

# The New Orleans Index at Five

August 2010

## Reviewing Key Reforms After Hurricane Katrina

### THE RISE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AFTER KATRINA

Frederick Weil, Louisiana State University

#### Introduction and History

Following Hurricane Katrina, observers worried that New Orleans might continue on a path of citizen passivity, inter-communal conflict, and corruption that was part of its long-standing reputation. Instead, observers have been struck by the outpouring of citizen engagement, the rise of new or invigorated community organizations, and the calls for government responsiveness.

By many accounts, New Orleans never developed a robust civil society in its long history prior to Hurricane Katrina.<sup>1</sup> Its elites were closed, its government unresponsive, and most of its citizens swung between passivity and angry protest. As is typical of communities with closed and rigid elites, New Orleans lost rank to more open, dynamic cities since the 1840s, when it was the third largest American city.<sup>2</sup> In the half century prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans actually shrank in size, while a “New South” arose all around it.

In short, New Orleans had lost sight of what sociological theory, going back to the early nineteenth century, has identified as three important characteristics of a free democratic society.<sup>3</sup> First, the initiative to address issues comes from free citizens working together in their communities. Second, government is responsive to citizens and partners with them, rather than commanding or excluding them. And third, civic engagement is open to all citizens, regardless of social standing or background: leadership is open to merit.

Modern empirical literature on civic engagement further underscores the importance of civil society – community, religion, family, social organizations—in supporting democratic self-governance.<sup>4</sup> And “social capital”—including social networks, reciprocity, and interpersonal trust—help enable this democratic participation.<sup>5</sup>

The effort to recover from Hurricane Katrina seems to have spurred the growth of civic engagement in New Orleans, giving the city an opportunity to regain lost ground. Government assistance alone was never sufficient for recovery, and thus citizens and communities were motivated to work together to further their recovery. Citizens had an incentive to cooperate and provide each other with mutual assistance; communities had an incentive to partner with one another; elites had an incentive to accept leadership initiatives from outside their traditional ranks; and government had an incentive to accept offers of assistance and partnership from engaged citizens and communities. A virtuous circle of growing mutual trust and civic engagement began to displace the old vicious circle of distrust and disengagement.

“...the higher powers, the Mayor and so on, see that they can’t do it by themselves. There has to be participation from citizens at the ground level. It can’t be top-down.”

- Audrey Browder  
Past President, Central City Partnership and U.S. President’s Volunteer Service Award recipient

 Metropolitan Policy Program  
at BROOKINGS

 GREATER NEW ORLEANS  
COMMUNITY DATA CENTER

Suggested Citation: Weil, Frederick. 2010. “The Rise of Community Engagement After Katrina.” In *The New Orleans Index at Five*. Washington: Brookings Institution and Greater New Orleans Community Data Center.

## Summary of Post-Katrina Community Engagement

This study relies mostly on original data collected by the author's research team, as well as government data and data assembled by the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center.<sup>6</sup> These data include: (a) a household survey (N = ca. 6,000), initiated in spring 2006 and continuing through 2010, covering respondents' damage, recovery, social connections (social capital), and feelings; (b) a survey of neighborhood association leaders conducted in partnership with the New Orleans Neighborhood Partnership Network (data collection is still underway, with N = ca. 90); (c) intensive ethnographic research, since shortly after the storm, of neighborhood associations, churches, synagogues, and other faith-based groups, nonprofits, and other community organizations (over 200 groups all told); (d) filmed interviews, beginning in early 2010, with forty interviews completed and about fifty more planned; and (e) various outside data. Together, this unique survey and ethnographic interviews reveal how much community engagement and social networks have changed since the 2005 disaster.

### Overall Civic Engagement and Social Capital

Some 6,000 household surveys conducted by the author's research team reveal that New Orleanians since Katrina score below the national average on most measures of civic engagement and social capital, as measured by the 2006 Social Capital Community Survey.<sup>7</sup> They are ten percentage points less likely to feel that most people can be trusted, 26 percent less trusting on a five-item index (trust people in your neighborhood, people you work with, people at your church, people who work in the stores where you shop, the police in your local community), 21 percent less trusting of other racial-ethnic groups, and 19 percent less likely to participate in various social activities (had friends over to your home, visited relatives, socialized with co-workers outside of work, played cards or board games, attended a club meeting, hung out with friends, attended sports events). Yet at the same time, post-Katrina New Orleanians were 24 percentage points *more* likely to attend a public meeting at which town or school affairs were discussed, at least a few times a year. With the advent of frequent community and planning meetings focused on disaster recovery, we can see "new" forms of civic engagement displacing an "old" style of civil distrust and disengagement in New Orleans.

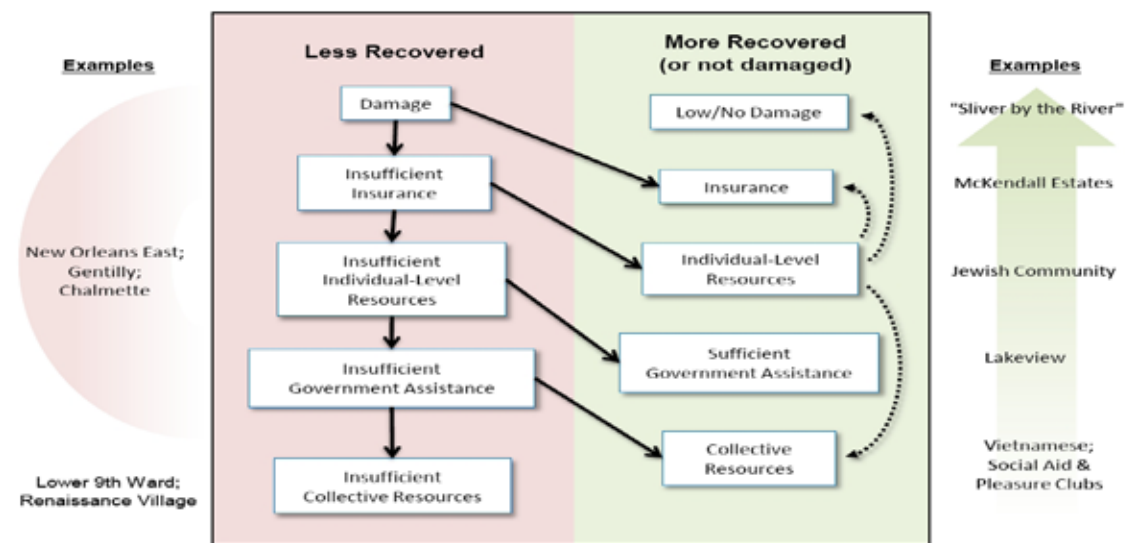
### Who Participates: Individual and Collective Resources

Research shows that participation requires resources, and resources are not distributed equally.<sup>8</sup> Thus, citizens with greater individual resources like money, education, and time, participate more strongly than lower-resourced citizens. Citizens with greater collective resources or social capital—cohesive communities, strong organizations, enthusiasm and mobilization, mutual trust—participate more effectively than those without collective resources. And higher status citizens (who have more individual resources) usually have more collective resources, as well. But collective resources can help lower-status citizens compensate for their lack of individual resources and thus participate at higher rates than they otherwise could. Lower-status citizens without compensating social capital are least able to participate.

Figure 1 suggests how these patterns seem to have played out in post-Katrina New Orleans. People with individual resources like money and education were (a) less likely to receive storm damage because they lived in places less likely to flood, (b) more likely to have adequate insurance, and (c) more likely to be civically engaged.

**Figure 1. Storm Damage, Resources, and Recovery**

Hypotheses about different Paths to Hurricane Recovery\*



\* Solid-line arrows show an opportunity or decision tree, indicating different possible paths for moving out of the red damage zone into the green recovery zone. (The arrows do not represent causation.) For instance, if a community suffered damage, but had insurance, it had a path to recovery and moved into the green zone. Failing that (“insufficient insurance”), it might exit the damage area with individual-level resources, or some other means, further along the tree branches.

People with insufficient individual resources were more dependent on collective resources, or failing that, on government assistance, to compensate and enable them to recover. People who had neither individual nor collective resources were least likely to recover.

Thus, well-to-do communities were at an advantage: the “Sliver by the River” (Garden District, French Quarter, and others) received less damage; McKendall Estates residents were well insured; the Jewish community was well-off and had strong communal solidarity; Lakeview was upper-middle income and developed strong organization. Less well-to-do communities like the Vietnamese and Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs were able to compensate to some extent for inadequate individual resources by employing strong collective resources. Recovery in middle-income communities, like those in New Orleans East, Gentilly, and Chalmette, varied considerably according to whether the communities were able to organize themselves or receive sufficient government assistance. Low- to moderate-income communities that were most heavily damaged and were unable to draw sufficiently on collective resources, like the Lower Ninth Ward, have had weak recovery. And individuals with little individual or collective resources—especially isolated poor people, lower-income elderly, those with disabilities, and those without strong networks of family and friends—have struggled most, often remaining in FEMA trailer parks like Renaissance Village in Baker, Louisiana, near Baton Rouge.

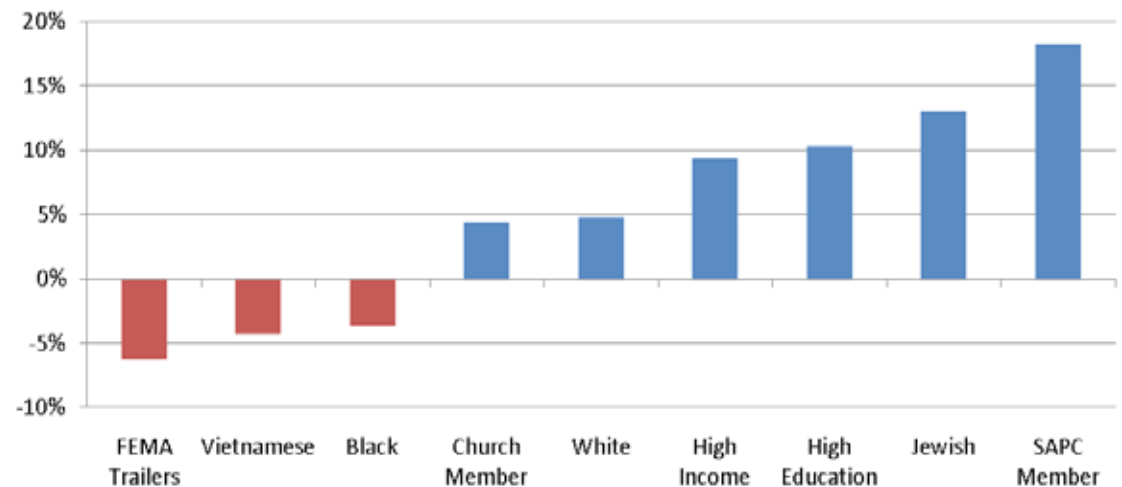
Communities that have exhausted all potential resources, or had none, have been unable to move out of the red zone into the green – that is, they have been unable to recover. (Dotted-line arrows show a causal relationship, namely, that individual-level resources contribute to many other forms of resource as well.)

**Civic Engagement and Recovery**

Figure 2 reinforces this picture: Higher status people and solidaristic communities participate more strongly. On a civic engagement index on the author’s household survey, better educated and higher income people are more engaged, as are Jews, church members, and members of Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs (SAPCs).<sup>9</sup> Residents of FEMA trailer parks are less engaged. The Vietnamese community, which has a reputation as a very tightly knit community that has only recently begun to abandon its traditional reluctance to engage in citywide affairs, remains less civically engaged than average. Perhaps this is due to their lesser integration in New Orleans. Vietnamese respondents came to New Orleans an average of 50 years more recently than other citizens, and they are less likely

to have friends of a different faith or race or who live outside their neighborhood. The most striking finding in Figure 2 is that Social Aid and Pleasure Club members score highest on civic engagement.<sup>10</sup> While SAPC members are mostly lower-income, and thus lack strong individual resources, they are nevertheless more civically active, service-oriented, and trusting than even the rich or well-educated. This is a powerful testament to the importance of social capital or collective resources, which can compensate for the lack of individual resources.

**Figure 2. Civic Engagement in Selected Social Groups**  
showing percentage points above or below New Orleans average



Source: LSU Disaster Recovery Survey. N = ca. 6,000. Data collection initiated in Spring of 2006, continuing through 2010. More details available at [www.lsu.edu/fweil/KatrinaResearch](http://www.lsu.edu/fweil/KatrinaResearch).

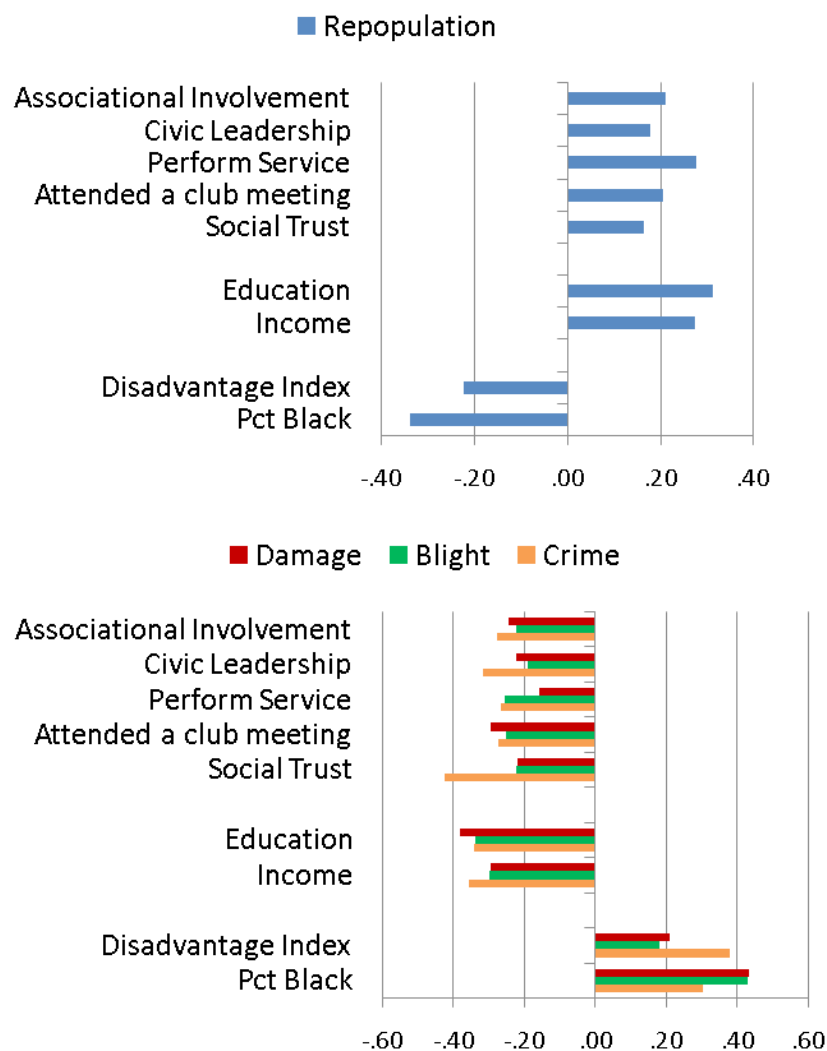
In the figure above, Civic Engagement scores represent an average of:

- Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? [Most people can be trusted]
- About how often have you done the following? Attended any public meeting in which there was discussion of town or school affairs. [Once a month or more]
- Have you taken part in activities with the following groups and organizations in the past 12 months? A neighborhood association, like a block association, a homeowner or tenant association, or a crime watch group. [Yes]
- Have you taken part in activities with the following groups and organizations in the past 12 months? A charity or social welfare organization that provides services in such fields as health or service to the needy. [Yes]
- In the past twelve months, have you served as an officer or served on a committee of any local club or organization? [Yes]

Figure 3 shows that higher levels of civic engagement and social capital in a census tract are associated with stronger community recovery. Specifically, greater associational involvement, civic leadership, performing service, attendance at club meetings, and social trust correlate significantly ( $p < .01$ ) with stronger repopulation and less damage, blight, and violent crime, in 167 census tracts.

**Figure 3. Civic Engagement, Social Capital, and Community Recovery**

Correlations aggregated to the level of Census Tract



Sources: LSU Disaster Recovery Survey; Damage estimates from the City of New Orleans; Repopulation estimates based on postal delivery data from Valassis & Greater New Orleans Community Data Center; Blight data from the City of New Orleans; Data on violent crimes from the City of New Orleans Police Department. Distribution of interviews per district are: mean = 18; median = 13; maximum = 204; minimum = 3.

**Optimistic Developments: A New Form and Quality of Civic Engagement**

A new style of activism has arisen in post-Katrina New Orleans. Civic engagement has evolved away from pressing for government assistance, while government plays communities off against each other. New forms of engagement include: (a) increasing organizational capacity and autonomy, (b) greater strategic sophistication, (c) increasing citizen participation, (d) a new cooperative orientation and the emergence of new umbrella groups, and (e) new recovery resources from “outside-inside” the community. Supporting these developments, a new array of often small, nimble nonprofit organizations have sought to encourage the emergence of active community organizations; and while government and established elites have not encouraged these developments to the same extent, they have sometimes become more open, or less resistant, than in the past. Let’s look at each of these factors in turn.

## **Increasing Organizational Capacity and Autonomy**

Community leaders stress several important elements in increasing organizational capacity and autonomy: (i) improved organization, including the use of committees, block captains, etc., (ii) data collection and developing their own, independent sources of information, (iii) ongoing incorporation of new technologies like mapping, databases, etc., (iv) extensive use of volunteers, and above all (v) taking the initiative and not waiting for outside help.

Some of the older, pre-existing community organizations already had committee structures, and these were quickly re-activated after the storm. But one of the most innovative organizational initiatives, block captains, grew organically out of the need to act quickly in the post-storm crisis environment. Al Petrie, former president of the Lakeview Civic Improvement Association said,

*One of the first things we did was say, 'Okay, we need to get in touch with people as best we can,' and the best way we can do that is to see if we have people that we know and then that one of them knows on every block in Lakeview... And we created a block captain network, where through everybody knowing somebody in Lakeview, we got somebody to volunteer to be the information officer for a particular block. And by doing that, we started our whole surveying process.<sup>11</sup>*

The block captain system quickly became an important tool for information gathering and dissemination, organizing, planning, and other activities that built community capacity.

Organizations were now able to collect their own data. They have become adept at conducting their own surveys of property conditions and infrastructure. They then feed the data into GIS mapping programs and computer databases, and have learned to analyze and utilize their own data for their own purposes.

Organizations also now organize and utilize their own workforce of volunteer labor, especially volunteer groups that have come to help rebuild the city. Many of the organizations have developed their own outreach channels to attract students on spring or summer breaks, church groups, visiting conventioners, and others, often establishing new information networks through word of mouth and national organizations.

These initiatives enable citizen organizations to become more independent of government, especially when government has been so slow and overwhelmed in providing services during recovery. When Hal Roark was installed as executive director of the Broadmoor Community Development Corporation, he told assembled community members:

*Do we want government help? Yes. Do we think the Army Corps is to blame for the flooding? Yes. Do we hold them accountable and think they should pay for the damage? Yes. Are we going to wait for government help? No, absolutely not. Every neighborhood in the city wants government help, and for most of them, that's the extent of their strategy & plan. We want this help, too, but we don't intend to wait for it in making our plans & strategies.<sup>12</sup>*

Indeed, when organizations find that government is overwhelmed and unable to perform its duties, citizens sometimes try to bring their assembled data to government to help them organize their tasks more efficiently. Describing how citizens can fight blight, Denise Thornton, founder and President of the Beacon of Hope Resource Center, said,

*[We've learned] the things to look for, how to fight blight, how to go to city hall and win in a constructive way. These blight teams have case files on every single blighted*

*home, where they make phone calls, they do voluntary compliance. ...You don't just sit around and wait for government to help you. You've got to do it yourself, and [our community members] are learning and they're feeling good about themselves when they go down to city hall with their case file and say, 'We did volunteer compliance. We've taken pictures of this property.' And somebody in government is listening to them. To me, that's the best thing about what this model brings to neighborhoods – the empowerment piece.<sup>13</sup>*

### **A New Strategic Sophistication**

This sense of urgency also contributed to the development of a new strategic sophistication among leaders. Community leaders quickly realized that if residents thought no one else was going to come back and rebuild, they would be discouraged, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. If, conversely, residents thought others were returning and rebuilding, this would give them confidence to do the same. The question was how to manage impressions and create a critical mass.<sup>14</sup> Broadmoor put up banners and yard signs throughout the neighborhood that said, “Broadmoor Lives,” and people in New Orleans East put signs in their window and their yards that said “We’re Coming Back,” well before they were able to return. These communities took a page from the playbook of Madison Avenue and created neighborhood “brands” to encourage other residents to join in. This signaling helped create a critical mass or tipping point to forge solidarity in the service of recovery.

