DISCUSSION OF MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK IN THE JOURNAL OF DEMOCRACY

Democracies work better when there exists an independent and long-standing tradition of civic engagement. Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone* effectively set an agenda for those wanting to explore the creation of convivial conditions for democracy to flourish.

The notion of social capital has been around for decades. This is how Putnam introduces the idea:

*Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.*

In other words, interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric. A sense of belonging and the concrete experience of social networks (and the relationships of trust and tolerance that can be involved) can, it is argued, bring great benefits to people.

**Civic involvement – the *Bowling Alone* phenomenon**

In 1995 Robert Putnam followed up his work on civic involvement in Italy with an exploration of the U.S. experience. He began with the same thesis: the quality of public life and the performance of social institutions are… powerfully influenced by norms and networks of civic engagement. He then went on to demonstrate that civic engagement, as measured by voting, political participation, newspaper readership, and participation in local associations, was in decline.

The concept of "civil society" has played a central role in the recent global debate about the preconditions for democracy. In newer democracies, this term has pointed to the need to foster a vibrant civic life in societies traditionally inhospitable to self-government. At the same time, in the established democracies, growing numbers of citizens are questioning the effectiveness of their public institutions. Putnam writes that in America, there is reason to suspect that this democratic disarray may be linked to a broad and continuing erosion of civic engagement that began a quarter-century ago. He shows that over the last three decades there has been a fundamental shift in:

**Political and civic engagement.** Voting, political knowledge, political trust, and grassroots political activism are all down. Americans sign 30 per cent fewer petitions and are 40 per cent less likely to join a consumer boycott, as compared to just a decade or two ago. The declines are equally visible in non-political community life: membership and activity in all sorts of local clubs and civic and religious organizations have been falling at an accelerating pace. In the mid-
1970s the average American attended some club meeting every month, by 2000 that rate of attendance had been cut by nearly 60 per cent.

**Informal social ties.** In 1975 the average American entertained friends at home 15 times per year; the equivalent figure (2000) is now barely half that. Virtually all leisure activities that involve doing something with someone else, from playing volleyball to playing chamber music, are declining.

**Tolerance and trust.** Although Americans are more tolerant of one another than were previous generations, they trust one another less. Survey data provide one measure of the growth of dishonesty and distrust, but there are other indicators. For example, employment opportunities for police, lawyers, and security personnel were stagnant for most of this century - indeed, America had fewer lawyers per capita in 1970 than in 1900. In the last quarter century these occupations boomed, as people have increasingly turned to the courts and the police.

He went on to examine the possible reasons for this decline. Some familiar themes:

- Changes in family structure (i.e. with more and more people living alone), are a possible element as conventional avenues to civic involvement are not well-designed for single and childless people.
- Suburban sprawl has fractured the spatial integrity of people’s. They travel much further to work, shop and enjoy leisure opportunities. As a result there is less time available (and less inclination) to become involved in groups. Suburban sprawl is a very significant contributor.
- Electronic entertainment, especially television, has profoundly privatized leisure time. The time we spend watching television is a direct drain upon involvement in groups and social capital building activities. It may contribute up to 40 per cent of the decline in involvement in groups.

However, generational change also came out as a very significant factor. A very civic-minded generation, born in the first third of the twentieth century, is now passing from the American scene. Their children and grandchildren (baby boomers and Generation X-ers) are much less engaged in most forms of community life. For example, the growth in volunteering over the last ten years is due almost entirely to increased volunteering by retirees from the “civic generation”.

**Social capital and social change**

The follow-up (2007) US study to *Bowling Alone* has also stimulated debate. The first findings from the study found that, in the short run, immigration and ethnic diversity tended to reduce social solidarity and social capital. In ethnically diverse neighborhoods residents of all races tend to ‘hunker down’.

Diversity does not produce ‘bad race relations’ or ethnically-defined group hostility, rather, inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from collective life, to distrust their neighbors, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, to register to vote less, to agitate for social reform more, but have less faith that they can actually make a difference, and to watch more television. Diversity, at least in the short run, seems to bring out the turtle in all of us.
Robert Putnam has also sought to track emerging, significant generators of social capital - and to examine some of the qualities that make them significant. Religion has been a particular focus - not surprising as (in his view) religious affiliations account for half of all US social capital. He cites U.S. megachurches as 'the most interesting social invention of late 20th century'.

These churches have very low barriers to entry - the doors are open, there are folding chairs out on the patio - they make it very easy to come and go. But they also develop strong commitment from many members. On average, nearly half of all members are tithing [giving a tenth of their income]. What do they do, from a social capital standpoint, that allows them to go from low to high commitment? According to Putnam, it is by creating a “honeycomb structure” of thousands of small groups: they have the mountain bikers for God group, the volleyball players for God, the breast cancer survivors for God, the spouses of the breast cancer survivors for God, and so on.

The intense tie thus involves an emotional commitment to others in their small group. Most of these people are seeking meaning in their lives but they are also seeking friends. The small groups spend two hours a week together - doing the volleyball or the mountain biking and praying; they become your closest friends. One of Putnam's conclusions is that this 'low entry/honeycomb structure' could be used to reinvigorate many other organizations.

From the material marshaled by Robert Putnam we can see that the simple act of joining and being regularly involved in organized groups has a very significant impact on society. Robert Putnam’s work is fascinating, and while aspects of his argument will no doubt be disputed over the coming years, his central message is surely true. Interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric.