

# Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital

by Robert D. Putnam

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, it was the Americans' propensity for civic association that most impressed him as the key to their unprecedented ability to make democracy work. "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition," he observed, "are forever forming associations."

Recently, American social scientists of a neo-Tocquevillean bent have unearthed a wide range of empirical evidence that the quality of public life and the performance of social institutions are indeed powerfully influenced by norms and networks of civic engagement. Researchers in such fields as education, urban poverty, unemployment, the control of crime and drug abuse, and even health have discovered that successful outcomes are more likely in civically engaged communities.

Social scientists in several fields have recently suggested a common framework for understanding these phenomena, a framework that rests on the concept of social capital. By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital--tools and training that enhance individual productivity--"social capital" refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.

## Whatever Happened to Civic Engagement?

By almost every measure, Americans' direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily and sharply over the last generation, despite the fact that average levels of education--the best individual-level predictor of political participation--have risen sharply throughout this period. Consider the well-known decline in turnout in national elections over the last three decades. From a relative high point in the early 1960s, voter turnout had by 2000 declined by nearly a quarter; tens of millions of Americans had forsaken their parents' habitual readiness to engage in the simplest act of citizenship.

It is not just the voting booth that has been increasingly deserted by Americans. A series of identical questions posed by the Roper Organization to national samples 10 times each year over the last two decades reveals that since 1973 the number of Americans who report that "in the past year" they have "attended a public meeting on town or school affairs" has fallen by more than a third (from 22 percent in 1973 to 13 percent in 1998).

Not coincidentally, Americans have also disengaged *psychologically* from politics and government over this era. The proportion of Americans who reply that they "trust the government in Washington" only some of the time" or "almost never" has risen steadily from 30 percent in 1966 to 75 percent in 1998. These trends are well known, of course, and taken by themselves would seem amenable to a strictly political explanation. Perhaps the long litany of political tragedies and scandals since the 1960s (assassinations, Vietnam, Watergate, Irangate, and so on) has triggered an understandable disgust for politics and government among Americans, and that in turn has motivated their withdrawal. I do not doubt that this common interpretation has some merit, but its limitations become plain when we examine trends in civic engagement of a wider sort.

RELIGION. Religious affiliation is by far the most common associational membership among Americans. Indeed, by many measures America continues to be (even more than in Tocqueville's time) an astonishingly "churched" society. Yet religious sentiment in America seems to be becoming somewhat

less tied to institutions and more self-defined. The 1960s witnessed a significant drop in weekly churchgoing--from roughly 48 percent in the late 1950s to roughly 41 percent in the early 1970s. Since then, it has stagnated or (according to some surveys) declined still further.

**UNION MEMBERSHIP.** For many years, labor unions provided one of the most common organizational affiliations among American workers. Yet union membership has been falling for nearly four decades, with the steepest decline occurring between 1975 and 1985. By now, virtually all of the explosive growth in union membership that was associated with the New Deal has been erased.

**PTAs.** The parent-teacher association (PTA) has been an especially important form of civic engagement in twentieth-century America because parental involvement in the educational process represents a particularly productive form of social capital. It is, therefore, dismaying to discover that participation in parent-teacher associations has dropped drastically over the last generation, from more than 12 million in 1964 to barely 5 million in 1982 before recovering to approximately 7 million now.

**VOLUNTEERING.** Next, we turn to evidence on membership in (and volunteering for) civic and fraternal organizations. These data show some striking patterns. First, membership in traditional women's groups has declined more or less steadily since the 1960s. For example, membership in the national Federation of Women's Clubs is down by more than half (59 percent) since 1964, while membership in the League of Women Voters (LWV) is off 42 percent since 1969. Similar reductions are apparent in the numbers of volunteers for mainline civic organizations, such as the Boy Scouts (off by 26 percent since 1970) and the Red Cross (off by 61 percent since 1970). At all educational (and hence social) levels of American society, and counting all sorts of group memberships, the average number of associational memberships has fallen by about a fourth over the last quarter century.

The most whimsical yet discomfiting bit of evidence of social disengagement in contemporary America that I have discovered is this: more Americans are bowling today than ever before, but bowling in organized leagues has plummeted in the last decade or so. Between 1980 and 1998, the total number of bowlers in America increased by 10 percent, while league bowling decreased by 40 percent. (Lest this be thought a wholly trivial example, I should note that nearly 80 million Americans went bowling at least once during 2001, *nearly a third more than voted in the 2002 congressional elections.*)

The rise of solo bowling threatens the livelihood of bowling-lane proprietors because those who bowl as members of leagues consume three times as much beer and pizza as solo bowlers, and the money in bowling is in the beer and pizza, not the balls and shoes. The broader social significance, however, lies in the social interaction and even the occasionally civic conversations over beer and pizza that solo bowlers forgo.

### **New Associations, New Patterns of Involvement**

At this point, however, we must confront a serious counterargument. Perhaps the traditional forms of civic organizations whose decay we have been tracing have been replaced by vibrant, new organizations. For example, national environmental organizations (like the Sierra Club) and feminist groups (like the National Organization for Women) grew rapidly during the 1970s and 1980s and now count hundreds of thousands of dues-paying members. An even more dramatic example is the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), which grew exponentially from 400,000 card-carrying members in 1960 to 38 million in 1998, becoming (after the Catholic Church) the largest private organization in the world.

These new mass-membership organizations are plainly of great political importance. From the point of view of social connectedness, however, they are sufficiently different from classic "secondary

associations" that we need to invent a new label--perhaps "tertiary associations." For the vast majority of their members, the only act of membership consists in writing a check for dues or perhaps occasionally reading a newsletter. Few ever attend any meetings of such organizations, and most are unlikely ever (knowingly) to encounter any other member. Their ties, in short, are to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but not to one another.

The concept of "civil society" has played a central role in the recent global debate about the preconditions for democracy and democratization. In the newer democracies, this phrase has properly focused attention on the need to foster a vibrant civic life in soils traditionally inhospitable to self-government. In the established democracies, ironically, growing numbers of citizens are questioning the effectiveness of their public institutions at the very moment when liberal democracy has swept the battlefield, both ideologically and geopolitically.

In America, at least, 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. High on the nation's agenda should be the question of how to reverse these adverse trends in social connectedness, thus restoring civic engagement and civic trust.

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#### **ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION OF *MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK* (from *The Journal of Democracy*)**

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. mega-churches 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 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.