On this basis, more formal planning became much more productive. Residents came to planning meetings and joined in. In the neighborhoods that began the process earliest, like Lakeview and Broadmoor, neighborhood meetings were large and had a buzz of anticipation and an eagerness of neighbors to see each other.

Several ethnic/religious communities also engaged in their own community planning. The Vietnamese community around the Mary Queen of Vietnam (MQVN) Catholic Church and Community Development Corporation had already begun planning prior to the storm. MQVN had planned a retirement home in a park-like setting, accompanied by an urban farm and farmers market, which they planned to make self-financing by serving not only New Orleans customers, but also Asian produce markets throughout the U.S. Hurricane Katrina interrupted this development, but the community was able to quickly pick up where they left off after the storm. The community even convinced FEMA to build a temporary trailer park on the site, laying all the plumbing and electrical work in such a way that it could then be repurposed as the retirement center’s foundation. The Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans (JFGNO) also engaged in extensive recovery planning, building on a long-standing tradition of community self-governance. The JFGNO conducted a recovery survey in spring of 2006,<sup>15</sup> and the annual meeting that year included not only a survey report, but also formation and break-out sessions of planning committees, which continued to meet and work throughout the following year. The JFGNO hired a new executive director, an urban planner from Jerusalem’s city hall. The federation then did a population survey of the community to assess needs and interests and guide allocations. Results of this survey, along with a final draft of the JFGNO’s new planning document, which included input from all the planning committees, were presented at the following year’s annual meeting, in fall 2007. A third planning/recovery survey is in the field in mid-2010.

Like the Vietnamese community, the Jewish community’s planning efforts were as much forward-looking as they were concerned with recovery. Notably, the Jewish community

embarked on a successful “newcomers” program to attract young, dynamic new community members to relocate to New Orleans. Combining financial and communal incentives with event invitations, the community sought to appeal to young Jews’ pioneering spirit in both the business and the nonprofit realms.

### **Increasing Citizen Participation.**

One of the most striking aspects of the post-Katrina period in New Orleans is how people who had never really taken part before have been drawn into civic affairs. People were galvanized by the “green dot” on a planning map<sup>16</sup> that said their community was slated for return to forest or park, by anger at authorities who were viewed as unresponsive, by feelings of love and solidarity for fellow community members, and by many other things. A new civic leadership is emerging from among people who had never previously been engaged. Katherine Prevost, president of Bunny Friend Neighborhood Association in the Upper Ninth Ward, said,

*Before the storm, I was living my daily life. The storm changed me. It changed the way that I think. It changed the way that I do things. It just changed me. It made me want to do things totally different with my life. All I think about when I go to work is, ‘Let me hurry up and get these 8 hours over with so I can do my community work.’ So when I leave my job, I put another 8 hours in sometimes. I might not go to bed until 3, 4 o’clock in the morning, reading my emails or drafting something or working on something that needs to be done.<sup>17</sup>*

### **A New Cooperative Orientation and the Emergence of New Umbrella Groups**

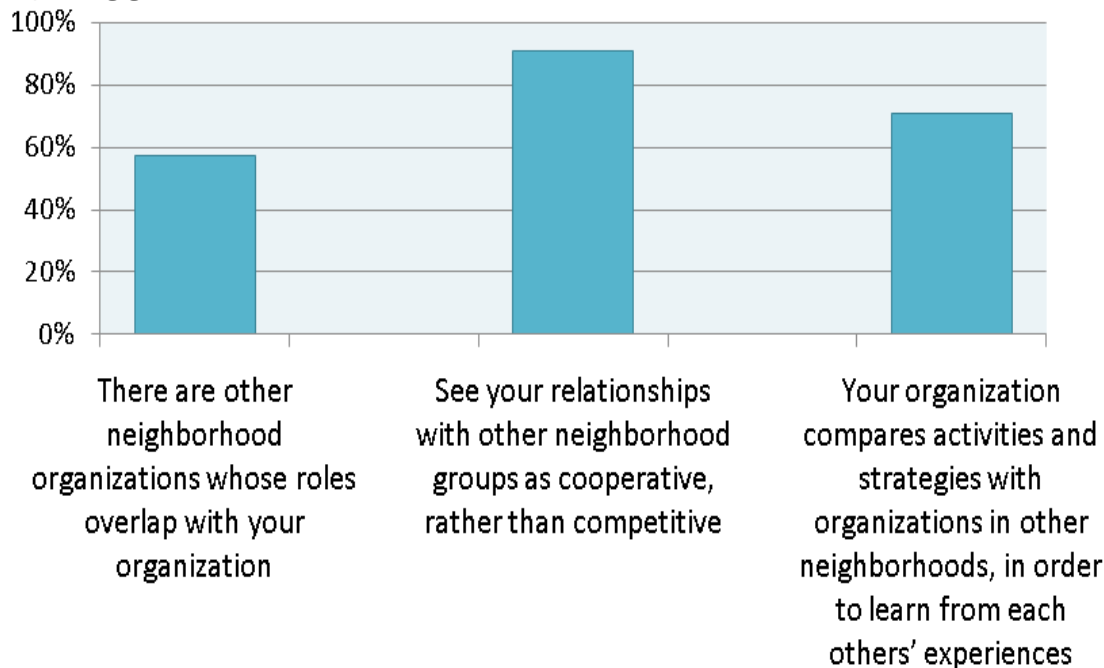
Another centrally important feature of this new civic participation in post-Katrina New Orleans is its cooperative orientation. Community members are pooling their efforts for the common cause of recovery and improvement. Communities are partnering with each other to achieve common goals, rather than competing with or confronting each other. And perhaps most surprisingly of all, many citizens are reaching out to government to act as a partner.

The Vietnamese community presents one of the most striking instances of cooperation within a community. When community members began to return after the storm, those with building skills went house to house in teams, putting on new roofs, so that the owners could sleep dry in them, even while they worked on them. Others, without building skills, cooked communal meals for community members. Meanwhile, building supplies were warehoused in MQVN church buildings. Within about six months of the storm, most community members had returned and had usable housing, generally as a result of their own efforts in common.

Communities have also begun to develop strongly cooperative relations with each other, in contrast to the past, when they pursued beggar-thy-neighbor competition with each other for scarce government goods and services. A current survey in the field, being conducted by the author with the Neighborhoods Partnership Network (NPN), asks neighborhood association leaders, among other things, about their relations with other neighborhood associations. As Figure 4 shows, their assessment is that relations are good and overwhelmingly cooperative, rather than competitive. Fifty one out of fifty six neighborhood leaders (91 percent) affirmed that relations are cooperative, and they identified specific areas and projects on which partnership is possible—including areas where one might predict competition.

