

# A Book Review

by

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of



*Bowling Alone*

by

Robert Putnam

## **Abstract**

This book attempts to explain why civic engagement in the United States has fluctuated over time, what the consequences of these changes will be, and how some of the negative outcomes can be prevented. Putnam hopes Americans who read his book will choose to lead more socially active lives and halt a looming collapse in community involvement.

## **Thesis**

Americans are becoming less involved in their communities primarily because a shift in generational values has reduced the amount of social capital among younger people.

## **Key Terms**

social capital: the connections between individuals (a.k.a. social networks) and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them

reciprocity: mutual obligations between individuals

specific reciprocity: when a person agrees to do a certain something in exchange for a something else

generalized reciprocity: when someone does something without asking for anything specific in return

bonding social capital: reinforces exclusive identities and homogenous groups

bridging social capital: forms inclusive networks of people from different backgrounds

tertiary group: a loosely affiliated group that relies mostly on symbolic ties and whose members have little involvement with the organization or with each other

## **Data Analysis Procedure**

Looked at hundreds of different secondary research studies on social trends and then cross-referenced them to find common conclusions.

## **Findings**

- Reduced political, civic, and religious participation
  - absolute numbers up, but relative percentages down
  - mass-marketing has replaced grassroots efforts
  - fewer moderates and more extremists from both ends of the spectrum
- Shifts in work environment
  - falling membership for unions and professional associations
  - lack of trust in employers
  - increased competition between employees
- Changes in social connections
  - schmoozing (informal) more common than maching (formal)
  - people participate in sports less often
  - fast-food outlets outnumber full-service restaurants

- Decreased amounts of charitable contributions
  - altruism is more common among the socially active
  - volunteering tends to be based on 1-time obligations and is transitory
  - philanthropy depends more on social capital than financial capital
- Diminished belief that people are basically trustworthy
  - makes reciprocity difficult
- A few exceptions to these downward trends in civic engagement
  - discussion groups, self-help support groups, and social movements

## **Discussion**

- Probable Causes
  - time and money pressures
  - suburban sprawl
  - mass media and new technology
  - generational differences
- Potential Effects
  - impaired child development
  - unsafe and unproductive neighborhoods
  - economic poverty
  - malaise and melancholy
  - autocracy
- Possible Solutions
  - educators can get young people involved in the community sooner and more frequently
  - employers can design working environments that are family and community friendly
  - urban planners can design more centralized cities
  - clergy can start a pluralistic “great awakening” to promote tolerance
  - the media can reinforce face-to-face communication and create content that makes the audience more active
  - cultural officials can encourage participation in the arts
  - politicians can urge more people to run for office

## **Limitations**

- Vaguely defined terms, which can hinder understanding of abstract phenomena
- Subjectively interpreted data, which can distort otherwise factual research
- Ineffectual solutions, which fail to motivate disaffected people

## **Further Research**

What effect has September 11<sup>th</sup> and the subsequent War on Terror had on social capital and civic engagement?

## **Introduction**

What comes to mind when you think of the freemasons? You might believe they teach their members black magic, that they're hell-bent on world domination, and that, according to Stanley Kubrick, they throw huge lesbian sex parties in reclusive mansions. Now regardless of whether or not these things are true, you'd think that with a reputation like theirs, people would flock to join them (I mean they sound like they're a real-life, adult-version of the *Harry Potter* books!). Alas, this isn't the case. A recent article in the *New York Times* reports that the mighty freemasons have been practically forced to beg for new members. Robert Putnam's magnum opus sets out to discover how come people don't want to join the freemasons, or any other group, and why they would rather go bowling alone.

## **Key Terms**

In the opening chapter Putnam argues that Americans today are less involved in their communities than they were a few decades ago and that this has resulted in a decrease of social capital. Putnam defines social capital as the connections between individuals and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. A key part of this definition is the term reciprocity, which refers to when people do things for each other and can be classified into two types. The first type is specific reciprocity and this occurs when a person agrees to do something in exchange for something else, or quid pro quo. The second type is general reciprocity and it happens when someone does something without asking for anything specific in return, like the Golden Rule. General reciprocity is more useful for creating social capital because it demands less, but both general and specific depend on trust. Putnam also divides social capital into two types, bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital reinforces exclusive identities and homogenous groups, while bridging social capital forms inclusive networks of people from different backgrounds. There is a tradeoff between the two types, since it is difficult to build relationships that are both close-knit and far-reaching, and each type has its own merits. All these terms serve as the basis for Putnam's argument that civic engagement is declining along with America's stock of social capital.

