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The Founding and Development of Secret Societies and Fraternal Orders and their Influence on Modern American Society

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Abstract

Secret societies and fraternal orders came to America with the arrival of the colonists, bringing ideals that influenced the founding of the United States. As the country grew and prospered, so did fraternal organizations, which exerted political influence, provided mutual aid for health and security to its members, and were instrumental in the growth of civic engagement. During the height of the Golden Age of Fraternity, one third of American men were members of a fraternal order. With the Depression of the 1930's, fraternal societies began a slow decline that continues to the present although the groups evolved to became more inclusive in their membership and took on community service projects in their local communities. Scholars suggest that despite efforts to adapt to societal changes, fraternal groups, like other American civic institutions, are suffering from the growing lack of civic engagement in society, which may be traced in part to the rise of digital communication. This paper follows the evolution of fraternal organizations in the United States, explores their changing roles in society, and suggests additional research to explore the future viability of fraternal groups.

Introduction

Fraternal orders in America began with settlers in New England, where many of the colonial leaders were members of early Masonic lodges. Their ideas about equality, reason, and natural laws influenced the founding of the United States. Numerous other fraternal organizations with similar ideas quickly followed. Black men, not welcomed by these first groups, began their own lodges (Trotter, 2004). Later, some organizations created auxiliary groups for women. As the country developed and became more diverse, multiple fraternal groups were formed to provide social life, status, and entertainment for members. Soon, the groups were providing benefits such as health insurance, burial costs, and payments to widows of members. Some organizations were formed for political pursuits. Others offered a business advantage while supporting charitable and community projects. Black men, denied membership in white fraternal orders, obtained charters and founded their own organizations. Women were likewise excluded from most white fraternal orders, but could join auxiliary groups. Historians agree the golden age for fraternal orders and secret societies in the United States was from the 1870s to the 1930s (Beito, 2000).

By the middle of the 20th century, most groups had expanded membership to be more diverse and representative

of their communities and were an important unifying force in civic engagement. However, fraternal groups struggled to survive the effects of cultural, economic, and technology changes, and some gradually disappeared as membership declined. Others were able to adapt as society evolved. Scholars suggest that despite these efforts to adapt to societal changes, fraternal groups are suffering the effects of the growing lack of civic engagement in American society (Putnam, 2001). The popularity of digital media may also be a factor in decreased membership (Born, 2018). This paper traces the evolution of these organizations in the United States, explores their changing roles in society, and poses questions about the future of fraternal groups.

The Creation of the Golden Age of Fraternity (1730s-1930s)

Secret Societies and Fraternal Orders Influenced the Founding of the United States

The tradition of secret societies and fraternal orders, already well established in Europe, took root in America early on. Freemasonry was brought to the colonies with the settlers from England, and Masonic lodges were established in Philadelphia and Boston in the 1730s. Many of the colonial leaders, including George Washington, Paul Revere, and Benjamin Franklin, were masons. Scholars of Freemasonry say the order was brought from England as a philosophical society associated with the liberal ideas of The Enlightenment but steeped in the traditions of the ancient stone masons' guilds. It used ritual, regalia, and secrecy to educate and improve the morals of its members (Garlinghouse & McKelvie, 2022, and Peterson, 2007). Nine signers of the Declaration of Independence and many top military leaders in the war were Masons (Freemason, 2022). Benjamin Franklin, a prominent member of the first Congress, was one of numerous Freemasons who played a role in the founding of the United States. They were intent on establishing "an independent nation based on the principles espoused by the Masonic brotherhood; principles of religious tolerance, free enterprise, limited government and the empowerment of the individual person" (Harris, 2018, para. 2).

By the 1830s, the United States had become a "nation of joiners" compared to Western European countries (Trotter, 2004). During his visit to the United States in 1831-32, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at the influence religious, fraternal, and civic organizations and secret societies exerted on American democracy (US Congress, 2019) and concluded "they made communities stronger, more interesting, and more engaged" (Brand, 2016, para.1). Furthermore, Tocqueville saw associations as essential to democracy (US Congress, 2019). Fraternal groups were so integral to the makeup of the country that Congress chartered the Knights of Pythias, founded in 1864 during the Civil War as an organization that practiced "brotherly love" (Mansky, 2016). Arguably, the most powerful fraternal organization in those early days of the United States was the Freemasons, with their combination of secrecy and influence. According to Jessica Harland-Jacobs, an associate professor of history at the University of Florida who studies Freemasonry, "Certainly in the 18th century and moving through the middle part of the 19th century, you could be powerful and influential without being a Freemason, but it was more likely that you would have been a Freemason" (Quoted in Silva, 2020, para. 6).