**Figure 4a. New Orleans Neighborhood Associations**

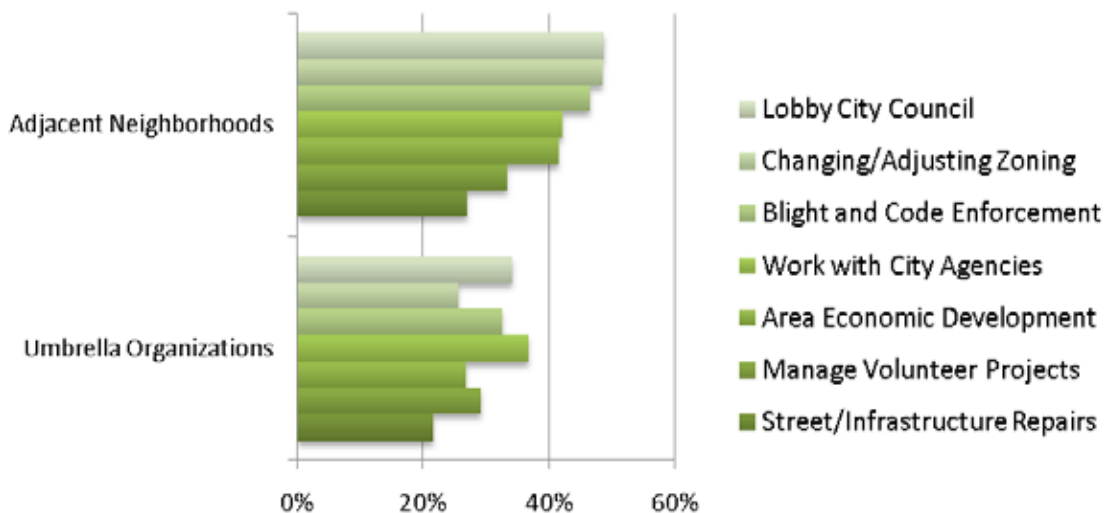
reporting good relations



Source: LSU/Neighborhoods Partnership Network survey of Neighborhood Association Leaders; still in the field as of July 2010; N=56.

**Figure 4b. New Orleans Neighborhood Associations**

how they partner with each other



Coordinating organizations have also emerged that have sought to reduce tensions or conflict among organizations in their community. Thus, the Social Aid and Pleasure Club Task Force (SAPCTF) and the Mardi Gras Indian Council worked to reduce tensions among their constituent groups, and to address external difficulties all their member groups faced, especially concerning city regulations and relations with the police. The influence of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans increased after the storm as it helped coordinate recovery and the distribution of resources among different denominations, synagogues, and cultural groups, which had previously sometimes competed with each other.

A similar phenomenon was the emergence of new umbrella groups formed to coordinate community groups and bring them together in addressing the challenges of disaster recovery. These umbrella groups differ from groups like the SAPCTF, Indian Council, or JFGNO, in that they were formed *outside* the eco-system of organizations they sought to work with. Their success has been that they have contributed to their client organizations, and also that they have been so well accepted and embraced by them.

Three notable such umbrella groups are the Neighborhoods Partnership Network, the Beacon of Hope Resource Center, and Sweet Home New Orleans. This is a highly heterogeneous set of organizations, and they might not all agree that they can be classified together. Yet they seem to share in common a mission of helping their member groups: (a) gain capacity and autonomy, (b) find areas of common concern on which they can work together, (c) find synergies on issues that would otherwise produce competition/conflict, and perhaps most importantly, (d) learn from each other. In this regard, they also differ from more traditional service-providing nonprofit organizations because they do not approach their task as expert professionals who seek to solve problems for their clients, but rather almost as conveners who try to help organizations function together more effectively in their own ecosystem.

### ***New Recovery Resources from “Outside-Inside” the Community***

Intra-community resources from outside the affected region, a sort of “outside-inside” resource, was critical and most prevalent in the faith-based and ethnic communities, but it was also important in the cultural community. The national and neighboring Jewish communities immediately mobilized to help the New Orleans Jewish community. Representatives from national Jewish organizations were on the ground in Baton Rouge, Houston, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast within 24 hours of the storm and immediately began providing monetary, logistical, and organizational assistance, aimed primarily at assuring continuity of existing communal institutions, so that the community could continue to function autonomously and provide for its members. At the same time, the neighboring Jewish community in Baton Rouge contacted New Orleans Jewish leaders and asked which community members were not yet accounted for. A command center was established; calls were received, lists checked off; and by the day after the storm, the Baton Rouge community had launched boats into the flooded areas, guided by satellite phones and global positioning systems (before either was widely in use). Within two or three days, not a single Jewish community member remained unaccounted for: The operation located and picked up every community member, as well as ferrying anyone else they could carry onto dry land.

When the Vietnamese of New Orleans East decided to evacuate, they phoned ahead to their colleagues in Houston to tell them they were en route. As the convoy of cars arrived in Houston-area Vietnamese strip malls, local community members came running out, holding up fingers indicating the number of evacuees they could take into their own homes. And when the MQVN community returned after the storm, their sister community on New Orleans’ West Bank helped them warehouse building materials and provided a local staging-area for rebuilding.

The cultural community also received massive assistance from musicians, artists, and others in cultural communities nationally and around the world. Organizations like MusiCares (the Grammy’s nonprofit wing), Music Rising, Renew Our Music, and the American Federation of Musicians contributed money, organized fund-raisers, and replaced instruments and equipment.

### **A New Model of Philanthropy**

Traditional philanthropy, including traditional disaster relief, most classically follows a paternalistic model: elites bear responsibility for helping lower status people in distress; and lower status people, in turn, are obligated to show deference to elites.<sup>18</sup> And a managerial model of philanthropy stresses expertise and efficiency, but still emphasizes assistance from above, coupled with passive (and grateful) receipt from below. Both these older models remained in widespread use after Hurricane Katrina. However, a newer model of philanthropy began to make an impact by emphasizing partnership more than simple assistance: these nonprofits treat clients as equals, and support empowerment and the creation of capacity and autonomy among recipients.

New-style nonprofits, often small and nimble, tried to help neighborhood, community, and umbrella organizations gain capacity and become autonomous. (To be sure, some of the old-style nonprofits also adopted some of the new methods and objectives). For example, the Blue Moon Fund and the Open Society Institute, among others, helped fund some of the new, innovative organizations we have examined, like the Beacon of Hope, the Neighborhoods Partnership Network, and Sweet Home New Orleans, as well as others like the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, the Urban Conservancy, City-Works, the New Orleans Institute, and LouisianaREBUILDS.info. The donors' intent was not simply to alleviate suffering, but to encourage the growth of a stronger civil society. And the recipients aimed not simply to seek as much support as possible, but rather to build capacity and autonomy in their communities. This new-style philanthropic support was tremendously important in helping sustain the emerging new civic engagement, which in turn, helped promote the recovery.

