Mosqueda 2011; Putnam 2000) to economic outcomes (Halpern 1995; Putnam 2000) to health outcomes (Andrews and Brewer 2010) to political outcomes (Putnam 1995; Hasanov 2009).

The absence of social capital poses dangers to civic engagement, according to Putnam (2000). The more limited the networks, the more limited the information and sense of responsibility. Further, those that do continue to “show up” often represent the most extreme sides of an issue, with the result being unpalatable to the majority. Social capital writ very small can lead to the appropriation of the public good for very narrow purposes (Putnam 2000; Walker 2008; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). What may come across as a highly energized community may actually be the very loud voices of a few, while the rest have deserted the commons.

The studies outlined above are largely quantitative, isolating critical variables that encourage or discourage engagement. Such studies are highly important as they get at the “big picture,” the overall trends in societies, but the brushstrokes are broad and we fail to really understand the mechanisms at work.

Fiorina’s qualitative study (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999) of an environmental group in Massachusetts begins to examine the role of social capital in civic participation, but is limited in its depth. Fiorina uses the case to illustrate a point—the way in which heightened engagement by a small, efficacious group can hijack the broader agenda. He does not test an argument with

this case study, or explore what motivates participation, but uses it as support for his important thesis around the “dark side” of civic engagement.

The Woodland Park study makes an important contribution to the literature exploring the relationship between social trust and social capital, respectively, and civic engagement, as it is a qualitative study. This allows for a better identification of the mechanisms at work. Further, because I am exploring two different sides of the same issue, I am able to examine whether these group level theories apply to both groups. I am also able to see the extent to which group level factors play a role in this example of engaged citizenship vis-à-vis individual factors, with the latter generally the dominant in previous research.

## **Methods**

### **In-Depth Interviews**

The bulk of the data for this study come from 24 in-depth interviews with residents of the town who were involved in the discussions over Woodland Park.<sup>2</sup> Of the 24 participants, 16 come from the M-WOOF side of the debate and 8 come from the neighbor/abutter side of the debate. The sample grew out of a hybrid approach, combining a purposive or judgment sample with a snowball sample. Table 1 highlights key demographic information of each participant.

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<sup>2</sup> I began by contacting those I knew were involved in M-WOOF through their very public positions in the newspaper and at public hearings. At the end of each interview, I asked them to supply me the names of others in M-WOOF who they thought would speak with me. According to one of my early interviews (ID #75), the M-WOOF email list contained close to one hundred names, but there were three clear leaders of the group and about fifteen others who carried out the bulk of the work. In total, I contacted nineteen members of M-WOOF. Of the nineteen I contacted, sixteen agreed to be interviewed, including two of the leaders. I attempted to interview the third group leader, contacting her several times, but she did not respond to my requests. I later learned that a new job had meant her relocation out of state. I am able to include some of her thoughts through the guest column that she wrote to the local newspaper on the topic. Of the other two I contacted, but did not interview, one is a married man in his thirties with a small child. He did not return any of my phone calls or emails. The other is a woman who did respond to my outreach, but said she had moved out of town and was not involved in the group. In this way, I reached the sixteen individuals who make up the M-WOOF sample.

I collected the sample of 8 residents on the other side of the issue in the same way, first approaching the most public members of the group and then asking for referrals. Because the group opposing M-WOOF was less organized (clearly part of the story), it was considerably harder to reach people. Further, the opposing side appeared to be comprised of fewer people, thus the disparity in sample size.

Table 1. Descriptives of Sample, N=24

ID #	Sex	Age	Relationship Status	Minor Children	M-WOOF Sample		Workforce Participation	Occupation
					Distance from Park	Length of Residency		
5	F	30-39	Married	Yes	<1/2 mile	10+ years	Yes	Teacher
10	F	40-49	Divorced	Yes	2+ miles	1-3 years	Yes	Store owner
12	F	50-64	Married	No	<1/2 mile	10+ years	Yes	Nurse
16	F	40-49	Married	Yes	1+ miles	10+ years	Yes	Project Manager
17	M	50-64	Married	No	1/2-1 mile	10+ years	Retired	VP, Telecom
23	F	50-64	Married	Yes	2 miles	10+ years	Yes	Consultant
27	M	50-64	Married	Yes	1+ miles	10+ years	No	Graphic Designer
29	F	65+	Widowed	No	<1/2 mile	10+ years	No	NA
32	F	50-64	Married	Yes	1/2-1 mile	4-7 years	No	NA
36	F	50-64	Divorced	No	<1/2 mile	10+ years	Yes	IT director
45	F	50-64	Divorced	No	<1/2 mile	10+ years	Yes	Development
49	F	65+	Married	No	<1/2 mile	10+ years	Yes	Psychologist
55	F	50-64	Divorced	Yes	<1/2 mile	10+ years	Yes	Community Health
75	F	50-64	Married	Yes	1 mile	10+ years	Yes	Sales
86	M	50-64	Married	Yes	<1/2 mile	10+ years	Yes	Doctor
93	M	50-64	Married	Yes	1/2-1 mile	10+ years	Yes	CEO



