Does the standard voluntary association question capture informal associations?☆

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A B S T R A C T

Sociologists have long been attentive to participation in associational life. Yet, despite being repeatedly cautioned to consider more informal groups, most researchers focus on participation in formal voluntary associations using national surveys with fixed group categories, such as the General Social Survey (GSS). In this paper, we use new GSS data on the names of the voluntary associations listed by respondents to evaluate whether voluntary association prompts capture or miss various types of informal associations. We code the formality of the associations listed by respondents and also compare to a new sample of bottom-up, informal voluntary associations. We demonstrate that some response categories adequately capture both formal and informal associations, e.g., sports groups. However, our results also suggest that the standard voluntary association question both omits entire categories of informal associations and omits some informal variants of associations within categories. In the tradition of Baumgartner and Walker (1988), Wuthnow (1994), and Wellman et al. (2001), we suggest that we may misunderstand citizen associations if we ignore informal associating.

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Attention to the associational life of communities is a common theme in both classical (Tocqueville [1835, 1840] 1990; Simmel [1903] 1950) and contemporary sociology (Habermas, 1989; Putnam, 2000; Maloney and Roβteutscher, 2007a). A vigorous associational life is linked to post-disaster recovery (Aldrich, 2012), equalization of social differences (Skocpol, 2003), and more effective governance (Putnam, 1993; Paxton, 2002; Lee, 2007; Baggetta, 2009). In particular, scholars have discussed America's long history of participation in voluntary associations since Tocqueville (1835, 1840) and have tracked membership rates since the advent of modern large-scale surveys (Verba and Nie, 1972).

Almost universally, the focus of this attention is on formal voluntary associations. Historically, many voluntary associations in the United States had a "top down" federated structure (Skocpol, 2003). Such formal associations (e.g., the Lions Club, the Sierra Club, and the NAACP) maintain national level infrastructures that set standards for regional and local membership

practices. Traditionally, individuals joined pre-existing formal voluntary associations that provide material and/or psychological benefits (Olson, 1965) and that fit their demographic profiles (Kaufman, 2002; McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1986). Large-scale data collection efforts are implicitly designed to capture these formal voluntary association memberships (e.g., Verba and Nie, 1972:42; Smith, 1997) and our knowledge about the extent of and trends in these memberships from surveys such as the *General Social Survey*, the *World Values Survey*, and the *Social Capital and Community Benchmark Survey* is well-established.

Yet scholars have noted the importance of other types of associations for some time. In place of traditional, federated voluntary associations, researchers have documented the rise of professional advocacy organizations (McCarthy and Zald, 1973; J. Walker, 1991; E. Walker, 2014) and a corresponding increase in "checkbook participation," in which members participate only passively through donations rather than engaging in face-to-face participation (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2003; Painter and Paxton, 2014).

And, other, more informal, forms of associating exist (Wuthnow, 1994; van Ingen and Dekker, 2011; Fine, 2012; Maloney and Roßteutscher, 2007a). An overlooked area of associating, and one that may have become more prevalent over the last few decades is the small informal group (Smith, 1997; Fine and Harrington, 2004).[1] Such groups are formed in a more "bottom up" fashion, and are less likely to have a federated structure or other formal features such as paid employees or bylaws. Importantly, some scholars argue that small groups may help fill the purported gap in civic participation over the last few decades. As explained by Fine and Harrington (2004: 343):

> Focusing on small groups permits an understanding of how civil society can thrive even if we assume the decline of formal and institutional associations. A proliferation of small groups without formal affiliations represents a healthy development in democratic societies by establishing intersecting webs of allegiance.

To date, scholars have had little way to assess whether they are "only measuring old forms of community and participation while new forms of communication and organization underneath the radar are connecting people" (Wellman et al., 2001: 437; but see Maloney and Roßteutscher, 2007a).

Luckily, a new source of data on voluntary associations is available — recently released GSS data on the actual organization names listed by respondents. This allows us to code reported organization names for formality, asking whether the standard voluntary association questions yield predominantly formal associations. Further, we compare the organizations named by respondents in the GSS to a new source of data on more informal voluntary associations — Meetup.com (Meetup). In brief, Meetup is a website designed to facilitate in-person associating by providing a platform for individuals to form and join voluntary associations. Data downloaded from Meetup.com provides an assessment of one form of informal voluntary associating in the United States. Taken together, the new GSS association name data combined with Meetup data allows us to evaluate the extent to which voluntary association prompts capture or miss various kinds of informal associations.

We find that some response categories in the standard voluntary association question appear to adequately capture both formal and informal voluntary associations. However, we also discover two types of omissions. First, the standard question omits entire categories of voluntary associations, as previously noted by Baumgartner and Walker (1988). We label this an "entire category" omission. Second, the standard question omits informal variants within categories. We label this a "within category" omission. If the GSS and other national level surveys are missing significant portions of informal associations, then we may misestimate the extent of voluntary associating in democracies today.