Equality of Man Was a Fraternal Goal…But Not a Reality

Many fraternal organizations based loosely on the ideals of the Masons quickly took root in America. In addition

to the Masons, American advocates of fraternal groups established an estimated 350 fraternal orders by the late 1800s, representing more than a third of the nation's adult men (Trotter, 2004, and Beito, 2000). Historian W.S. Harwood (1897) wrote in *Secret Societies in America* that there were an estimated 5.4 million members of secret fraternal orders in the United States by 1897. This number did not include members of labor unions, secret military orders, or college fraternities (Harwood, 1897).

Harwood's tally also did not include black men, who were not welcomed by these early groups. Prince Hall, an abolitionist Black clergyman from Massachusetts, attempted to join a masonic lodge in the late 1700s, but was refused. Hall then obtained a charter from the Grand Lodge in England and founded Prince Hall Freemasonry, which remains active today (Silva, 2020). Over the years, other black fraternal groups were formed, including the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks of the World, begun in 1899 after two Black men were denied membership in the all-white Order of the Elks. For more than 100 years, that organization has sponsored scholarships, youth camps, and community service activities all over the world (Mansky, 2016).

But for many decades, only a few white fraternal groups accepted black members, and those were enrolled either in racially integrated local chapters or in separate units of the organization (Skocpol & Oser, 2004). Following the emancipation of the slaves after the Civil War, Odd Fellows lodges for blacks became even more popular and the order became the largest black fraternal group in the country (Skocpol & Oser, 2004). Trotter explains that black secret orders such as the Odd Fellows strongly influenced African American identity by creating rituals of brotherhood, providing a social safety net, and supporting social change, "including the antislavery movement of the 19th century and the modern civil rights and black power movements of the 20th century" (2004, p. 356). Black secret societies also were more likely to be multiclass and gender-integrated orders (Trotter, 2004). In addition to the well-known fraternal groups such as Masons, Odd Fellows and Elks, African Americans organized distinctive secret societies, many with biblical names that focused on religiously inspired rituals (Skocpol & Oser, 2004).

Fraternal Groups Offered Popular Practical Benefits

Joining in the burgeoning popularity of fraternal groups, in 1819 the Independent Order of Odd Fellows established a lodge in Baltimore. This group got its start in England in the early 1800s, supposedly because King George IV, a Freemason, wanted a relative to be admitted to the masons without the lengthy initiation and was denied, so George IV left the order and established the Odd Fellows (Mansky, 2016). In America, the Odd Fellows were not a philosophical society like the Freemasons, but espoused the "ideals of friendship, love, and truth" (Mansky, 2016). In addition, the Odd Fellows introduced the concept of offering insurance and benefits for widows and orphans to their members. This became a popular model for fraternal groups because it was a practical benefit to members when there were few other programs available to help families at the time (Beito, 2000).

In his report on *How Fraternal Societies Fought Poverty and Taught Character*, Beito says, "Mutual aid was one of the cornerstones of social welfare in the United States until the early 20th century. A fraternal society… existed for virtually every major service of the modern welfare state including orphanages, hospitals, job exchanges,

homes for the elderly, and scholarship programs" (2000, para.1). This system of social welfare provided by fraternal groups was firmly in place for more than a century, and the amount of benefits was substantial. In 1896, Harwood compiled a chart of 46 fraternal groups showing their membership and the dollar amounts they paid in beneficences, including "caring for the sick, burying the dead, supporting the widows and orphans of deceased members, and sums paid out to the widows of deceased members in the form of insurance" (p. 618). The grand total for that year came to almost $650 million. The Masons were first with $90 million, followed by the Ancient Order of Foresters with $80 million and the Odd Fellows with $74,000. In addition, the 70,000 fraternal lodges across the country contributed to their local economies by renting rooms, purchasing uniforms, regalia and furnishings, and hosting banquets (Harwood, 1897).

Members of successful orders relied on the benefits their membership provided and the comfort of knowing there would be help if misfortune struck. This theme that the fraternal organization served as a loving and extended family is shown in the mission statement for The Security Benefit Association (originally the Knights and Ladies of Security). The group, which was unusual in that it allowed men and women to join on equal terms, declared that its principle goal was to

> … promote the brotherhood of man, teach fidelity to home and loved ones, loyalty to country and respect of law, to establish a system for the care of the widows and orphans, the aged and disabled, and enable every worthy member to protect himself from the ills of life and make substantial provision through co-operation with our members, for those who are nearest and dearest (Beito, 2000, para. 5).