Neighbor/Abutter Sample								
103	M	65+	Married	No	<1/2 mile	10+ years	Yes	Part Time Accountant/ Ret. Insurance Exec.
104	F	65+	Married	No	<1/2 mile	10+ years	No	NA
111	M	40- 49	Married	Yes	<1/2 mile	8-9 years	Yes	Professor
113	F	30- 39	Married	Yes	<1/2 mile	10+ years	Yes	Professor
122	F	50- 64	Married	Yes	<1/2 mile	10+ years	Yes	Part Time Accountant
134	F	50- 64	Married	No	<1/2 mile	10+ years	Yes	Realtor
138	M	30- 39	Married	Yes	<1/2 mile	4-7 years	Yes	Financial Advisor
154	M	50- 64	Married	Yes	<1/2 mile	10+ years	Yes	Financial Advisor

I chose to interview this very selective sample of town residents, as opposed to a random sample, as they have information and concerns specific to the Woodland Park issue. A representative sample, rather than a purposive sample, would not necessarily provide me with the type of informed data this study requires.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded with the written consent of the subjects. I conducted interviews in a range of settings, from the homes of the participants to the library to the local coffee shops in town, largely at the discretion of the participants. A research assistant transcribed the interviews verbatim into Microsoft Word.

The question of sample size often comes up in qualitative research, with the concern of not having interviewed enough people or having stayed out in the field for long enough. Although there is no “magic” number in terms of sample size, qualitative work often relies on the notion of “redundancy,” the identification of trends in interview data, even before one has sat

down to analyze it formally (Ely, Anzul, Friedman and Garner 1997). Such was the case in this sample where I began to see clear repetition within the interviews.

The interviews started in January 2009, shortly after the leash law went into effect and as soon as approval was granted from the Institutional Review Board under which I am governed, and continued until September 2011. This span covered the initial implementation of the complete ban on off-leash dogs, through the negotiation process and the implementation of a pilot program to establish daily off-leash hours, and into a period of park renovations resulting, in part, from the debate laid out here. The off leash hours program is in place as of fall 2011.

### **Documents**

I supplemented the 24 in-depth interviews with additional documents. These documents include 17 letters to the editor, three guest columns, two editorials, and five articles, all appearing in the local newspaper. These documents span the period from April 26, 2006 through June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011. I also reviewed minutes from public meetings on the topic and attended a series of public meetings throughout 2008 and 2009. The additional sources of data allow for a triangulation of viewpoints (Yin 1994).

### **Analysis**

I took a grounded theory approach to analyzing the data, first looking to the data and then tying the data to larger theories when applicable. In this framework, one begins “in the data,” and attempts to set it within a larger sociological framework to make sense of the data one has collected (Lofland and Lofland 1995). The approach is inductive, rather than deductive.

In order to assure objectivity, my research assistant and I independently coded a random sample of the interviews to look for themes in the data. After we had each independently coded the same six randomly sampled interviews, we met to discuss the themes we had identified. Although we had slightly different terms for some of the themes, we found significant overlap in our respective codes. One could consider these the initial codes (Lofland and Lofland 1995).

I then returned to the interviews and through an iterative process focused the codes to a greater extent, with more formal or “focused” groups developing (Lofland and Lofland 1995). I coded the data using the software OpenCode. I used the same coding categories to code the newspaper items and minutes from the public meetings.

### **Findings**

An analysis of both the in-depth interviews and the additional documents suggest differential motivations to engage between the two groups. All of the theories outlined earlier find at least some support from the data, but some themes are much more pronounced than others and vary between the two sides (see Figure 1).

The dog group is clearly motivated by both individual and group level factors that are intimately tied to one another—the importance of the issue to their individual lives, their individual feelings of efficacy, and their strong connections to one another as a virtual community. This is a story of individual relevancy and personal efficacy, combined with tight-knit social networks. Those networks reaffirm the personal importance of the issue and the ability to transform individual abilities into social capital.

The neighbors and abutters, ironically more diffuse in their concerns, are largely active only because of their connections to one or two abutters who are particularly negatively impacted

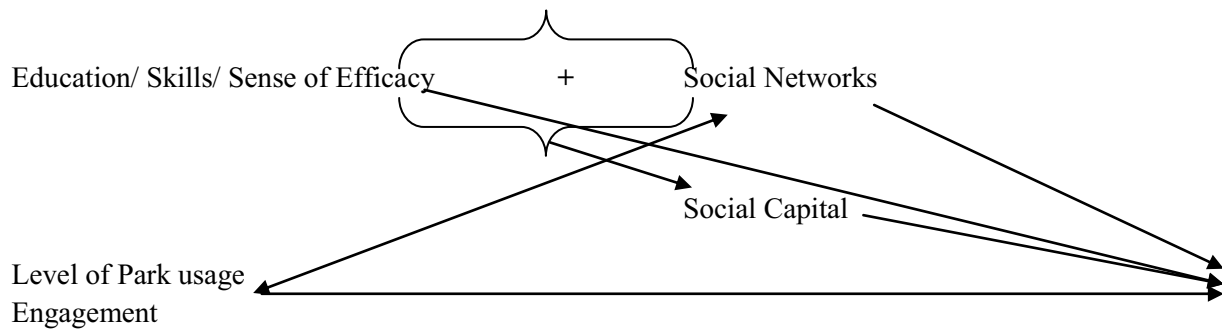
by the dogs. This is also a story of individual relevancy, but combined with feelings of group trust and responsibility.