Although Putnam was not the first person to use these terms, he is the one most responsible for popularizing them. As such, Putnam bears the brunt of criticism for the shortfalls of social capital, and one of the most frequent complaints lobbed against him is that his definitions are too vague. But while some consider this to be a liability, it can also be an asset. For instance, Putnam's ideas about social capital have even been used in a policy paper entitled "Watching Alone" that deals with how television programming should be structured on the BBC. Because of the wide applications of Putnam's material, professionals would do well to familiarize themselves with it so that they know how it relates to their field or area of expertise.

## **Data Analysis Procedure**

In order to understand just how much community involvement has changed, Putnam did secondary research and analyzed hundreds of quantitative studies on social trends, mainly from: the General Social Survey, the National Election Studies, the Roper

Social and Political Trends data set, the DDB Needham Life Style surveys, and the Americans' Use of Time project diaries. He also looked at membership records for dozens of organizations to see whether enrollment had grown or shrank over the past 150 years. By cross-referencing these different sources Putnam was able to determine some common conclusions about the current state of social capital and organize his findings into broad categories.

## **Findings**

The early chapters reveal that political, civic, and religious participation have all suffered declines, although the decreases are difficult to spot. Even though the absolute number of people who engage in these activities is up, the relative percent is actually down. For example, more people attended party caucuses in the 1990s than during the 1950s, but that's only because the total population increased. Once one calculates the number of attendees as a percent of the total population, it becomes clear that party caucuses are experiencing declining attendance. This trend affects membership for civic and religious groups as well. Another trend Putnam identified is that mass marketing has replaced grassroots efforts as the primary means of recruiting and interacting with members and has led to a proliferation of tertiary groups. These types of civic groups have very little member interaction and may only consist of making donations; hence they don't create much social capital. One thing Putnam noted about all these decreases in participation is that people with moderate views are the most likely to drop out of the process. This is particularly true for religious groups like evangelical Christians and it means that as the community becomes increasingly polarized between extremes more moderates will leave, creating exclusive groups held together by bonding social capital.

Putnam also realized that people spend a growing amount of their time at work, so the level of social capital employees develop on the job is an important measure of civic engagement. He found that the percentage of employees who belonged to a union had fallen from a high of 32.5% in the 1950s to just 14.1% today. This decrease reflects more than just a changing labor market and indicates that most employees simply do not want to join groups. On the positive side, Putnam found that employee membership to professional organizations nearly doubled between 1960 and 1997. However, this type of absolute increase hides the fact that most professional organizations experienced relative decreases in market share, since during the same time period the percentage of eligible employees who joined such groups fell from 51% to 37%. Social capital has also been weakened by the lack of trust between employees, which has come about as a result of increased competition in the job market and means that workers are less likely to build close personal relationships. Another major obstacle to the formation of trust and social capital is the organization itself. Nowadays companies like Hewlett Packard go to great lengths to monitor employees, and this tends to create an oppressive atmosphere where people don't discuss anything for fear of repercussions.

Beyond the basic formal modes of civic engagement, Putnam explored the web of informal social connections people interact with. He used the Yiddish word *macher* to refer to people with many formal organizational ties and *schmooser* to refer to people with active informal social lives. Putnam found that the world of schmoozing was much

bigger and encompassed such activities as family meals, team sports, and other group-oriented recreational pastimes. Each of these hobbies is also endangered. In the face of fragmented schedules and an upsurge of takeout restaurants, people are eating together less often and losing a valuable opportunity to exchange thoughts. Social capital faces challenges in the sports arena as well, since participating in athletic activities has been supplanted by watching others do them. Granted people tend to talk to each other about the sports games they watch on TV or in-person, but they miss out on the social capital acquired from playing with real people (not to mention the exercise).

Yet another measure of informal social capital Putnam studied is the level of people's charitable contributions. Putnam found that altruism tends to be more common among the socially active, and considering all the negative developments he already mentioned, it's no wonder simple acts of kindness are down too. The outlook on volunteering appears just as bleak, since most people only give up their time if an employer forces them to. Perhaps philanthropy will be better. Nope. Putnam found that philanthropy depends more on social capital than financial capital, and since Americans seem to be socially bankrupt, don't expect anyone to open their hearts (or their wallets). Strangely though, people seem to be spending more on themselves than ever before, so what little they give to charity is rightly called pittance. Compounding all these problems is the fact that nobody seems to trust each other anymore, which makes giving to other people even more circumspect.