### **Cautions and Implications for Future Policy and Actions**

These developments are very helpful for New Orleans' prospects, not only of recovering, but of actually growing out of some of its pre-storm problems. Yet while the new civic engagement can help drive this progress, citizen participation must itself overcome several challenges if it is to be able to help the city move forward:

**Lower and middle- status citizens must be able to overcome elite resistance to their participation.** There is perhaps no greater danger to a city or society than a closed elite that excludes leaders from outside its circles who show merit.<sup>19</sup> Openness to leadership from every sector of society, including lower status communities that had historically been excluded, seems indispensable if New Orleans is to move beyond recovery to sustained improvement. If New Orleans' old elites refuse to work with leaders from outside their ranks, the only likely outcomes are further stagnation and decline, or, as has happened in other New South and Sun Belt cities, old elites are simply bypassed and made irrelevant by a dynamic and open new leadership.

Perhaps the most striking finding of our large survey is the high level of civic engagement of Social Aid and Pleasure Club (SAPC) members. By the standards of the civic engagement literature, SAPC members are model citizens: they are community leaders; they perform service; they support each other in times of need. But New Orleans elites were not accustomed to viewing SAPC members, who are mostly working class African Americans, as community leaders and generally excluded them from a seat at the table. The elites tried to justify this exclusion by saying that this community was disorganized, that its leaders were irresponsible, that its culture promoted disadvantage and needed

to be led from the outside.<sup>20</sup> Yet our large household survey shows tremendous strength and organization among SAPC members.

Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs see themselves explicitly as groups that not only lift the spirits of their communities, but also provide concrete services. When the hurricane hit, the Young Men Olympians mobilized its phone list and was able to locate all its members on their cell phones within days.<sup>21</sup> Asked to say a few words about what her club does, Sue Press, founder and President of the Ole and New Style Fellas SAPC, reeled off an unbroken, five-minute stream of accomplishments, from mentoring youth, to donating school uniforms to needy families, to holding a voter registration drive at her house, and on and on.<sup>22</sup>

The Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs perform crucial leadership functions of drawing members of disadvantaged and excluded communities into a mainstream, providing opportunities and reducing the attraction of harmful activities. And bridging this gap benefits the whole city, not only by reducing social problems, but by making the talents and contributions of a large part of society available to promote the city's progress and enrich everyone's culture. Forward-looking leadership should recognize these benefits by easing police restrictions and fees for the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs' parades and showing them the same respect, as community leaders, shown to the "official" Mardi Gras Krewes that parade on St. Charles Avenue.

**Citizens must overcome government resistance to their participation, as well as avoid being "captured" by government.** As we have seen, community groups have grown increasingly capable and sophisticated, gathering their own data, generating their own development plans, and asking government to act as a partner in their efforts. Historically, New Orleans government tended to resist citizens' bids to partner with it, or tried to co-opt groups that made such bids. Again, recovery has been greatly assisted by the new forms of civic engagement, and it would surely impede further progress if government reverted to old exclusionary practices—but a newly active citizenry is resisting any such tendencies.

Since Katrina, communities have sometimes employed hardball tactics to remind government to be open and responsive. But these tactics share only the form, not the content or intent, of more familiar protests that demand benefits from government. For instance, when the city called for neighborhoods to develop recovery plans in late 2006, the Broadmoor neighborhood had already developed theirs, prior to and outside the city's framework. When it appeared that city hall might not accept Broadmoor's plans—widely acknowledged to be well constructed and with widespread citizen participation—community leaders organized a demonstration. Their protest was not intended to demand benefits, but rather to assert community autonomy, keep Broadmoor's citizens engaged, and insist that government partner with the community rather than command it. Likewise, the traditionally quiescent Vietnamese community in Eastern New Orleans organized a protest against the creation of a landfill garbage dump near them. Again, while the form was similar to protests aimed at gaining benefits or avoiding disadvantages, this protest was intended mainly to keep its citizens engaged and demand inclusion in decisions that affected the community. That is, the Vietnamese community also demanded that government partner with them rather than make decisions for them.

These successes have not gone unnoticed by government or by other communities. Indeed, the Neighborhoods Partnership Network, the Beacon of Hope, and others, are

adopting and adapting empowering tactics that work. NPN has been holding a Capacity College, which trains community leaders, and the Beacon has been taking its methods to its less-privileged neighbors.

These new “hardball” practices not only help community organizations act as partners to—rather than petitioning clients of—government. They also help maintain and assure higher levels of citizen participation beyond the euphoric period of immediate recovery, by incorporating participation within a framework of active community organizations.

There is also the opposite risk: not that government refuses to accept citizen input, but rather, that it tries to “capture” it. In the “realist” theory of democracy, government and politics are ultimately about power; and a politician who might wish, but be unable, to block a citizens’ initiative, might try instead to co-opt, redirect, or subvert it.<sup>23</sup> From this perspective, formal institutions or programs that encourage citizen input should certainly be welcomed, but citizens are well advised to be vigilant that these institutions augment, rather than substitute for, autonomous citizen participation. Politicians and government may have incentives to repurpose such institutions, if they can, into gatekeepers for citizen input or as ways to reduce independent citizen organizations to petitioners. Even the best formal institutions cannot fully substitute for neighborhood and community independence and the ability of communities to partner with government as autonomous actors. As Audrey Browder, past President of the Central City Partnership, put it, “I think there’s always a need for citizens’ associations. Again, their element of independence – you’re hearing from the real people, so to speak. ... There has to be participation from citizens at the ground level. It can’t be top-down. It has to be from residents up.”<sup>24</sup>

The new administration of Mayor Mitch Landrieu began its transition into office on the right foot by establishing citizen task forces in seventeen important areas of government. Task force membership was very diverse, including many of the emerging new post-Katrina community leaders; and their discussions were wide-ranging, with vigorous but generally civil debate. The new administration has made a very public point of listening to task force recommendations.

**Communities must find ways to sustain participation beyond the euphoric period of recovery, into the more mundane tasks of further improvement that are often more technical rather than popular in nature.** Most of the civic engagement described in this paper seems oriented to the individual or neighborhood level. Yet many of the most central decisions New Orleans must make going forward take place at an institutional, administrative, and technical level. Some observers feel that, even under the best of circumstances, citizens cannot have much impact here because participation at this level requires such a high degree of expertise.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, as Robert Collins notes in a companion essay, “The real power to remake the shape of any city lies with the power of the zoning code;” and only those who master the code’s granular detail have a chance of really influencing it. Similar challenges arise for citizens who want to influence reform in fields like health care, public education, housing, criminal justice, or coastal restoration and flood protection, as described in other essays in this volume.

Thus, there is a danger that if citizens are unable to compete at the expert level, their participation might be ineluctably pushed back to “old” forms like petitioning authorities, rather than “new” forms like partnering. Yet, it is important to remind ourselves that experts do not actually govern. They implement decisions made by leaders, and the form that implementation takes reflects the character of leadership. If a city has a closed elite system, where decisions are made behind closed doors, experts may appear to

govern because elites prefer to obscure their own role. But when leadership is open, and communities hammer out policies in public discourse, experts are required to implement decisions with a degree of transparency and accountability. If they do not, leaders hold them accountable, but more importantly, leaders hold each other accountable with checks and balances.