Figure 1. Key Determinants of Political Engagement in the Woodland Park Debate

**M-WOOF:**

Individual-Level Factors

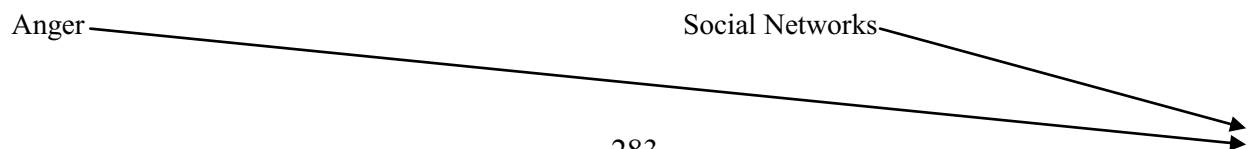
Group-Level Factors

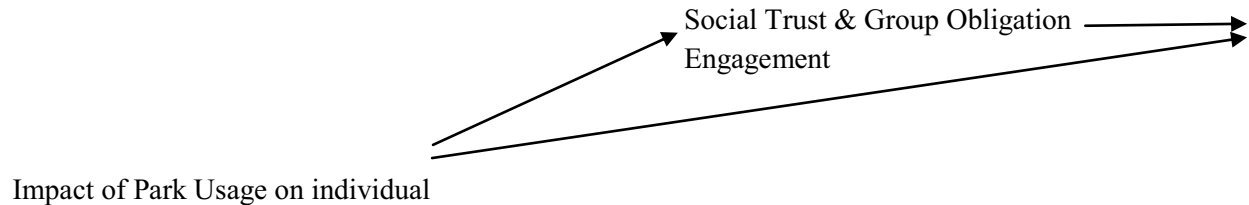


**Neighbors/Abutters:**

Individual-Level Factors

Group-Level Factors





### **Importance of Issue to Individuals**

First and foremost, people engage in issues that impact their daily lives (Verba and Nie 1972). One subject (ID #49) echoes this sentiment, “That’s the thing that makes me participate—when I feel something affects me personally or if I put my larger... if it’s a cause that I can, you know, I see makes a difference for me and also touches people I care about then I put my time and energy into working with that cause.” Another respondent says “I try to stay active in issues that pertain to me (ID #154). ID #103 thinks people got involved on both sides because it was something that “impacted people personally.” In a particularly telling statement, one neighbor (ID #111) says “I couldn’t believe how organized, passionate, and motivated people were. There was never any activism like that for President Obama or Senator Brown. That’s kind of sad. I guess this is just a much more sensitive issue.”

From the perspective of a few of the abutters to the park, the issue was intensely personal and was described as a “quality of life” issue (ID #122). This respondent cites dogs barking as early as 5:30 a.m. and as late as 11 p.m. The noise issue was raised by another abutter, who I did not formally interview, who eventually put a large black tarp over her fence to muffle the noise. Yet another abutter (ID #134) states “It sounded like a kennel with a million dogs right in my backyard. My husband and I would comment about how miserable it was...it was really untenable.” One man (ID #154) described the park before the leash law as “mayhem.”

Multiple people cite health and safety issues as their primary concern with the dogs. One neighbor cites a dog grabbing the hat off of her infant child's head (ID #113). Another neighbor to the park cites children being knocked over by dogs and nipped on a daily basis (Letter to the Editor, November 6, 2008). Still another writes "I can personally attest to having my heart in my mouth one day when I took my young grandson up to the park to play, only to be met by a pack of perhaps six dogs on the run right toward us" (Letter to the Editor, November 6, 2008, ID #103). A woman who runs in the park writes she is "often 'welcomed' by a friendly dog wanting to say hello." She goes on to say "While I am sure they are not dangerous, these dogs are disruptive to people who enjoy a morning jog or walk through the park" (Letter to the Editor, January 8, 2009). She goes on to say that she and her husband were recently at the park and jumped on by two off-leash dogs.