1. Formal and informal associating

Voluntary associations entail social interaction that persists over time between individuals who share a collective sense of unity about their group membership. Associations can range from the extremely formal, e.g. the Masons, to the extremely informal, e.g. a board game group. Surprisingly, we have not found a definition that distinguishes formal associations from informal associations, even though such a distinction has been employed in passing (e.g., Cerulo and Ruane, 1998; Putnam, 2000; McFarland and Thomas, 2006).[2] Here we introduce a continuum of formality. At one end would be the most formal associations exhibiting features such as bylaws or a federated structure. At the other end would be the most informal associations, exhibiting no formal features whatsoever.

The most formal associations are likely to have bylaws or codified rules and regulations that provide formalized procedures for leadership transition, membership, voting, and other aspects of organizational life. Such written policies maximize an association's legitimacy and increase its longevity (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Second, brick and mortar locations

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[1] To be clear, small informal groups are not a new social phenomenon. The historical record of salons, coffeehouse meetings, and clubs play an important role in theories of civil society (Habermas, 1989 [1962]; Giesen, 2001; Amann, 1975:33—77). In their classic study of Middletown, Lynd and Lynd (1929) found that activities such as card playing, dancing, and attending parties were popular among citizens. They document the pendulum swing away from such informal, unorganized leisure in the 1890s toward the more organized associational life of the 1920s. Thus, it is important to note that "the halcyon days of the Elks deliver only a snapshot of citizen interactions" when viewed in this larger historical context (Kittilson and Dalton, 2011: 626).

[2] Pichler and Wallace (2007:424) make a distinction between formal and informal social capital, where formal social capital is "participation in formally constituted organizations and activities" and informal social capital is "the informal bonds between people." Similarly, Taniguchi (2012) distinguishes between formal volunteering, unpaid labor in a "formal organizational setting," and more informal volunteering (see also Helms and McKenzie, 2014; Lee and Brudney, 2012). These definitions all suggest that certain organizations can be formal or formally-constituted but do not specify criteria for formality.

provide dedicated physical places for formal associations to conduct their activities. A formal organization may own its physical space (e.g., a Shriner's lodge) or may be consistently associated with one (e.g., an elementary school's PTA). Third, highly formal voluntary associations are likely to have a federated structure, with a central entity at least partially organizing the activities of peripheral entities (Skocpol, 2003). Finally, voluntary associations are more formal when they incorporate bookkeeping, or the collection, storage, and distribution of finances. Keeping a formal ledger of accounts allows donations to be accepted, dues to be required, and/or tax benefits to be conferred.

Voluntary associations that are more formal in nature should exhibit at least one of these qualities.[3] The most formal associations should display all four features, for example the Sierra Club or the Elks. Voluntary associations can fall along the continuum, employing some but not all of the features. A small storefront mission, for instance, may not employ a federated structure or bylaws, but still feature a physical location and tax benefits. An undergraduate club may regularly keep a ledger and employ bylaws, but may not have a federated structure or a long-term designated meeting place. The most informal associations (e.g., a neighborhood garden club) would not feature any of these elements. van Ingen and Dekker (2011) argue that informal groups are characterized by minimal (if any) rules of membership or governance, weak obligations, and strong attachments between individuals.

When discussing voluntary associations, most research has implicitly focused on formal voluntary associations. Introduced in a 1967 survey by Sidney Verba and Norman Nie (1972), and subsequently included in the *General Social Survey,* a set of questions has traditionally established the associational landscape of the United States and other democracies. Respondents are asked whether they belong to sixteen categories of organizations, including fraternal groups, labor unions, sports groups, and professional associations. To maintain longitudinal comparability, the categories have rarely changed since 1972. The Verba and Nie (1972: 41) questionnaire assumed that participation in voluntary organizations "[took] place within the context of *formally* organized social collectivities" [our italics]. Furthermore, the original set of questions included examples of organizations for some categories, and these oriented respondents toward quite formal associations. For example, the questionnaire asked about "Service clubs, such as Lions, Rotary, Zenta, Junior Chamber of Commerce," "Nationality groups, such as Sons of Norway, Hibernian Society", and "Farm organizations, such as Farmer's Union, Farm Bureau, Grange."

Social scientists have long debated the merits of these large-scale national survey prompts for capturing the extent of and trends in voluntary association memberships (e.g., Baumgartner and Walker, 1988; Adam, 2008; Maloney and van Deth, 2010). Baumgartner and Walker (1988), for instance, argued that the framing of the Verba and Nie (1972) inspired survey questions fails to take into account new forms of voluntary associations, such as environmental groups, elderly interest groups like the AARP, and charities like the Red Cross. More recently, debates on trends in association memberships have found differences when large scale surveys on formal associations are compared to more fine-grained questions as in the *Social Capital and Community Benchmark Survey* or surveys of lobbying firms (Walker et al., 2011).