Insurance benefits were particularly attractive to African Americans since white insurance companies refused to write policies for blacks in the period after the Civil War. The black Odd Fellows, the oldest and largest black fraternal organization, offered insurance benefits, built social-welfare institutions, fostered a sense of community, and attracted both leaders and working class members. They were highly visible, organizing public parades and ritual displays (Skocpol & Oser, 2004).

Both white and black fraternal orders promoted entrepreneurship, with a strong focus on the practical. For example, The Ladies of the Maccabees, an all-white, all-female group, offered members managerial and financial skills training and also provided health benefits. In contrast to the white societies, some black groups actually established businesses. Particularly notable for its enterprising efforts, in the early 1900s the Independent Order of St. Luke founded the Saint Luke Penny Savings Bank of Richmond, established a printing plant, ran a newspaper called the *Saint Luke Herald*, and owned a department store, the Saint Luke Emporium (Beito, 2000).

Politics, Patriotism, and Protests

The majority of fraternal groups included in their creed respecting the law and the democratic process, but given the power and influence of the groups, it is not surprising that members could influence the political process (Harwood, 1897). However, the fraternal orders espoused nonpartisanship to achieve internal harmony and to widen their appeal to potential members. Beito explains that "it was standard practice for aspiring Republican and Democratic politicians to join all the leading lodges in their community. Individuals who were bitter rivals

politically could co-exist under a common fraternal banner" (para. 18). While most fraternal groups disdained partisanship, they zealously promoted patriotism, contending that patriotism and good moral character went hand in hand (Beito, 2000). But politics did intrude into the brotherhood of secret societies, and in some cases, politics and fraternal interests intersected. In 1832, the short-lived Anti-Masonic Party, which was the country's first third party, entered the political arena, running a presidential candidate who pledged to "wipe out Freemasonry" (Barlow, 2016).

The 1840s brought waves of newcomers from Ireland, Germany, and other European countries to America. They formed numerous fraternal orders based on their homelands or ethnic groups. By the mid-1800s groups of nativists, such as the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner, sometimes referred to as the Order of the Sons of the Sires of '76, sprang up in protest to the newcomers. The group's stated purpose was to "keep foreigners, naturalized citizens, and Catholics out of public office" (Beals, 1960, p. 121.). The order expanded and became known as the Know-Nothings, which exercised some political clout in American politics before it disappeared due to internal disagreements about hot button issues of the day such as slavery (Scisco, 1901). Skocpol and Oser point out that "ethnic-identified white fraternals were especially likely to be launched during the 1890s, a juncture of intense conflict between native Protestants and immigrant Catholics," (p. 382), and in the 20th century they became increasingly active in political affairs (2004). Trotter agrees, pointing out that "African Americans formed more fraternal orders than did their white counterparts, held on to them longer, and used them more readily as instruments for social change than did their white brethren. Black fraternal orders joined the fight against slavery during the 19th century and Jim Crow during the 20th century" (2004, p. 363).

Women's Place in Fraternal Organizations: Separate but Not Equal

Without question, women were mostly excluded from the influential world of secret societies and fraternal orders for decades. In the 1850s, the Masons formed a women's auxiliary group called Eastern Star, and the Odd Fellows formed the Daughters of Rebecca group for women. The first independent women's fraternal group, the United Order of True Sisters, was founded in 1846 by Jewish women. It was modeled after the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith established by Jewish men three years before (Clawson, 1986).

However, these auxiliaries, especially among white secret orders, were usually regarded as "satellites" open only to close female relatives of male members. It was common for these white fraternal auxiliaries to have both male and female leaders, while women were barred from the primary groups (Skocpol & Oser, 2004). Since the very term "fraternalism" connotes brotherhood, it is clear that main-stream white U.S. fraternal orders were organized around the principle of male identities and masculine supremacy (Clawson, 1986).

There were exceptions, of course, such as the Independent Order of St. Luke, which admitted men and women on equal terms (Beito, 2000), but for the most part the fraternal institution in the 19th century was a masculine world, mirroring the gender relationships in most sectors of society. Men might join and even have leadership roles in a women's auxiliary group, but women could not belong to the primary organization. A group that defied that standard was the Ladies of the Maccabees, which refused honorary membership to men from the parallel Knights

of the Maccabees. Bina West, the Supreme Commander of the organization from 1911 to 1948, responded to male applicants that "L.O.T.M., which means Ladies of the Maccabees, may also be construed to mean, Leave Out Those Men" (Beito, 2000, para. 10). The leadership of the Ladies of the Maccabees asserted that the all-female policy promoted self -reliance and independence. Although the group eschewed politics, it supported feminist causes, taking prominent roles in suffrage and temperance organizations, including the League of Women Voters, but they were the exception rather than the rule (Beito, 2000).

By contrast, women played a much more pronounced role in African American fraternalism, where lodges were gender-integrated and women could take leadership positions. This involvement by women, especially through the distinctive African American orders, was a natural outgrowth of the central role women played in black churches. Another key reason for this powerful female presence in African American fraternalism had to do with economic realities. Since many black women held jobs in domestic service, agriculture, and professions such as teaching, they were often the main or the sole wage earner in the family (Skocpol & Oser, 2004). These self-reliant women were accustomed to being breadwinners and were a ready market for fraternal benefits such as insurance, funeral expenses, and payments to survivors.

The Struggle to Adapt and Survive (1930s-Present)

With the Great Depression of the 1930s, fraternal societies began a slow decline that was to continue into the next century except for a brief uptick in the 1950s. This overall decline was due to an unfavorable combination of economic factors, competition and policy changes for health care and insurance, competing forms of entertainment, cultural shifts, and perhaps most damaging, the rise of the welfare state. All of these factors contributed to a transformation in the nature of fraternalism as it had existed in the United States for 200 years (Putnam, 2001).

During the Depression most of these groups suffered loss of membership due to widespread unemployment. Many lost their lodge buildings because dues were insufficient to pay their construction loans. Some groups were never able to recover and died out. At the same time, fraternal orders began to see their membership benefits being curtailed by competition and government regulations. The medical associations sought and won stronger certification requirements, which reduced the number of doctors in the country, and then attacked fraternal medical services by denying licenses to doctors who accepted contracts with fraternal owned hospitals and clinics. These medical benefits, a cornerstone of the mission of fraternal orders, were no longer available to members. Insurance, a lucrative business, became available from a variety of agencies (Beito, 2000).

Some fraternal groups saw the writing on the wall early on and realized the impact of these changes. The magazine of the Fraternal Order of Eagles printed an article in 1915 that clearly stated the ramifications. "The State is doing or planning to do for the wage-earner what our Order was a pioneer in doing eighteen years ago. All this is lessening the popular appeal of our beneficial features. With that appeal weakened or gone, we shall have lost a strong argument for joining the Order; for no fraternity can depend entirely on its recreational features to attract members" (Beito, 2000, para. 31).

The Shift from Mutual Aid to Social Welfare

As predicted, the 20th century brought far-reaching expansion in the government's social welfare role. Numerous government programs for health care were put into place. Many employers were required to provide health insurance and workers' compensation. Fraternal organizations had to look for tactics other than mutual aid to keep their organizations relevant. The forward-thinking groups realized they needed to adapt to the fast-changing society and shifting expectations.

Some groups did more than adapt, they morphed into another kind of organization to survive. For example, The International Concatenated Order of Hoo Hoo was a secret society formed in 1892 with ties to the timber industry. Because the founders of Hoo Hoo did not adopt the conventional rituals of popular fraternal groups of the time, the group was criticized as being silly and undignified for serious businessmen. The titles of its officials were taken from the Lewis Carroll's book *Hunting of the Snark*. The leader of Hoo Hoo is still called the Snark of the Universe (Tarpley, 1992).

As early as 1896, leaders were arguing for Hoo Hoo to adopt more practical reasons for existing. Over the years, Hoo Hoo added to their goals helping find employment for people wanting to work in the timber industry, and providing disaster relief and death benefit insurance to members. Local clubs were encouraged to do public service education about issues affecting the forest products industry. When these efforts were not successful, Hoo Hoo became a trade organization to promote lumber products. Although membership for women did not become available until 1993, the organization is still viable today as a trade organization but retains its rituals and traditions from its founding (Hoo-Hoo, 2022). But for every survival story, there are plenty of groups that have fallen by the wayside in the challenging times since the glory days of fraternal groups.