But why did dog owners care so much about the leash law when this town has over 728 acres of public, dog friendly park land (Article, February 9, 2009), with unlimited off-leash hours at many of these spaces? For most of the individuals interviewed, the controversy over Woodland Park arises from the fact that it was so much a part of their daily lives. One leader of the dog group (ID #17) says "...I was going every day. I would go very early and it would just be a way of starting the day." Multiple subjects cite daily (ID #17, ID #29, ID #55, ID #75), or even twice daily usage (ID #10, ID #12, ID #36, ID #45, ID #49). Other members of the group (ID #23, ID #32, ID #93) say they would go three to five times per week. For these twelve individuals, the park is a very regular component of their schedules and thus strikes a personal chord with them. At least one letter to the editor (January 28, 2010) cites similar usage.

For a few subjects from M-WOOF, it is less the regularity of their usage and more the reason behind the usage that makes the issue so personal. One individual (ID #5) cites the

importance of her dog to her life. The third leader of the group who I was unable to interview said to me in an informal conversation, “we care so much because we love our dogs like our children.”

### **Support for the Resource Based Model of Participation**

Although the significance of the issue is critical for individual engagement, it is not sufficient to get people involved. Individuals need to have the tools necessary to engage.

The town in which Woodland Park resides is a resource rich community, both relative to other towns in Massachusetts and to the United States, as whole. Table 2 compares the level of educational and economic resources across the various populations. The town of Mayfair has a very high rate of post-secondary education, with nearly 80% of town residents age 25 or older holding a bachelor’s degree. This is more than double the rate for the state as a whole, and almost three times the rate that exists across the United States. This higher level of education translates into higher levels of earnings. The median household income is over \$133,000, more than double the median household income for the state, or country at large. There are also higher levels of wealth in Mayfair. A single family home has a median value of nearly \$900,000, as compared to \$358,000 across the state and \$185,000 across the country.

Though the numbers in Table 2 are no guarantee of political engagement within the community, they set the stage for a population that has the economic and educational resources often associated with the highest levels of engagement (Verba and Nie 1972; Milbraith and Goel 1977; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie 1993; Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1994) and suggest the presence of time, skill, efficacy, and knowledge (Niemi, Craig and Mattei 1991; Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1994).

Table 2: Educational and Economic Resources in the Town of Mayfair

	Mayfair	Massachusetts	U.S.
Population	27,412	6,593,587	308,745,538
Percentage of Town Residents Age 25+ with at least a BA	78.5%	37.8%	27.5%
Median Household Income	\$133,790	\$64,496	\$51,425
Median Single Family Home	\$893,700	\$357,600	\$185,400
Unemployment Rate	5.4%	8.0%	9.0%
Percentage of Households below Poverty Line	3.7%	7.0%	9.9%
Percent White	83.0%	82.8%	74.5%

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009 American Community Survey; 2011 Bureau of Labor Statistics

Table 1, presented earlier, shows the professional backgrounds of the subjects. Many are engaged in professions that require at least a college degree, if not more. Participants include multiple college and university level instructors, a high level consultant, a doctor, a CEO, a retired insurance executive, and a psychologist, to name just a few of the more skilled professions in which people engage. This is true for those on both sides of the issue, but interestingly enough, these socio-economic characteristics appear to play very different roles on the two sides.

Strong feelings of efficacy and political savvy, clear byproducts of education and income (Niemi, Craig and Mattei 1991), are present in six M-WOOF interviews (ID #10, ID #17, ID #27, ID #29, ID #49, ID #75), as well as in multiple newspaper items. One person (ID #10) says “People felt like they had the intellect and the power and the wherewithal to run a campaign.” Another individual (ID #27) explicitly says “people of [Mayfair] have a great sense of efficacy in their abilities...” He goes on to say “I think there’s a lot of entitlement on behalf of many people. ‘I live here, I pay taxes, I deserve the best.’ ” Throughout the course of the interview, this individual also discusses other sorts of political participation in which he has been involved, including testifying at the State House and being part of a Senate Committee.



Another individual (ID #75), when asked about her involvement in M-WOOF, states “we felt that our rights had been taken away from us and you just can’t do that in a democracy...The way things work in [Mayfair] is if you go before a board, you ask for a hundred percent of what you want. You don’t ask for fifty percent because you’ll end up with thirty. So, go for the gusto, if you will.” This same woman had earlier written in the local newspaper an article discussing the high levels of education and skill set in the town, and the willingness to use those skills to solve the park problem (Guest Column, February 5, 2009).

Another woman (ID #29) similarly states that she and others became involved because a decision had been made without their representation. An older man (ID #17) who was very active in M-WOOF states “And fortunately what we have in this country, even in this town, is the ability to push back and get some hearings and do something.” Another individual (ID #49), also critical of the way the situation was handled, says “I think people don’t like to be bossed by people who don’t really seem to represent them.” She likens it to the special election held to fill Senator Ted Kennedy’s seat in which Scott Brown beat the presumed winner, Martha Coakley.

An early guest column in the local newspaper written by the one leader of M-WOOF I was unable to interview writes “In the absence of dialog with the Natural Resources Commission, the morning crowd is clear about what they plan to do, and there is talk of ‘civil disobedience’” (October 24, 2008). And of the three guest columns written on the topic, all are written by members of M-WOOF, another sign of the group’s sense of efficacy.