Some scholars have pushed for an expanded understanding of associating. Robert Wuthnow (1994) notes that small groups (especially support groups) have risen in prominence over the years in numbers that amount to a "quiet revolution" in civil society. Putnam himself discusses the possibility that small informal associations are attracting more members, drawing on the GSS question on "Literary, arts, discussion, and study groups," as an example (2000: 469, footnote 6). The *Citizenship, Involvement, and Democracy* project (CID) completely mapped the associational landscape in six European communities and identified associations of varying size, resources, institutionalization, etc. (see van Deth et al., 2007; Maloney and Roβteutscher, 2007b). Generally there is the sense among some scholars that our social lives have become more personalized and informal in a way that sidesteps formal associational life and that may counteract observed declines in formal associating (Wellman, 2001; van Ingen and Dekker, 2011).

2. Data

2.1. The standard question

The General Social Survey prompt on voluntary associations is a good example of the standard voluntary association question. It reads, "We would like to know something about the groups and organizations to which individuals belong. Here is a list of various kinds of organizations. Could you tell me whether or not you are a member of each type?" Respondents are then asked if they belong to each of the following: fraternal groups; veterans' groups; labor unions; school fraternities or sororities; farm organizations; youth groups; school service groups; service clubs; professional or academic societies; church-affiliated groups; political clubs; nationality groups; sports groups; literary, art, discussion, or study groups; hobby or garden clubs; or any other groups.

Respondents in the 2004 GSS were also asked, for the first time, to report the actual *names* of their voluntary associations through an open-ended question. This new prompt allows researchers to investigate what kinds of organizations respondents associate with each category and whether, as originally conceived, the standard voluntary association question tends to prompt recollection of more formal association memberships. Across 1467 respondents, 2874 voluntary association names were generated. Associations exhibiting at least one of the four criteria defined above were coded as formal: (1) use of bylaws

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[3] Alternative criteria to identify a formal association are possible, for example the organization having a dedicated mailing address or a dedicated web domain. Such metrics would either be subsumed under the criteria we propose or otherwise highly correlated with them.

or codified rules, (2) connection to a geographic location, (3) a federated structure, and (4) bookkeeping, accounting, or the collection of finances.[4]

2.2. Meetup.com

We use Meetup.com as a source of information on informal voluntary association memberships. Meetup allows users to create and search for informal groups around interests and identities. Users can search for groups near their zip code by topic or interest and select groups to join. Members of each group then attend events at local venues such as restaurants, bars, coffee shops, parks, or members' homes. Since its origins in 2002, Meetup has grown to encompass millions of people in hundreds of cities, suburbs, and small towns across the U.S.[5]

Of course, most informal groups and associations take place without using Meetup as a platform. While certainly not the population or a random sample of all informal voluntary associations in the U.S., Meetup provides a useful first look at the foci of informal associations to compare to the association memberships prompted by the standard survey question. Scholars have to date not had a way to assess informal groups on any large scale. In Bowling Alone, Putnam (2000: 150) acknowledges that small, informal groups may counteract decreases in formal participation, but admits that "evidence to support this hopeful view turns out to be hard to find." Our use of Meetup allows a broader assessment than the focused community studies (Lynd and Lynd, 1929; Warner and Lunt, 1941; van Deth et al., 2007; Maloney and Roßteutscher, 2007a), assessments of specific group types like self-help groups (Wuthnow, 1994), or ethnographic accounts (Fine, 2012) that have been the only source of information about informal groups until now.[6]

Using Meetup's website, we scraped all current Meetup memberships and associated topics on July 15, 2013. Webscraping entails using a computer program to repeatedly extract and catalog data from websites. Memberships record an individual's connection to a particular group. As in traditional surveys of associations, a single individual can have multiple memberships. Thus, there are more memberships recorded in Meetup's database than members who use the site.[7]

Topics are tags that Meetup organizers apply to their groups. A head organizer manages each group's webpage, including the group's searchable topics. For instance, a group on kayaking might list topics such as "kayaking," "outdoors," or "sports and recreation." An individual looking to join this group could find it by searching these or related keywords. As of July 2013, there were 33,062 topics in use by at least 100 people on Meetup, which speaks to the level of user-created content on the website. For classification, we focus on the 632 topics with more than 50,000 memberships. Topics with this number of memberships are salient across a high number of groups, suggesting that these topics have become a significant motivation for people creating informal associations.