To this long list of rather depressing findings, Putnam adds three shining beacons of hope, and then smashes them one by one. The number of discussion groups appears to be up, both in absolute and relative terms. Unfortunately these groups are far too small to offset the massive decline in social capital overall. Self-help and support groups also appear to be doing well, although the mere fact that these two categories are expanding probably means that other aspects of American life aren't doing so well. But the main problem with these groups is their focus on *self*-help, not *community*-help. Sure, giving Bob DrinksTooMuch the opportunity to confess that he's an alcoholic helps him, but what does it do for the community? The last ray of sunshine on this awfully cloudy day comes from national social movements. The success of the civil rights movement back in the 1960s inspired a plethora of other causes to rally their members and fight for more rights. Groups like Greenpeace, AARP, Moral Majority, and Pheasants Forever mounted nation-wide mailing campaigns to solicit donors and raise awareness for their causes. Wait a second, these aren't social movements at all, they're tertiary groups incognito!

So now that Putnam has killed what little joy remained in the world and all hope of finding any surviving forms of social capital, what is to be done? The first thing is to find out just how accurate this portrait of unremitting doom really is. Putnam spends so much time looking in the mirror with a magnifying glass that he loses sight of the larger picture. Yes you can compare yourself to yourself, but an even better way to find out more about yourself is to look at how you compare to others. A good way to compare different countries and their cultures is to use Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions, a list of five traits that all societies share. One of those traits is a nation's orientation towards individualism or collectivism, meaning whether it focuses more on the self or the group. The U.S. turns out to be the most individualistic nation on earth and has been since

people first started comparing different countries' cultures, and probably even before the American colonies declared their independence.

Yet Putnam asserts that during the 1950s America was more of a collective culture or some sort of socialist utopia where all the little boys and girls belonged to the Scouts and their parents joined the PTA. He argues that during the height of the Cold War the U.S. became the very system it was fighting to destroy, maybe not in terms of economics, but in terms of collective values. This is an exaggeration on Putnam's part, sure the U.S. almost certainly had more social capital 50 years ago than it does today, but to hear Putnam tell it the 1950s was like living in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and everything since then has been like *The Osbournes*.

## **Discussion**

Now it's time to put aside Putnam's more dubious claims and move along to what actually caused the decline in civic engagement and the disappearance of social capital. This part constitutes some of Putnam's best work because he uses a set of four criteria to whittle all the possible causes down to four main culprits that are highly correlated and causally linked to the recent fall in community involvement. The first, and one of the smallest contributors, is Americans face increasing time and money pressures. It's a small factor that accounts for only 10% of the problem because most Americans have more leisure time and more money than ever before, but due to an increase in 2-career families (both mom and dad work) it has become harder to coordinate time together and their expenses have increased. The second perpetrator is suburban sprawl and it makes up about 10% of the problem. Putnam says increased commuting times and distances have decreased the amount of face-to-face communication between people and that for every 10 minutes a person spends behind the wheel, the odds of them being involved in the community falls by 10%.

The third offender is perhaps the most insidious of all because it lives inside the homes of Americans everywhere, and yet it's single-handedly responsible for destroying 25% of America's social capital. The criminal's name is television and it goes by aliases such as TV or the idiot box. Anyone familiar with Neil Postman's work already knows the depths of depravity it can create, the way it turns men's minds to mush, and how it obliterates the literary culture and replaces it with entertainment. Putnam realizes these things too; he makes a special point that "nothing is more broadly associated with civic disengagement and social disconnection than is dependence on TV for entertainment." He goes on to elaborate about why this is so and gives three reasons: TV consumes scarce time, the psychological affects of watching TV inhibit a part of the brain responsible for comprehensive thought, and the specific content on TV undermines civic motivations. But his main grievance with TV goes beyond its content and stems from the amount of time people sit on the couch to watch it. Putnam says that for each hour a person spends in front of the tube, the odds of them being involved in the community falls by 10%, meaning 60 minutes of TV is actually less harmful than 10 minutes of driving. However, since Americans spend entire days watching TV, the idiot box wins second place in the race to destroy social capital.