Those on the other side of the issue tended not to discuss feelings of power or efficacy. In a few instances, there is a discussion of the *absence* of those feelings. When asked how the ban on dogs had come about, one abutter (ID #122) who came to be a clear leader of the group explains it as resulting from the complaints by the sports teams and how that had led to the ban.

She says of the abutters “There had been more incidents, but the NRC wasn’t really getting feedback from people. People would just shut their windows or go to another park.” She later goes on to say:

I think the most shocking thing about this was the people that were negatively impacted but sat back and chose not to do anything. That was an extremely common thing to do...Maybe they didn’t know what to do. Maybe they didn’t think they had rights. I don’t know. It’s hard. But they didn’t do anything.

Another abutter (ID #134) who became highly involved in the discussions says of the pre-leash period “We had no recourse.” She later says “We just didn’t know who to go to, who to report to, what to do.”

For some, the answer was avoidance or acceptance (ID #111, ID #113, ID #134, ID #138, ID #154). A neighbor of the park (ID #111), when reflecting on his involvement in the issue, says “when I look back at my youngest, and his use of the park, I do remember situations where he was afraid of some of the dogs...Maybe part of that came from big dogs jumping on him when he was little at Woodland.” Yet this man did not report these events to the NRC. Similarly, the woman who described her child’s hat being taken off her head by a dog (ID #113) did not lodge a complaint, either. She explained that she and her family simply stopped going to the park. Another abutter (ID #138) made a similar decision, saying that he and his family would just not go to the park when it was “overrun” with dogs. They would stay in their backyard or go to another park.

Efficacy appears in another way among the neighbors and abutters supporting the ban—a sense of anger with the level of efficacy the other side feels. This theme appears strongly in four interviews (ID #103, ID #113, ID #134, ID #154), several newspaper items, and in observations

at two public meetings (December 16, 2008; February 7, 2009). One man who spoke at one of the larger town hall meetings said that if the leash law was overturned, it would be another example of the “wishes of the vocal and powerful few trample[ing] the rights of the many” (February 7, 2009). In a letter to the editor responding to an earlier guest editorial by one of the leaders of M-WOOF, another neighbor writes “The temerity of her speaking from the far east side of town on how we in the far west can best use our neighborhood park” (Letter to the Editor, November 6, 2008). A woman says (ID #134) “This is the type of neighborhood where people don’t call up their lawyer, you know?...There’s not a feeling of exclusivity.” Another abutter (ID #154) says of the dog group “it was mostly people from a different part of Mayfair. They basically think their house is worth more money so they can do whatever they want.” A neighbor (ID #113) says “It made me mad that they [the dog owners] thought they could pick and choose what rules to follow just because they didn’t agree.” To some extent, the anger and frustration of the abutters about the level of efficacy felt by the dog owners encouraged their own engagement.

### **Support for Group Connections**

Although previous quantitative research finds individual characteristics to be the biggest predictors of formal political activity (Verba and Nie 1972; Milbraith and Goel 1977; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie 1993; Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1994; Putnam 2000), this study of engaged citizenship identifies a more nuanced relationship between the individual and the group, with significant implications for engagement.

People who have a longer tenure in a setting or are more tightly connected to a community are more likely to be active, in keeping with the social bond theory of political

engagement (Putnam 2000; Stern and Fullerton 2009; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Looking at Table 1, which highlights the basic demographic information of the sample, one sees that twenty of the twenty four subjects have lived in town for at least ten years, with some living in Mayfair for as long as 35 years. These unusually long residencies suggest a high level of connection to the community of Mayfair.

The in-depth interviews reveal the importance of group connection on an individual's decision to engage. This is evident for people on both sides of the issue, although through different mechanisms and to different degrees.

From a practical standpoint, abutters and neighbors transmit information through a neighborhood network and work on the issue as a group. They learn about the problems from each other (ID #111, ID #134), standing at the bus stop, walking their children to school, or just from being around the neighborhood. They attempt to remedy them through group level initiatives, such as canvassing the neighborhood to distribute petitions and surveys (ID #134, ID #154) and attending public meetings together (ID #111, ID #138).

The real power of the group for neighbors and abutters comes in its ability to motivate people through feelings of social trust and reciprocity. The decision among some to engage was the result of both specific and more general feelings of obligation. One neighbor (ID #111) and one abutter (ID #138) cite their support for one individual in particular (ID #122) who felt negatively impacted by the dog usage. The abutter (ID #138) says that the issue was not really of huge importance to him. He had two small children at the time and didn't really feel he had time to get involved in town issues. He did not like how the park was being used, but his family would just go to another park when he felt there were too many dogs. However, he felt an

obligation to his neighbor to become involved. He says “I really did it for Paula.” ID #111 echoes this sentiment, citing the same person.