The 'Greatest Generation' Briefly Revived Fraternal Interest, Then Decline Continued

However, after World War II, there was a resurgence of enthusiasm for joining organizations of all types, including fraternal orders. After the war ended in 1945, the veterans came home and eagerly became 'joiners.' Like many fraternal groups, the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar, a Christian organization for Freemasons, saw its membership 'skyrocket' from the mid-40s until the mid-60s (Flores, 2014). These members of the "Greatest Generation" were less concerned about health and funeral benefits and more interested in civic activity and conviviality (Flores, 2014).

By the middle of the 20th century, the successful fraternal groups had expanded membership to be more diverse and representative of their communities and were an important unifying force in civic engagement. However, the children and grandchildren of those WWII veterans were not enthusiastic joiners. The Vietnam War brought a loss of trust in government and service organizations in general, and organizations begin to see a drop in membership. In addition, members often tended to give less volunteer time to community events, preferring to belong in name only (Flores, 2014). However, the majority of those who continued to be active in civic groups were older; Members of the generation born in the 1920s belonged to almost twice as many civic organizations

as those born in the late 1960s. Members of this "civic" generation also were much more likely to vote (Putnam, 2001).

Researcher Robert Putnam began a national debate about the decline of civic America with a series of articles and in his 2000 book, *"Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* in which he documented that Americans today "are significantly less engaged with their communities than was true a generation ago" (2001, p.5). He found that membership in voluntary organizations ranging from the PTA to fraternal groups, from the League of Women Voters to the Red Cross and from Greek organizations to labor unions has declined by as much as 50 percent over the past two to three decades. Even family life is less engaged; Americans have 43% fewer family dinners (Putnam 2001). Fraternal orders have been hard hit by this trend, which accelerated in the 21st century. Over just the past two decades, Masonic membership went down 76%, Jaycees declined by 64%, and Rotary International lost 20% (Brand, 2016). Surprisingly, Putnam found black Americans have been dropping out of both religious and civic organizations as rapidly as white Americans (2001). Those who do continue their membership in fraternal orders are less likely to take on leadership roles; over the past 25 years, there has been a sharp decline in those who are willing to serve on committees or as officers of local groups. This mirrors reductions in local activities such as attending school board meetings (Levine & Galston, 1997).

Finally, a lack of long-term loyalty is also a major reason for falling numbers in service organizations where membership was once a life-long commitment, even a multi-generational tradition. Groups such as Rotary International launch membership drives and are successful in attracting new members, but retention is the biggest problem. Rotary International averages 44,000 new members per year, but loses an average of 51,000 (Brand, 2016).

Why Are Fraternal Orders Declining in Membership?

Social scientists have launched numerous lines of study attempting to explain this growing lack of civic engagement in American institutions. Fraternal organizations, with memberships in freefall, are examining their core values and discussing how to understand and adapt to changes in society while preserving their unique history and personality. The path to that goal is not clear.

Secrecy, Race and Gender

Although it is clear that Americans simply don't join clubs or fraternal orders as often as they once did, some critics say the organizations have not kept up with changes in society. For example, many Masonic lodges still don't allow women to join, and others have struggled to attract members of color. From a high of more than 4.1 million in 1959, when about 4.5% of all American men were members, Masonic membership has dropped about 75% (Silva, 2020).

John Dickie, a historian at University College London and author of *The Craft: How the Freemasons Made the Modern World*, contends that the secrecy that once intrigued men is less alluring. "... in an age when it can take

two minutes or less on Google to find out what the Freemasons' secrets really are, I'm not sure that they can really hold that much mystique for members anymore" (Quoted in Silva, 2020, para.11). Also, there is concern that tackling gender and race issues might attract new members, but could also drive away long-time members who value those historic "limitations"(Silvia, 2020).

Moving To Professional Associations and Changing Family Dynamics

Millions of people have left labor unions and fraternal societies such as the Elks and Masons, and similar numbers have joined professional associations, which are more focused on career success and are less rooted in community involvement where men and women from varied backgrounds can talk and cooperate as equals (Levine & Galston, 1997). Putnam confirmed that the increasing number of women in the workplace over the last generation has changed the types of organizations they join and created more two-career families with less time for volunteer activities that do not include children. Single households are also more common, with associated time pressures (Putnam, 2001).