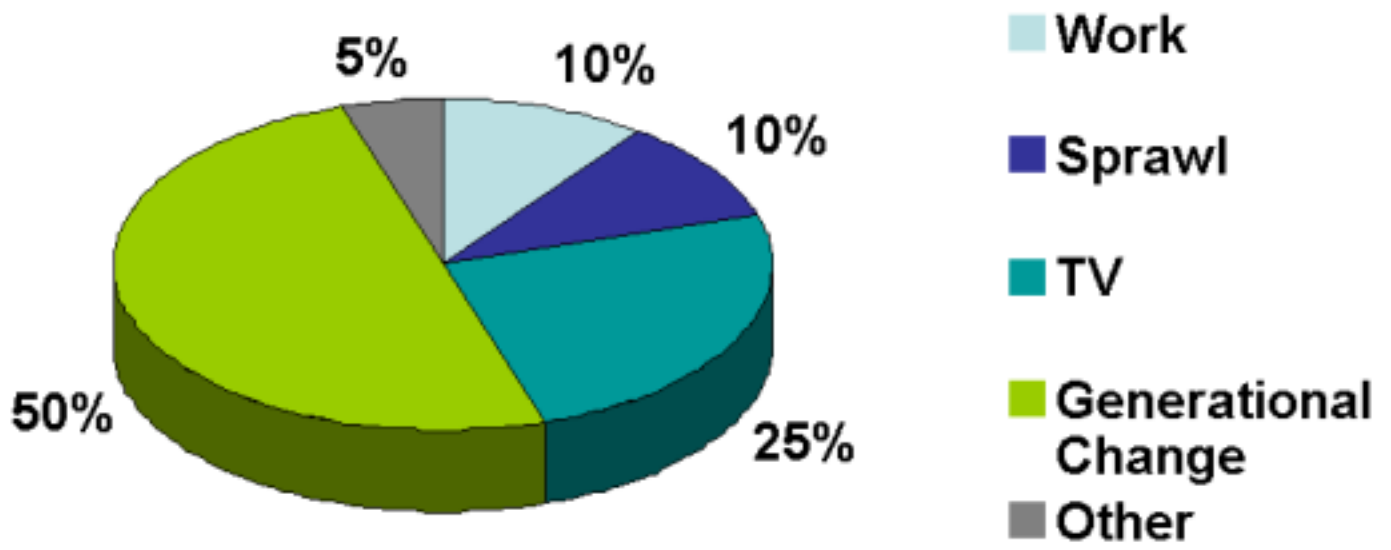
The final and most important factor involves generational differences, which have created 50% of all the changes in civic engagement. Putnam was very careful to prove causation by eliminating the confounding effects of lifecycle changes that arise with age (i.e. young people volunteer the least, middle-aged do it more, and the elderly do it the most). Instead, Putnam compared generations as a whole and was able to show that people born between the years of 1910 and 1940, what Tom Brokaw called the Greatest Generation, have been more active in the community than either the Boomers or Gen X. Putnam isn't very clear as to why this is, but he hints that it might have something to do with the shared experience of living through the Great Depression and World War II. Of course the problem with this arrangement is that members of the Greatest Generation are dying en masse, and they're taking social capital and civic engagement along with them.

Putnam goes on to warn the reader that unless something is done about these four things America will be in even worse shape than it already is (if that's possible), with consequences ranging from impaired child development to all-out autocracy. He says the only way America can save itself is if it implements his list of seven solutions, each one fluffier than the last and all of them just as ineffective. In all fairness, it isn't that his ideas wouldn't work, it's that he couldn't get anyone to implement them. According to Putnam himself, Americans are self-absorbed and socially disengaged, so if he asked someone on the street to help revive social capital they'd likely laugh him off (or worse). This is probably why Putnam's book *Better Together* hasn't sold so well, people just don't care about fixing something they don't think is broken or that isn't worth repairing.

## **Conclusion**

Towards the end of *Bowling Alone*, Putnam says almost prophetically that modern America has no great war and although it would be terrible to wish for it, such a disaster would bring us closer together. Now the U.S. is at war, and although 9/11 triggered an outflow of solidarity, the mood is mostly remembered only in newspaper articles that eulogize its demise. While this could be seen as a flaw in his work, it could also be taken as a sign that social capital, by its very nature, is difficult to define and even harder to maintain. That's why every effort should be made to ensure its continued existence and to expand the range of active citizenship.

# Causes of the Decline in Social Capital



# Social Capital Distribution in the U.S.