Neighbors and abutters also discuss a more general sense of obligation and connection to the neighborhood:

I went to one of the planning board meetings that discussed the proposals regarding how the park should be used. I wasn’t planning on speaking, but when I got there, there was a huge attendance, and during the public speaking portion, the majority was pro-dog and the few that weren’t had very valid points but I didn’t feel their voice was being heard because there were just less of them. So, I stood up to add my two cents, just to balance out the discussion (ID #111).

The abutter (#122) to whom the others felt an obligation, appeared to feel her own sense of obligation to the group. She says “I was representing a larger group of people and their issues.” Later in the interview, she says “...the feedback that I saw and heard about people’s negative experiences kept me going. I didn’t want to be on the sidelines. I knew the information had to get across.”

Three other neighbors cite an obligation to the larger community (ID #103, ID #104, ID #113). One man who was historically a “gladiator” (Milbraith 1965) in town politics says he became involved in the park issue because “anything that threatened neighborly friendliness and recreation I have been sensitive to” (ID #103). As a naturalized American citizen, he earlier in the interview discusses the importance of becoming a U.S. citizen for the sake of engagement.

Another neighbor (ID #113), who similarly has a long history of political engagement but at the national level, explains that she became involved because someone from the town called her and asked her to join the conversation. She goes on to say “I really looked at this as more of

a jury duty role.” She later says “I was just doing it as a civic duty.” From an individual park usage perspective, she simply changed her patterns, but she felt an obligation to engage on behalf of the larger community.

These individuals (ID #103, ID #104, ID #113) appear to have fewer direct or close connections to the abutters and other neighbors involved, but do feel an abstract sense of connection to the community, leading to engagement. Their participation seems more akin to “duty-based” citizenship (Dalton 2008). Fukuyama (1995) would argue this type of behavior results from more generalized trust.

At the same time, one abutter (ID #122) believes it is relationships that kept people from engaging. They feared destroying connections in a small, tight-knit community—  
“disengagement to them was the solution.”

Among the M-WOOF folks, the group bonds play a different role, acting as both the impetus behind the engagement and the mechanism through which the mobilization is able to occur. Twelve of the sixteen people interviewed discuss the sense of connection and community they feel at the park, with this theme appearing in newspaper items, as well. Six people (ID #10, ID #27, ID #32, ID #36, ID #45, ID #55) cite instances of social groups that developed out of Woodland Park. ID #10 talks about a group of park goers going to see a film in which another park-goer’s daughter had a role. ID #27 and ID #45 discuss walking with the “regulars” at the park every morning. ID #32 talks about a Thursday afternoon cocktail party that would take place each week, ID #55 discusses the “Kibble Club,” a group of four women who would go out for lunch once a month, and ID #36 discusses a Valentine’s Day on which a number of single women went out for dinner. This suggests support for the park as a setting where “bonding” social capital develops and is nurtured (Putnam 2000).

Three subjects (ID #17, ID #45, ID #55) use the term “family” to describe the nature of the relationships that formed at the park. This is also a term used in a letter to the editor (Letter to the Editor, January 28, 2010). ID #17, an older, retired man who frequented the park, but stopped going because he was so upset by the fighting, says:

There was a woman who had a few surgeries and while we were there, people would go visit to make sure she was alright. Again, people cared about one another...People would be concerned about each other if someone didn't show up...It became sort of an extended family kind of thing...

Another park goer (ID #29) ended up taking in two dogs from people she knew through the park, one from a family who had to move to an apartment that would not allow dogs and one from a family who had financial and family pressures.

One woman who continues to frequent the park (ID #55) discusses the important role the park relationships played at a particularly difficult time in her life, when she was just newly divorced. She says, “I started going in 2004, when I got divorced. It was this other group of people who knew me as Barbara, not just as Bob Smith's wife, Bob Smith's ex-wife. That's when we talk about the sociology, missing those [park] friends was very difficult...”

One town resident who is an abutter, parent of small children and dog owner, writes in a letter to the editor (December 4, 2008) following the enactment of the leash law:

...the same excitement and energy that used to be at the park is now missing. No longer is the park utilized by a variety of people. No longer do we see friends we used to chat with on a daily basis. The park is empty when I go to walk my dogs there now. It is sad to see that a regulation by a town committee has forced a

neighborhood to lose a valuable gathering spot and community outlet, rather than *enhance* it (italics in the original).

### **Support for Social Capital**

The group connections that formed from Woodland Park as a result of the frequent usage also had another critical component for civic and political engagement: the distribution of resources necessary to engage in an organized and effective way (Lin, Cook, and Burt 2001; Putnam 2000). This is again an illustration of an individual-level characteristic, such as knowledge or specific ability, which translates into a group-level resource.

The role of social capital is evident among members of M-WOOF, but is essentially absent in the discussion with neighbors and abutters. One of the three leaders of M-WOOF, a woman in finance who buys and runs distraught companies, is referenced throughout interviews for her skill set and its application to the issue at hand. She is referenced in one interview (ID #12) as someone who is “an executive and obviously runs a lot of meetings. She’s incredibly organized and just took over. If it weren’t for her, I’m not sure anything would have proceeded at all.” Another member of the group (ID #10), in referencing this individual says “she would really build an agenda for the meeting at the NRC, and you know, some of them were real concerns. Some of them would imagine what the other side would say; she was really great at organizing the whole forum, even when we had our big meeting at the City Hall on Saturday. [She] suggested that we not all sit together, that we disperse among the audience so there was a voice in that corner and over there and up there...” Yet another subject (ID #49) cites this leader’s professional skills and experience.

Another individual in the group (ID #27) applied his professional skills to the cause and describes it in this way “I’m a, professionally, I’m a graphic designer, but I’m also an artist. So, I



think it would have been criminal of me not to volunteer to do this. I photographed public spaces and parks” for the purposes of comparing Woodland Park to the other public spaces in town and coming up with a solution to the conflict.

One of the key figures in the group (ID #17) discusses some of the skills provided by other members of the group. He explains how the group organized itself: “We did a letter writing campaign to the Selectmen and the [local newspaper]. There were a couple of people who had a touch of PR experience and we talked with them...they would give us guidance. And that’s basically how it went.” There is clearly group benefit resulting from individual skill sets and a network through which these skills can flow.

### **Rational Action Theory**

Rational action theory receives very little support in this study. Although individuals clearly view the park as being very beneficial in their lives, they generally do not seem to think of their political and civic action within this framework.

The only data that approach support for this theory come from a neighbor (ID #113) and an abutter (ID #122). The neighbor (ID #113) discusses how the engagement extracted more of a cost than she would be willing to pay again—“I just don’t have time for it anymore. I don’t care enough.” She says she doesn’t need that much “drama” in her life. Interestingly, she did talk about her initial involvement growing out of a sense of civic duty, support for Sigelman and Goldfarb’s (2010) argument for the inclusion of the “civic duty” motivation into the rational action framework.

Conversely, one abutter (ID #122) says she would become involved again because it was an issue that was very important to her and she sees “positive changes in quality of life,” but she also sees the “toll” that it takes. She discusses weight loss, increased tension with her husband,

and a loss of relationships resulting from her engagement. She appears to weigh the “tolls” of engagement against disengagement. She also discusses why she thinks others did not get involved, approaching the language of rational action theory—“You can’t live your life going to [the grocery store], seeing someone from the ‘other side’ and deciding to walk down a different aisle. That’s so stressful! I think that’s why a lot of people didn’t get involved at all or dropped out, so to speak...Disengagement to them was the solution. The people that stayed involved had the most to lose, in my opinion.” These pieces of data suggest it is a framework that is more useful for considering the costs, in keeping with previous quantitative work (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 2000).

### **Discussion**

Albert O. Hirschman’s (1970) work on responses to unsatisfactory conditions outlines three paths an individual or group can take—the decision to leave the situation (“exit”), the decision to try and change the situation (“voice”), or the decision to stay and accept the situation (“loyalty”). This study examines the individuals who generally chose the “voice” option, albeit to varying degrees, in an effort to remedy a problematic situation in a public space.

I have outlined in this case study the individual and group-level factors that lead to individual voice, and I have identified the way those factors vary in their mobilization for each of the sides. I move beyond description to better understand the intimate connection between certain individual and group-level characteristics, clarifying the mechanisms that exist in ecological studies of civic and political participation (Huckfeldt, Plutzer and Sprague 1993; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987, 1991). I also find that individual level characteristics (Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie 1993; Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1994; Putnam 2000; Sander and

Putnam 2010; Dalton 2008), the ones most often identified as *the* predictors of electoral participation, at times play a lesser role to group-level considerations.

The individual relevancy of the issue—how profoundly an individual is influenced by the situation—plays a significant role in whether or not one chooses to engage in “voice.” Among neighbors and abutters, this generally means that if an individual feels the dogs at the park are too onerous a burden in terms of noise or overuse, engagement will occur. At the same time, it appears, based upon both interviews among neighbors and abutters who engage in “voice” and my inability to find a larger sample, that some decide that “loyalty” is preferable given the costs of engagement. For still others, “exit” in the form of going to another park was the preferable option. For those who identify with M-WOOF, relevancy also matters. Many of those who are involved, including those who play the most active role in the park discussions, are daily users.

Among M-WOOF members, individual efficacy also plays a significant role. People who feel they have the knowledge, ability, and skill set speak out on their own behalf. They feel their rights have been violated and they feel they have every reason to fight to get them back. This finding is in keeping with previous research on political engagement that finds a link between socioeconomic status and efficacy, and political activity (Dalton 2008; Sander and Putnam 2010).

But this study moves beyond simply identifying the “traditional” predictors of turnout (Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie 1993; Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1994; Putnam 2000; Sander and Putnam 2010; Dalton 2008) to enhance our understanding of the mechanisms mediating between the individual and the group (Huckfeldt, Plutzer and Sprague 1993; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987, 1991). I find that certain individual characteristics matter beyond the individual who holds them.