2.3. Classifying Meetup memberships

There is no pre-set categorization of Meetup group topics into categories as we see in the standard survey question (e.g. veterans, professional). Instead, Meetup's user-created groups and topics must be categorized by researchers. In an initial round of coding, we generated categories for the 321 topics that had more than 100,000 members. Two researchers' independent coding processes yielded a highly similar categorization—intercoder reliability 81.31%. In fact, many of the independently-derived categories matched exactly, such as "Outdoors," "Dancing," and "Volunteering." In a few instances, a major category derived by one researcher (e.g. "Book Clubs") served as a subcategory for the other researcher (e.g. "Arts and Culture: Book Clubs"). Following the first round of coding, we integrated the two sets of categories and added subcategories. For example, while book clubs and photography groups are distinct interests, they are both classified under the larger interest "Arts and Culture," as the subcategories "Arts and Culture: Book Clubs," and "Arts and Culture: Photography." A second round of coding then reclassified the initial 321 topics, and expanded to an additional 311 topics with more than 50,000 memberships, for a total of 632 topics. High intercoder reliability was achieved — calculated as 96.2% or 90.5% depending on the measure. A full intercoder reliability analysis is available from the authors.

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[4] Most associations were easily coded for formality through basic knowledge augmented with web searches; initial intercoder reliability was 94%. The largest area of dispute was whether bible study groups should be coded as formal or informal. Here bible studies are coded as formal, like other church-affiliated groups such as a choir, which are nested within the formal structure of a church. However, because bible studies can be started by individual members and often meet in members' homes, they could alternatively be coded as informal. The percentage of formal organizations in the church category in Table 1 dips to 84% (from 95%) when bible studies are not counted as formal.

[5] Some websites (e.g. Big Tent, Group Spaces) provide spaces for pre-existing groups to organize their activities online. Other websites (Yahoo Groups, Ning, Reddit) provide only online socializing. To our knowledge, Meetup is currently the only website that enables in-person groups to form online.

[6] Meetup groups are internet-mediated informal associations; selection is therefore likely due to the digital divide. Roughly 70% of Americans currently have some form of Internet access via a desktop, laptop, or mobile device (File, 2013) and about half use social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. A recent study from Pew (Zickuhr and Smith, 2012) finds that age, education, and language ability currently have the strongest influences on Internet access, suggesting that on Meetup older, less-educated, and non-English members are underrepresented.

[7] Although Meetup currently boasts over 19 million members, some members participate more than others. Some users may join a group to receive updates but never actually participate in any events. Such inactive users are frequently called "ghosts," "lurkers" or "zombies" by Meetup organizers. Inactive members and free riding are also a characteristic of more formal voluntary associations, as discussed by Olson (1965) and Verba et al. (1995).

Table 1
GSS membership landscape.

	GSS voluntary association category	Percentage of Total GSS Memberships	Percentage of formal organizations in category	Organization name examples
more formal ↑	Labor Union	5.41%	98.36%	American Federation of Teachers; Steelworkers of America; Teamsters; Screen Actors Guild; AFL-CIO
	Professional or academic societies	11.45%	97.33%	American Bar Association; American Medical Association; National Notary Association; Phi Theta Kappa; National Society of Realtors
	Fraternal groups	4.35%	96.23%	The Knights of Columbus; The Elks; The Fraternal Order of Eagles; The Masons; United Daughters of the Confederacy; Daughters of the Nile
	Service clubs	6.86%	94.81%	Habitat for Humanity; Kiwanis; Rotary; **** Civic Club; Amnesty International; **** Optimist Club; Junior League; Jaycees
	Church-affiliated groups	18.59%	94.79%	Baptist Church; church choirs; bible study groups; social ministry; National Council of Jewish Women; church bowling league
	Veterans' groups	3.22%	94.59%	American Legion; The Veteran's of Foreign Wars; Disabled American Veterans; American Legion Women's Auxiliary
	Farm organizations	1.70%	93.02%	The Farm Bureau; 4-H; **** County co op; **** Soybean association
	School fraternities or sororities	2.16%	90.48%	Alpha Kappa Alpha; Chi Omega; Phi Theta Kappa; Kappa Alpha Psi; Alpha Delta Pi
	School service groups	7.99%	89.02%	Parent Teacher Association (PTA); school volunteer; **** Booster club; **** State Alumni
	Political clubs	2.62%	88.89%	Democratic Party; Republican Party; Moveon.org; Oregon Right to Life; Citizens of ****
	Youth groups	5.80%	88.46%	Boy Scouts; Girl Scouts; Big Brothers, Big Sisters; YMCA; Youth group; Soccer youth org
less formal ↓	Any other groups	3.99%	70.27%	"no name"; AA; AARP; Ecos Environmental Council of ****; Tri-States Transgender Group; NRA
	Sports groups	11.88%	68.42%	The Softball **** League; "golfing group"; **** Table Tennis Club; "no formal group just friends watching Monday night football"
	Nationality groups	1.41%	57.58%	NAACP; Sons of Italy; "no name"; Japanese Club; Romanian Group
	Literary, art, discussion, study groups	6.15%	37.69%	Fiction Writer's group; "we don't have a name"; "no name"; Civic Art League of ****; book club
	Hobby or garden clubs	6.43%	37.14%	**** Gardening Club; Quilt Group; scrapbooking club; **** jazz Society; Hula dance club; Bridge group; "no name"
	Total	100.00%		

Notes: The GSS provides organization names with city-identifying information converted to **** to ensure respondents' confidentiality.

3. Results

Table 1 provides the 2004 GSS categories and example association names from the open-ended prompt, in order from the category with the most formal to the least formal associations. Table 1 displays the percentage of total memberships for each association type in the GSS, and the percentage of each category coded as formal. Table 1 illustrates that most response categories overwhelmingly prompt recollection of formal associations. Respondents listed formal organizations over 80% of the time for the following categories: Labor unions, professional or academic societies, fraternal groups, service clubs, church-affiliated groups, veterans' groups, farm organizations, Greek organizations, school service groups, political clubs, and youth groups. For example, respondents listed the Knights of Columbus, Alpha Chi Omega, American Legion, and Parent Teacher Associations.

The only categories to prompt recollection of predominantly informal associations are "Hobby or garden clubs," and "Literary, art, discussion, or study groups." Although a handful of organizations were more formal within these categories (e.g. museum or botanical garden memberships), most of the listed association names suggest informality, such as "quilting club," "girls get together," "neighborhood book club," and "my bridge group." Indeed, many of those associations were so informal that respondents stated that their group had no name (e.g., 11% of literary, art, discussion, and study groups). By comparison very few of the respondents in the more formal categories stated that their association had no name.[8]

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[8] Informal associations are reported by respondents in the "Other" category, but they by no means dominate the category. Of the organizations listed under "Other," only 5% are listed as no name. In contrast, respondents often listed formal associations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, the AARP, the NRA, and environmental groups in the "Other" category.

Given a focus on formal organizations, do we have evidence from the GSS that the standard voluntary association question misses informal associations? To answer this question, we compare the association names listed by GSS respondents to the topics employed by Meetup groups. Table 2 showcases Meetup categories and their sub-categories along with examples of specific groups using the topic. We also include the number of memberships across the topics in each category. For example, the category "Dancing," contains 9 topics: dancing, salsa, ballroom dancing, salsa dancing, dance lessons, Latin dance, swing dance, social dancing, and salsa dance lessons, which on average have 249,354 memberships.[9] These categories suggest high diversity in informal associations being established and maintained in the United States today.

Comparing Tables 1 and 2, and a detailed examination of the association names listed in the GSS and through Meetup, we find that certain response categories in the standard voluntary association question appear capable of adequately capturing both formal and informal associations. But we also find two types of omissions in response categories. First, as noted by Baumgartner and Walker (1988), the standard question misses certain group categories altogether. We label this an "entire category omission." We estimate that the GSS may be missing about half of the types of groups that appear on Meetup. Second, we identify a new type of omission in the standard voluntary association question: the tendency for the question, within a given category of association, to only collect formal associations and miss more informal forms. We call the second type of omission a "within category omission." In what follows we describe two situations where the GSS appears to be accurate – when it captures formal association and informal association categories without error – and two situations where the GSS appears to miss some informal associations – both between (entire category) and within (within category) its predetermined categories.

3.1. The standard question captures formal categories without error

Reviewing the association names listed by GSS respondents reveals that some categories are comprised of only formal associations (see Table 1). The associations listed by respondents for fraternal, labor unions, Greek organizations, veterans, traditional youth groups, school service, or farm groups are overwhelmingly formal. For example, the American Legion represents 38% of the veterans associations listed, while the VFW captures another 28%. The other veterans associations listed by GSS respondents are also formal — e.g., Veterans against Foreign Wars, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Marine Corps League. Thirty-eight percent of listed farm associations are the Farm Bureau, 43% of school service associations are the PTA/PTO, and 20% of fraternal groups are the Eagles.

Further evidence for the formality of the associations in these categories is that no informal versions of these group types appear in Meetup. No topics in Meetup can be classified as fraternal, labor, Greek, veterans, traditional youth, school service, or farm. As would be expected, if an individual wants to join the Lions, the PTA, or 4-H there are pre-existing, traditional avenues for joining. Meetup is not a necessary bottom-up facilitator in these cases. Based on a comparison to the informal associations created by Meetup users at least, the standard question appears to therefore capture the population of these categories of associations.

3.2. The standard question captures some informal categories without error

The comparison also demonstrates that the standard question can accurately capture memberships in its most informal categories. Reviewing the association names listed by GSS respondents reveals that "Literary, Art, Discussion, or Study Groups," "Hobby or garden clubs," and "Sports," categories each featured informal groups, as well as some formal groups. In the GSS organization name data, respondents recall hyperlocal book clubs, quilting circles, golfing groups, and many groups that are so informal that they do not have names. They also list formal groups like the American Numismatic Association. The GSS sports category, for example, includes more formally-organized popular Americans sports played in leagues (e.g. "The **** Softball League," and "**** Parks and Recreation Baseball"). It also features more informal groups such as "small fishing group" and "bowling team."

Further, for these three categories, the groups named in the GSS correspond to the topics used on Meetup, suggesting that the GSS is doing an adequate job of capturing informal variants. For example, Meetup topics in the "Arts and Culture" categories include book clubs, knitting groups, and photography groups— groups mentioned by GSS respondents. Meetup hobby groups include board games and dancing, as in the GSS. Indeed, the GSS open ended responses for sports include the "**** Hiking Club," "Natural Mamas," and "The Geezers and the Wheezers," which could all be Meetup groups! Thus, we have evidence that the GSS is prompting recollection of both formal and informal associations in these categories.

3.3. Entire category omissions: association categories missed by the standard question

Thus far, we have examined response categories that appear to capture the population of relevant associations, both formal and informal. However, as showcased by Table 3, about half of the 42 Meetup categories do not have corresponding

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[9] More topics does not necessarily imply more memberships for a given category. The "Technology" category with 50 categories has similar membership numbers as the "Outdoors" category with only 19 categories. This is due to the fact that many "Technology" topics are for highly specialized skill sets for software developers, including a variety of programming languages and data management systems.

Table 2
The Meetup landscape.

Category	Number of topics	Average number of memberships for category	Topic examples	Group name examples
Animals and pets	16	87,741	Socializing Dogs; Doggie Playgroups	Chicago Party Animals Offleash Canine Club
Arts and culture	27	137,044	Art; Museum; Culture; Comedy	The New York Museum Club
Arts and culture: book clubs	7	149,651	Book Club; Reading; Fiction	Books and Brews
Arts and culture: crafts	5	66,628	Crafts; Knitting; Handmade Crafts	Nerdy Knitting and Fiber Arts
Arts and culture: film	15	161,121	Movie Fans; Bollywood	The Raleigh Movie Fans Meetup Group
Arts and culture: music	10	194,145	Live Music; Karaoke; Drum Circle	The Washington Jazz and Blues Meetup
Arts and culture: photography	18	226,543	Digital Photography; Photojournalism	Ohio Valley Camera Club
Arts and culture: writing	8	93,203	Creative Writing; Authors; Blog	Creative Writing: Seeking the Muse in NJ
Business	18	389,396	Business Networking; Professional Development	Peninsula Business Forum
Business: entrepreneurs & startups	11	436,599	Entrepreneur; Startups	Austin Struggling Entrepreneurs Meetup
Business: investing	18	111,330	Venture Capital; Real Estate Investors; Stock Trading	Inventors Network of the Capital Area
Business: marketing	9	270,355	Marketing; Social Media Marketing	The Seattle Marketing Meetup Group
Business: women's	4	334,496	Women Entrepreneurs; Women's Business Networking	Network of Entrepreneur Women
Dancing	9	249,354	Dancing; Salsa; Swing Dancing	The North Houston Country Western Dance Meetup
EcoFriendly and environment	10	99,986	Sustainability; Green Living; Environmental Awareness	Tucson Permaculture
Food and drink	34	253,919	Dining Out; Wine; Cooking; Foodie	L.A. Foodies
Games	15	120,331	Boardgames; Video Games; Poker	The Atlanta Boardgames Meetup Group
Health and wellness	12	282,842	Health and Wellness; Nutrition	Tai Chi in the Park (Denver)
Health and wellness: alternative health	7	241,776	Alternative Health; Energy Healers; Reiki	The Sacramento Reiki Meetup Group
Health and wellness: fitness	7	509,598	Exercise and Fun; Fitness BootCamp	San Jose Capoeira
Identity	9	123,975	Expat; Baby Boomers	It's Boomertime!
Identity: LGBTQ	13	107,783	LGBT; Gay and Lesbian Friends	Portland Lesbian Coffeehouse
Identity: race/ethnicity	8	98,094	Black Women; Latino/a Community; Desis	Bay Area Asian Professionals
Intellectual development	10	98,428	Philosophy; Intellectual Discussion; History	Socrates Cafe
Language	19	139,214	Spanish Language; English as a Second Language	Des Moines Spanish Conversation Group
Language: foreign culture	6	86,210	French Culture; International Friends	Africa and Friends of Africa in Los Angeles
Outdoors	19	594,589	Hiking; Outdoor Recreation; Nature Walks	Nashville Hiking Meetup
Parents	7	164,497	Single Parents; Stay at Home Parents; Family Events	Totally Tots
Parents: moms	15	161,214	Moms of Toddlers & Infants; Hip Mamas	Minneapolis Area Moms
Personal growth	15	313,708	Self-Improvement; Life Transformation	Shyness and Social Anxiety Group
Politics	16	87,067	Local Politics; Conservatives; Tea Party; Freedom	Idahoans for Liberty
Singles and dating	17	538,750	Singles; Speed Dating; Singles Over 40	The Indianapolis Singles Meetup Group
Social	24	1,246,123	Friends; Meeting New People	Atlanta New In Town Meetup Group
Social: women's	7	346,418	Ladies Night Out; Women's Social; Girls Having Fun	Girls Just Wanna Have Fun
Spirituality and religion	32	187,278	Atheists; Buddhism; Pagan	The Birmingham Atheists Meetup Group
Sports	48	139,770	Bicycling; Running; Skiing; Pick-up Soccer; Kickball	Capitol Hill Sports: "We're Bringing Recess Back!"
Technology	50	213,978	Software Developers; New Technology; Web Design	Boston Software Engineers
Technology: data analysis	6	117,959	Big Data; Data Management	SF Data Mining
Technology: programming languages	21	137,520	JavaScript; MySQL	The Baltimore JavaScript Users Group
Travel	6	303,386	Travel; Day Trips; Weekend Adventure & Travel	Adventure Travel Club
Volunteering	9	137,744	Community service; Nonprofit; Community Builders	Little Rock Volunteers
Other	15	82,559	Motorcycle Riders; Festivals & Events; Activities; Gardening	SoCal Sports Bikers
N	632	234,341		