The Profound Effect of the Electronic Revolution

In his studies at the beginning of the 21st century, Putnam examined a number of other possible causes of the decline in civic engagement, including economic hard times, residential mobility and suburbanization, the cultural revolt against authority, the growth of the welfare state, and the civil rights revolution. He concluded that all of these contributed to America's changing cultural landscape, but he argues that the most damaging factor was a technological innovation: namely television. In 1950, barely 10% of American homes had TVs, but by 1959, the number had shot up to 90%. "TV watching comes at the expense of nearly every social activity outside the home, especially social gatherings and informal conversations," Putnam contends (2001, p.32). Putnam also references the work of political scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool, who predicted in 1991 that the "electronic revolution in communications technology would have profoundly decentralizing and fragmenting effects on society and culture" (Putnam, 2001, p. 34).

Since then, the electronic revolution has moved at breakneck speed, with the pervasive use of social media. Research is ongoing about the conflicting effects of social media replacing physical congregation, yet leaving people yearning for physical social connections. Civic groups that traditionally offered informative programs during their meetings have lost favor now that the internet offers a universe of information instantly, but people still crave face-to-face interaction and hands-on community service (Flores, 2014). Undoubtedly, social media platforms are profoundly affecting civic engagement. On the one hand, they support connections beyond physical barriers and give voice to diverse viewpoints without gatekeepers. However, social media also allows immediate distribution of vitriolic or harassing comments, often aimed at women and ethnic or racial minorities. Researchers fear disinformation and polarizing language may be encouraging destructive forms of engagement offline as well (Born, 2018). This trend toward online discord may offer opportunities for reviving floundering fraternal orders. Members of fraternals contend the greatest benefit of their modern-day organizations is establishing friendships outside of work and connecting with a community that isn't divisive. With polarization and division in the U.S.

on the increase, fraternal members say it's soothing to spend time with people who aren't arguing (Silva, 2020).

Michael Brand, who says he consults with nonprofits and civic organizations “when change is no longer an option, but an urgent necessity,” agrees the decline of service clubs’ membership in the United States is a loss of social capital and civic engagement. He points out that “potential members are constrained by lack of time. In addition, they may not see much use in an organization whose prestige and vitality is in question. It is imperative we reinvent. That may involve passing the torch and allowing an emerging generation of leaders to reinvent our clubs according to their needs. The alternative may be irrelevance and obscurity” (Brand, 2016, para. 22).

Conclusions

Secret societies and fraternal orders have played important roles in the social, political, and cultural evolution of the United States and in the lives of its citizens. During their golden age, fraternal groups initially exerted political influence and later also provided health care, insurance and support to widows and orphans before the government established national social welfare programs. Gradually, fraternal groups became more diverse in their makeup and focused on civic engagement in local communities. Understanding the role of fraternal organizations in the history of the U.S. is vital to seeing the full picture of how the country evolved.

Fraternal organizations were successful during their glory years because they provided a brotherhood structure of close ties to like-minded people; they used the allure of secret rituals; they were a path to power and influence; and they offered benefits including mutual aid for health and security. Additionally, affiliation brought social status and entertainment, and members received assistance with employment as well as a business advantage. The groups were highly visible in the community through civic engagement activities and were recognized for their contributions. However, since the 1930s, many of these inducements have disappeared or have become less desirable as society evolved. Americans who came of age during the Depression and World War II were much more involved in the life of their communities than the generations that followed. The passing of this “long civic generation” seems to be the cause of the decades of decline in fraternal groups, and by association, the decline of civic life in America (Putnam, 1995). Lightning fast innovations in digital communication have dramatically affected social discourse and have reshaped how people spend their time, especially those born since the 1960s.

Social scientists agree that civic engagement is vital to democracy and express concern about the growing isolation of the population. Although many of the traditional appeals of fraternal orders are no longer viable, studies indicate people yearn for engaging forms of personal communication. This backlash against digital media’s divisive and abrasive characteristics may drive a renewed interest in face-to-face interaction and hands-on community service.

Recommendations

Given the critical role secret societies and fraternal orders have played in the history of the United States, and their ties to the vital exercise of civic engagement, the author recommends more research on this topic to explore questions such as these:

- Do fraternal orders still have an important function in society or are they tribal and divisive?
- Can fraternal organizations still play an important role in how individuals define themselves?
- Could fraternal groups offer in-person connections and engagement that is not readily available through other forms of communication?
- How could fraternal orders contribute to a revival of civic engagement in America?
- What must fraternal orders do to make themselves more appealing to current generations?

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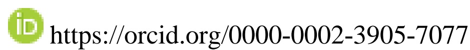 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3905-7077

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