Among members of M-WOOF, the relationship between individual and group motivation appears in multiple ways. Education, efficacy, and skill set, all individual in nature, translate into group-level social capital (Putnam 2000) for the M-WOOF community. The individual usage of the park also transforms into a group-level consideration. The more often a person uses the park, the more likely he is to be embedded in a network based there, which only further increases feelings of ownership and usage. The relationship between the individual and the group thus feeds on itself.

Among the abutters and neighbors, individual characteristics feed into group-level conditions through a different mechanism. Length of residency represents not just how long one has been in his house, but what that tenure means for relationships among neighbors, mutual trust, and responsibility to the larger community. In the Woodland Park affair, the relationships that come to matter are the result of circumstance and geographic location, rather than shared agenda. Individuals become involved and join forces oftentimes for the benefit of another, rather than to reach a common goal. It is the social trust and sense of responsibility that motivates individuals for whom the park issue is not of major concern. One individual (ID #111) motivated to participate because of his relationships even goes on to say “If anything, I’ve developed stronger relationships with my neighbors. We came together as a unified group with a common message. I think if I had an issue close to my heart, they’d back me up.” Thus, “individual” characteristics, in the form of tenure in the neighborhood or the town, play both a direct and indirect role in engagement on both sides.

Interestingly, at the group-level, it appears that connections to just one person, even one who is not necessarily a close friend, can be enough to prompt engagement if the network in

which both people reside is both small and prominent in their lives. This finding is in keeping with Olsen's argument around overcoming the problem of collective action (Olsen 1971).

This study begins to fill an important hole that has existed in the political and civic participation literature by examining how some of the most widely accepted individual-level characteristics actually mobilize people in an example of engaged or informal citizenship, how they come to matter beyond the individual-level, and when the group conditions appear to trump the individual factors.

### **Conclusion**

This case study examines several previously developed theories around political and civic engagement, including the resource-based model, rational action theory, the social capital model, and the social trust model, all within the context of informal engagement. I find evidence of a highly engaged community, contrasting (to some extent) the widely held argument that civil society is in decline. I identify both individual and group level theories playing a role in the Woodland Park activism, the connections between the two levels, and the particularly important role that the group plays vis-à-vis the individual in this case of hyper-local engaged citizenship. But I also find harbingers in the data. The engagement is highly particularistic, with only modest evidence of more generalized feelings of obligation at work, raising important questions.

The Woodland Park case, like most instances of informal participation, requires public engagement where others clearly know who has participated, in what ways, and on what side. This is highly distinct from electoral participation where both the event and the choice are secret.

The other critical aspect of the Woodland Park debate is that it is hyper-local. Although some argue it is a town-wide issue, it is largely an issue that affects a relatively small percentage of the population, even if one sums the numbers on both sides. The strong impact it has on the

lives of the two sides on a daily basis makes it a particularly sensitive issue, but in a sticky way, given the hyper-locality of it and the public nature of it. Unlike a local ballot initiative where one's position can remain anonymous if one chooses, this local issue requires visible engagement.

Future research needs to explore under what conditions people are willing to engage in local issues that require visibility. Although rational action theory receives limited support from these data, one could imagine a scenario where the decision to engage locally and visibly is determined by the costs borne by the individuals or groups involved. In some instances, the costs of remaining outside of the political arena may be too high, thus leading to engagement. In other instances, the costs of engagement may be too high, thus leading to disengagement. The question is, under what circumstances do we see one outcome versus the other? Through additional case studies on other political issues, one could start to determine if the ingredients identified in the Woodland Park example are always essential for engagement, or whether the critical factors vary by issue, location, or group demographics.

Better understanding the motivations behind these less formal types of participation is essential, given a number of trends. Governments at the local, state, and national levels are heading into a period of severe austerity. With a shrinking "pie," more and more people will feel the direct effects of the state, or its absence. With this scenario becoming reality, we will likely witness two trends—a trend of increasingly vocal engagement by one segment of society, likely the best educated and wealthiest, and an opposite trend of retreat by the bulk of the population. This is the scenario that some warn about (Putnam 2000; Walker 2008) and others empirically identify (Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999).

Within this environment of economic unease, we see a growing desire to protect one's place of connection and sense of community, whether geographically or issue based. People appear desperate to preserve connections to one another, in the limited number of arenas where these connections take root. What we may be seeing is the dog park as a new avenue of engagement, along the lines of the PTO, but growing out of the desire to preserve relationships. One could likely find similar debates from cyclists over the creation of bike lanes or from local residents over the loss of a beloved, locally owned restaurant.

The answer should not be to try and stymie engaged citizenship, but to spread it. Government must avoid serving the demands of only the loudest left in the commons and work against the trend of highly particularistic communities. Based upon the findings in this study, communities would be well served to identify ways to create more opportunities for "bridging" capital and thus increase the size and diversity of networks, ideally leading to more cross-cutting ties, broader feelings of trust and responsibility, and the greater distribution of social capital, all factors essential to a healthy and vibrant civil society.

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