Source: Meetup.com.

Table 3
Meetup topics overlooked by the GSS.

Meetup topics not found in GSS	Meetup topics with content differing from GSS
Animals and Pets, EcoFriendly and Environment, Food and Drink, Health and Wellness, Health and Wellness: Alternative Health, Identity, Identity: LGBTQ, Language, Parents, Parents: Moms, Personal Growth, Singles and Dating, Technology, Travel, and Other (except for 2 topics on gardening, which the GSS does capture)	Business (all), Identity: Race/Ethnicity, Politics, Spirituality and Religion, Volunteering

Source: Meetup.com.

GSS categories. Like Baumgartner and Walker suggested about environmental, consumer, and elderly interest groups back in 1988, we find a subset of voluntary associations in play in American society that are not measured by the GSS or other national-level surveys. Overlooked categories include "Animals and Pets", "EcoFriendly and Environment", "Food and Drink", "Health and Wellness", "Identity", "Parents", "Personal Growth", and "Travel."

Some of the associations that appear in Meetup but not in the GSS have been previously noted by scholars. Baumgartner and Walker (1988), for instance, documented the rise of environmental groups and argued that such groups were not being adequately measured by the GSS. Meetup suggests environmental activism is indeed taking place. "EcoFriendly and Environment" Meetup topics included "Sustainability," "Permaculture," and "Environmental Awareness." Environmental Meetup groups generally promote small-scale, local sustainable living, gardening, and volunteering.

Previous case studies have also identified the rise of support groups in American life as an important aspect of informal associating not captured by national-level surveys (Wuthnow, 1994). Groups dedicated to "Personal Growth" have a respectable presence on Meetup. Some of these topics indicate groups offering support on a wide range of interests, such as "Overcoming Stress," "Divorce Support," and "Shyness and Social Anxiety." Some topics connect individuals for the purposes of personal development, such as "Life Transformation," "Communication Skills," and "Personal Development." Other topics connect individuals in identity groups such as "Expats," "Baby Boomers," "LGBT," and "Black Professionals." Notably, topics having to do with more formal associations such as Alcoholics Anonymous are not in our sample of Meetup groups, but a handful of them do appear in the residual "Other" category of the GSS.

In sum, like Baumgartner and Walker (1988), we find that the standard voluntary association question fails to capture new forms of associations that have arisen since the 1960s. Investigating the GSS, they note that "probes were not changed in response to changes in the nature of American voluntary associations, so they failed to record the growing number of affiliations with new types of groups" (1988: 914). And much has changed even in the 25 years since Baumgartner and Walker first documented the GSS's omissions. Entire-category omissions acknowledge that we cannot expect that Americans are associating today in the ways they did in the 1960s.[10]

3.4. Within-category omissions: informal associations missed within the standard categories

Comparing the GSS and Meetup reveals a heretofore unnoticed omission— for some categories, our standard survey prompts yield only formal versions of associations when informal versions exist. For example, in the GSS professional category, respondents listed formal professional association memberships 97% of the time (e.g., American Chemical Society, National Notary Association, see Table 1). In contrast, the groups Meetup users create focus on informal local networking and information sharing (e.g., Peninsula Business Forum, Saint Louis Small Business Networking Club, and La Jolla Business Networking, see Table 2). Unlike traditional professional memberships, such as the American Medical Association (AMA) or the American Sociological Association (ASA), that cover a single profession across different geographic areas, Meetup's "Business" groups feature different professions within a single geographic area. For example, the popular Network after Work group in Houston, TX works to attract "professionals from all industries and career levels."

Similarly, groups in the Meetup "Technology" category share information across particular programming languages or tasks. At "Technology" Meetups, computer programmers get together, network, and learn about different programming languages and data management programs across a variety of skill levels. Sometimes "Business" and "Technology" Meetup groups will feature lectures and social hours, benefiting members' human and social capital. Generally the prevalence of informal networking and sharing groups on Meetup suggests a strong need, possibly due to new economic realities, for local networking for professionals, beyond that provided by, say, a chamber of commerce. But this type of local and more informal associating does not appear in the GSS associations listed by respondents.

Another category where the associations listed by respondents in the GSS are formal, and informal counterparts exist in Meetup, is "Politics." In the GSS, 89% of associations named by respondents are formal, with 58% of these either the Republican or Democrat parties or associations affiliated with the two major parties. The remainders are formal special

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[10] In addition to the GSS, we also compared Meetup categories to the top-down categories used by the *Social Capital and Community Benchmark Survey* (SCCBS) and the *World Values Survey* (WVS). On the surface, the category prompts used by these two surveys appear to capture more of the Meetup categories. If we view the GSS as missing about half of the Meetup categories, the SCCBS and WVS seem to miss only about a third. However, we do not have the actual association names listed by the respondents in these two additional surveys, so the comparison is more speculative (details of the comparison available by request from the authors.).

interest groups such as the NRA or Oregon Right to Life. The most popular political groups on Meetup, in contrast, tend to be grassroots and conservative, with topics such as "Libertarian," "Ron Paul Campaigns," "Glenn Beck," "Tea Party," "Freedom," and "Liberty." In a political system dominated by two formal parties, individuals disenchanted with this system appear to use Meetup to find other like-minded individuals in more informal associations. The standard question "Political clubs" category does not capture this informal associating.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Investigation of newly available GSS organization name data shows that the standard voluntary association question tends to prompt respondents to list more formal association types. Respondents listed formal organizations over 80% of the time for eleven of sixteen GSS categories. Only two categories prompt recollection of predominantly informal associations: "Hobby or garden clubs," and "Literary, art, discussion, or study groups." Can traditional voluntary association survey questions therefore capture the full range of associating in the United States, both formal and informal? A comparison of GSS categories to Meetup categories suggests that some categories of association are adequately measured by the GSS while others reveal error.

We find that there are categories comprised of entirely formal voluntary associations, including fraternal orders, PTA, and veterans' groups, that are captured by the GSS questions without a corresponding informal presence on Meetup. These are therefore adequately measured by the standard question. There are also those GSS categories that feature informal groups alongside formal groups and that overlap with Meetup categories accordingly. Again, these categories are adequately measured by the standard question. But we document two types of omissions in the standard question. First, as documented by Baumgartner and Walker (1988), there are types of associations that are being missed by the question entirely. Using Meetup as a measure of more informal, bottom-up organizing in the US, we in fact find that about half of topics being created by Meetup users are not captured by the categories used in the GSS. Second, we document a second type of omission: response categories that prompt recollection of only formal forms of associating while Meetup suggests the presence of more informal forms in American communities as well. For example, where the GSS captured only formal professional associations (97%), Meetup groups for professionals were more oriented toward informal social networking. One benefit of the comparison to a new source of data is that in addition to corroborating the previously observed omission of entire categories in the standard voluntary association question, we have identified this new type of omission within categories.

The comparison raises several questions about the way we study voluntary associations going forward. Certainly, maintaining the same questions over the years offers useful longitudinal comparability. But as Baumgartner and Walker (1988: 914) noted decades ago, "the careful preservation of the Standard Question as devised by Verba and Nie for over two decades without alterations virtually crippled it as a reliable device for collecting information about group affiliations." Since most longitudinal comparisons are interested in Americans' overall rates of joining, biased assessments may result if memberships shift from formal to informal associations (van Ingen and Dekker, 2011). If the standard question is to continue as a valid measure of voluntary associations, it must change to reflect Americans' changing social lives.

We have taken care throughout this article not to conflate the Meetup data with the population of informal voluntary association memberships. Unlike many offline informal groups that rely on pre-existing social ties to come together, Meetup relies upon the searchability afforded by the Internet. As a result, some category memberships many be more prominent on Meetup than they would be in the larger population of informal groups (much as some formal category memberships may be less prominent in the GSS than the larger population of formal memberships). For example, Meetup may better facilitate small groups or fringe groups. We do not have information on the size of these groups. While we suspect that Meetup memberships share some parallels with other forms of small group memberships, we have no way of knowing, given the lack of survey data on small groups. We may even be missing some unknown forms of associating beyond Meetup, the GSS, and case studies of informal groups. For example, perhaps there are groups formed of recent veterans that are being created outside of traditional veterans associations but not through Meetup. Regardless, our analysis has shed light on some previously "known unknowns," even if, as in any research, there may still remain "unknown unknowns."

A nation's associational life has been linked to any number of positive social outcomes. It is thus imperative that we accurately assess the extent of citizens' associating. Our results suggest that the extent and diversity of heretofore unmeasured informal associations is qualitatively different from better-measured formal associations. In debates about our civic life, therefore, we must consider not only whether people are connected to formal associations, but whether there are untapped and unmeasured reserves of informal connections in the United States.

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