**The 2010 oil spill presents a different sort of challenge, but one that citizens may be better able to face with capabilities they have developed since Hurricane Katrina.** At present writing (July 2010), the oil flow has not yet been stopped, and as a result, no one knows for sure how great the damage will be in the end – not local citizens, government and the company, nor people who live outside the region. Yet we can make a few educated guesses about citizen and community response, based on previous experience.

Natural disasters tend to draw citizens together in what have been called “therapeutic communities” that provide mutual support to face common problems.<sup>26</sup> Despite anger at the government for not sufficiently maintaining the levees, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina tends to fit this model and produce citizen solidarity in recovery efforts. By contrast, technological disasters, like the oil spill, are regarded as man-made and preventable and result in blame and anger towards the responsible party. This can easily generate conflict among claimants for restitution, not only between claimants and the responsible party, but among competing claimants themselves, thus producing higher levels of stress, and “corrosive communities.”<sup>27</sup> As Duane Gill, expert on the Exxon Valdez disaster, pointed out at the July 2010 Natural Hazards Workshop, the long-term economic disruption of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill may lead to demographic shifts, as younger, better-earning residents move away, and thereby, to erosion of trust and social capital.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the oil spill may produce divisions among various claimants for restitution, as well as demographic shifts, which may undermine community solidarity in the long term. These “corrosive” effects may be heightened by long periods of litigation, driven by interest-group leaders and attorneys representing the various economic sectors that are differentially affected by the spill. Possibly, group solidarity may rise *within* economic sectors (extractive, fisheries) that attempt to defend their interests, and this could produce competing camps in towns and neighborhoods, very different from the overarching community solidarity we have seen in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Yet, there are countervailing tendencies, as well. Louisiana’s coastal communities have lived with the oil industry for generations and have become well aware of the trade-offs involved. The industry has provided employment that has allowed tight-knit communities to survive and persist at levels that would not have otherwise been possible. Coastal community ties developed and grew strong in the face of, not in the absence of, hardship. It would take strong pressures, indeed, to set economic sectors within these communities off against each other. Yet, predictions, are premature. The author’s research team has now completed a first post-spill survey of coastal Louisiana communities (N=933), and it reveals tremendous levels of stress, combined with strong attachment to community.<sup>29</sup>

So far, many citizens seem to be in a wait-and-see mode, monitoring how well the company and government are providing compensation for the economic disruption; and citizens are supporting each other in solidaristic communities. Whether community relations and civic engagement develop along “therapeutic” or “corrosive” lines, or some combination of the two, depends on many things that have yet to happen. Events may push strongly in both directions simultaneously. Yet, recent efforts to recover from Hurricane Katrina probably give coastal communities more strength to support

solidaristic, rather than divisive, relations. Perhaps facing adversity will once again promote community solidarity rather than division, but it is still very early in the process to be sure.

### Conclusion

This account shows how civic engagement and participation have helped drive recovery in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina. Progress has been fastest and most effective among communities that have refused to wait for somebody else to help. The most successful communities have not tried to take the law into their own hands or point fingers of blame at others. They have mobilized their most valuable resource, their community members; they have followed the most effective strategy, working with each other; and they have taken the view that government is not the problem: it belongs to the citizens, and it can and must act as a partner to the citizens. Thus, the best policies going forward should encourage this civic orientation, include previously disadvantaged and excluded communities, but not try to “capture” the process. Citizen and community organizations are asking to retain their autonomy and for government to partner with them. New Orleans now has the opportunity to change its narrative—even in the face of the 2010 oil spill—from pitiable victim to author of its own destiny, and to serve as an advanced model to others of how civic engagement can drive a city’s improvement.

## ENDNOTES

1. Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans after the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997); Ben Toledano, "New Orleans - An Autopsy." *Commentary*, September 2007, pp. 27-32.
2. Richard Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2008).
3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Politics and Culture*. Edited with an Introduction by Gertrude Himmelfarb (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1973); Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
4. Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, *Participation in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Sidney Verba, Norman Nie, and Jae-On Kim, *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven Nation Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); Frederick D. Weil, "Political Culture, Political Structure and Democracy: The Case of Legitimation and Opposition Structure." In Frederick D. Weil, ed., *Research on Democracy and Society, Vol. 2, Political Culture and Political Structure: Theoretical and Empirical Studies*, (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1994) 65-116; Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, eds, *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (Washington, DC, and New York: Brookings Institution Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 1999); Theda Skocpol, Marshall Ganz, and Ziad Munson, "A nation of organizers: the institutional origins of civic voluntarism in the United States," *The American Political Science Review* 94 (2000): 527-46
5. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990); Nan Lin, Karen Cook, and Ronald S. Burt, eds., *Social Capital: Theory and Research* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 2001); Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, eds., *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003); Robert J. Sampson, Heather MacIndoe, Doug McAdam, and Simon Weffer-Elizondo, "Civil Society Reconsidered: The Durable Nature and Community Structure of Collective Civic Action," *American Journal of Sociology* 111(3) (2005): 673-714; Olivia Patterson, Frederick D. Weil, and Kavita Patel, "The Role of Community in Disaster Response: Conceptual Models," *Population Research and Policy Review* 29 (2) (2010):127-141.
6. More details and findings are given at [www.lsu.edu/fweil/KatrinaResearch](http://www.lsu.edu/fweil/KatrinaResearch).
7. Robert D. Putnam, "Saguaro Seminar, Civic Engagement in America: The 2006 Social Capital Community Survey," available at [www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro/measurement/2006sccs.htm](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro/measurement/2006sccs.htm). (September 2009).
8. Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*; Verba, Nie, and Kim, *Participation and Political Equal-*

ity; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*

9. Average of: most people can be trusted, attended a public meeting, member of a neighborhood association, officer of local organization, engage in service activity.
10. Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs are associations of mostly lower-to-middle income African Americans. They trace their heritage to nineteenth century benevolent and burial societies created in response to racial discrimination and segregation. They developed the tradition of “jazz funerals” wherein a brass band would play a dirge on the way to the cemetery followed by jazz leaving the cemetery. The later became known as a “second line” and today most SAPCs hold an annual second line parade in which members and neighbors dance to brass band music on a long, circuitous route through the city. The clubs rightly regard themselves as keepers and innovators of the culture and proudly maintain and develop these living traditions. SAPCs continue to be service and fellowship organizations today.
11. Al Petrie, filmed interview with Wesley Shrum (LSU Sociology), September 19, 2008, New Orleans. This, and several other filmed interviews quoted in this paper, can be viewed at [www.lsu.edu/fweil/KatrinaResearch](http://www.lsu.edu/fweil/KatrinaResearch)
12. Hal Roark, speech at the Broadmoor Improvement Association general meeting, September 18, 2006, New Orleans. Author’s field notes from the meeting.
13. Denise Thornton, filmed interview with the author, March 11, 2010, New Orleans.
14. Gerald Marwell and Pamela Oliver, *The Critical Mass in Collective Action: Studies in Rationality and Social Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
15. The surveys mentioned in this paragraph were conducted by the author: April-December, 2006, N=707; June-September, 2007, N=791; 2010, still in field. See [www.lsu.edu/fweil/KatrinaResearch](http://www.lsu.edu/fweil/KatrinaResearch) and [www.jewishnola.com/page.aspx?id=176820](http://www.jewishnola.com/page.aspx?id=176820)
16. See Robert A. Collins, “Finding Order in Chaos: Land Use Planning in the City of New Orleans,” in the present volume.
17. Katherine Prevost, filmed interview with the author, March 3, 2010, New Orleans.
18. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944).
19. E. Digby Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
20. These reasons have been used since Tocqueville’s and Mill’s day to exclude working-class, female, and minority citizens from full participation and a share of leadership. They have generally proved groundless when the excluded groups gained the chance to participate. Theories of democracy since Tocqueville and Mill stress that democratic values are best acquired in practice by enfranchisement and civic engagement rather than by tutelage.
21. Waldorf J. Gipson III (Vice President of the Young Men’s Olympians SAPC), filmed interview with Wesley Shrum (LSU Sociology), January 17, 2009, New Orleans.
22. Sue Press, filmed interview with the author, April 17, 2010, New Orleans.

23. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975).
24. Audrey Browder, filmed interview with the author, January 13, 2010, New Orleans.
25. Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1970).
26. E. L. Quarantelli and R. R. Dynes, "Community Conflict: Its Absence and Its Presence in Natural Disasters," *Mass Emergencies* 1 (1976):139-152; A. H. Barton, *Communities in Disaster: A Sociological Analysis of Collective Stress Situation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970).
27. J. Steven Picou, Brent K. Marshall, and Duane A. Gill, "Disaster, Litigation and the Corrosive Community," *Social Forces* 82(4) (2004):1493-1522; Duane A. Gill and J. Steven Picou, "Technological Disaster and Chronic Community Stress," *Society and Natural Resources* 11(8) (1998):795-816.
28. Duane A. Gill, "Panelist at Plenary: It's Just Beginning: Social Impacts of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Technological Disasters to Come" (paper presented at the Annual Hazards Research and Applications Workshop, Broomfield, Colorado, July 13, 2010).
29. Matthew R. Lee and Troy C. Blanchard, "Health Impacts of Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster on Coastal Louisiana Residents," July 2010, available at [www.lsu.edu/pa/mediacenter/tip-sheets/spill/publichealthreport\\_2.pdf?id=329](http://www.lsu.edu/pa/mediacenter/tip-sheets/spill/publichealthreport_2.pdf?id=329)

### Acknowledgments from the Author

This research was supported by National Science Foundation Grants SES-0554572 and SES-0753742; by research grants from the Jewish Federations of Greater New Orleans and Greater Baton Rouge; and by an LSU Faculty Research Grant. A number of organizations also collaborated directly in collecting and analyzing data, including: The Neighborhoods Partnership Network (NPN); Sweet Home New Orleans, the Social Aid and Pleasure Club Task Force, the Roots of Music after-school music program; LouisianaRebuilds.info and PolicyLink; NOLA YURP (“Young Urban Rebuilding Professionals”) and 504ward; and the Congregation B’nai Israel Hurricane Relief Committee. Altogether, our research team has worked with over two hundred neighborhood associations, faith-based groups, nonprofit and other community organizations, as well as hundreds of individual citizens. Our combined surveys in Greater New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina have received over 10,000 responses. The author thanks Douglas Ahlers for his incisive comments on an earlier draft of this article.

### Acknowledgments from Brookings and the Data Center

Both the Data Center and Brookings would like to thank the Community Revitalization Fund of the Greater New Orleans Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Foundation to Promote Open Society, and the Surdna Foundation for their support of *The New Orleans Index at Five*. Additional gratitude goes to Baptist Community Ministries, the RosaMary Foundation, and the United Way for the Greater New Orleans Area for their ongoing support.

### For More Information:

#### Frederick Weil

Associate Professor of Sociology  
Department of Sociology,  
Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge  
fweil@lsu.edu

#### Amy Liu

Deputy Director  
Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program  
aliu@brookings.edu

#### Allison Plyer

Deputy Director  
Greater New Orleans Community Data Center  
allisonp@gnocdc.org

## About The New Orleans Index at Five

Over the past five years, the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center and the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program have tracked the recovery of New Orleans and the metro area through the regular publication of *The New Orleans Index*—indicators of the social and economic recovery of the New Orleans metro. The Index’s value as a regularly updated, one-stop shop of Katrina recovery indicators has made it the go-to resource for national and local media, decision-makers across all levels of government, researchers, and leaders in the private sector and nonprofit community.

This year, *The New Orleans Index at Five* aims to move past disaster recovery to assess the remaking of a great American city and examine the extent to which New Orleans is poised to bounce back from any shock better than before. This *Index* is intended to be the first of a series of reports that measure progress and prosperity in the greater New Orleans area with indicators and essays that change over time depending on new data availability, relevance, and the needs of the community.

### **The New Orleans Index at Five collection:**

#### **An Overview of New Orleans Index at Five: From Recovery to Transformation**

Amy Liu (Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program)

Allison Plyer (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center)

#### **Twenty Indicators Measuring Greater New Orleans’ Progress Toward Prosperity**

Amy Liu (Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program)

Allison Plyer (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center)

#### **Essay Series Reviewing Key Reforms After Hurricane Katrina**

##### *School by School: The Transformation of New Orleans Public Education*

Andre Perry (College of Education and Human Development, University of New Orleans)

Michael Schwam-Baird (Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University)

##### *An Opportunity to Reinvent New Orleans’ Criminal Justice System*

Nadiene Van Dyke (New Orleans Police and Justice Foundation)

Jon Wool (Vera Institute of Justice)

Luceia LeDoux (Baptist Community Ministries)

##### *Community Health Clinics: Bringing Quality Care Closer to New Orleanians*

Karen DeSalvo (Tulane University School of Medicine)

##### *To the Heart of the Matter: Coastal Restoration and the Future of New Orleans*

Mark Davis (Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy)

##### *No More Surprises: Land Use Planning in the City of New Orleans*

Robert Collins (Urban Studies and Public Policy, Dillard University)

##### *Community Action: Bringing People Home to Stronger Neighborhoods*

Kalima Rose (PolicyLink)

Laura Tuggle (Southeast Louisiana Legal Services)

##### *The Rise of Community Engagement after Katrina*

Rick Weil (Department of Sociology, Louisiana State University)

#### **Background Resources:**

##### *Economic Timeline:*

##### *Selected Historical Events that Shaped the New Orleans Economy, 1700-2010*

Richard Campanella (Tulane Center for Bioenvironmental Research)

##### *Jobs that Matter Most:*

##### *Regional Export Industries in the New Orleans Area*

Allison Plyer and Elaine Ortiz (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center)