

Are we 'bowling alone'—and does it matter? The decline of civic engagement: *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. By Robert D. Putnam. Simon & Schuster, 544 pp., \$26.00.

by [Mark Chaves](#) in the [July 19, 2000](#) issue

Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, by Robert D. Putnam. Simon & Schuster, 544 pp., \$26.00.

The phrase “bowling alone”—the title of an article Robert Putnam published in 1995 in a relatively obscure academic journal—quickly became shorthand for the arresting claim that civic engagement is in decline. Putnam’s point was that though we may be bowling as much as we used to, we are much less likely to be doing it in organized leagues. The article did not, of course, rest mainly on bowling statistics. It pointed to evidence of declining participation in a variety of civic arenas—politics, churches, labor unions, parent-teacher organizations and fraternal organizations.

As civic participation in these arenas declined, Putnam claimed, so did America’s stock of social capital—the connections between people that foster cooperation and trust. To be sure, social capital can be used malevolently—to restrict employment opportunities for those outside one’s own group, for example, or to battle real or imagined enemies. But because it also serves as a resource for many benevolent activities, we should be concerned about its decline.

Many commentators found Putnam’s original article unpersuasive. By focusing on formal membership in organizations such as the League of Women Voters, the Boy Scouts and the Elks, critics said, Putnam overlooked other, newer kinds of civic

engagement that have compensated for the decline in these particular organizations. Declining church attendance may be offset by increased participation in small support groups. Perhaps shrinking membership in the League of Women Voters and the Shriners is offset by membership gains in the Sierra Club or the American Association of Retired Persons. Bowling leagues may be dwindling, but what about the soccer explosion? Putnam, the criticism went, mistook change for decline. The vessels through which Americans channel their civic engagement may be different, but the overall level of engagement has not declined much. At the very least, the critics asserted, the case for decline has not been proven.

This long book is Putnam's response to his critics. It is plainly argued and compulsively readable. To the fundamental question, "Are we in a time of declining civic engagement?" Putnam answers with a resounding and definitive yes. His claim is supported by a massive amount of evidence drawn from a wide range of sources and covering a broad spectrum of specific activities. Putnam shows that the present decline in civic engagement does not characterize the 20th century as a whole. Rather, civic engagement seems to have steadily increased for the first two-thirds of the century, stagnating and declining only in the last third. The decline began in the 1960s and '70s and accelerated in the '80s and '90s.

What is the evidence? With stunning consistency, virtually every indicator of civic engagement currently available shows the same pattern of increase followed by stagnation and decline—newspaper reading; TV news watching; attending political meetings; petition signing; running for public office; attending public meetings; serving as an officer or committee member in any local clubs or organizations; writing letters to the editor; participating in local meetings of national organizations; attending religious services; socializing informally with friends, relatives or neighbors; attending club meetings; joining unions; entertaining friends at home; participating in picnics; eating the evening meal with the whole family; going out to bars, nightclubs, discos or taverns; playing cards; sending greeting cards; attending parties; playing sports; donating money as a percentage of income; working on community projects; giving blood.

The evidence covers partisan political activity and nonpartisan community activity; it covers religious activity and secular activity; it covers high-commitment activities and low-commitment activities; it covers things one can do as an individual as well as things requiring the cooperation of others; it covers informal socializing as well as participation in formal organizations. Though the details vary for specific items, the

consistency of the pattern is compelling. It might be possible to quibble about one or another detail of one or another indicator, but such quibbling would miss the deeper point. Even if one finds some flaw in the evidence about, say, card playing, there are still several dozen other indicators showing the same trend. Putnam draws an apt analogy to global warming. Standing alone, evidence from tree ring research might not amount to much. But when tree rings, pollen counts in polar ice, and temperature records from multiple places around the world all point in the same direction, we become increasingly confident that global warming is a reality. Congruence across multiple kinds of evidence from multiple sources is powerfully persuasive.

Not everything has declined, and Putnam's argument is greatly strengthened by his close attention to potentially countervailing trends. For example, contributions to political parties have increased. Nevertheless, writing a check does not forge social connections in the same way attending a local meeting does. The number of nonprofit associations is up, and Americans formally belong to just as many organizations now as they did several decades ago, but these are more likely to be mailing-list organizations that never bring members into contact with one another.

Evidence about trends in workplace socializing is difficult to come by, but even if workplace socializing has increased, it remains only a small part of most people's social lives. Participation in self-help and support groups and in protest demonstrations has gone up, but the absolute numbers participating in these kinds of groups do not come close to compensating for declines in other forms of civic engagement. Volunteering is up, but virtually all that increase is among retired people. Generally speaking, the increases that have occurred tend to involve forms of participation that do not promote face-to-face connections among people. And the increases in some social-tie generating activities such as 12-step support groups (or soccer leagues!) are too small to offset the large-scale declines in civic engagement throughout the society.

The overall decline in civic participation cuts across virtually all social and demographic groups. It is evident among both women and men, in all regions of the country, and in cities and towns of all sizes. It also is evident across racial groups, religious traditions, political parties, occupational categories, social classes and household types. However, a large difference in civic participation is evident in one category: generations. Younger cohorts are much less likely to be civically involved than older cohorts. Roughly speaking, about half the decline in civic engagement

has come about because those born before 1945 are inexorably leaving the scene and are being replaced by the less civically engaged generations born after 1945. Even if not a single individual changes his or her behavior over time, it still is possible for widespread social change to occur through this generational turnover.

Religion is a big part of this story, and it receives a chapter of its own. Perhaps the most important lesson for those who care about religion, however, is in the deep similarity between trends in religion and in other areas of civic life. Church attendance is declining along with other kinds of civic engagement. Declines in church attendance are mainly produced by a generational changing of the guard, as are declines in many other institutional arenas. Religious participation, it seems, is a special case of something much more general.

It appears, then, that declining church attendance is unlikely to be fundamentally caused or cured by developments specific to religion. Churches may be having trouble attracting young people, but so are virtually all other voluntary and membership organizations. Looking for root causes or solutions only within the religious sphere is like the man who, faced with a flooded basement, looks for the leak in his own pipes, not realizing that the water main has broken and every house on the block is flooded.

What explains the decline in civic engagement? I cannot do justice to Putnam's subtle sifting of evidence and rich discussion of possible causes, but will simply report that the main culprits, in order of importance, are: generational change, television watching, suburbanization (with its associated increases in sprawl and commuting time), and pressures of time and money (including increases in two-career families). Putnam's arguments about underlying causes are more qualified and tentative than those about the decline itself. Nevertheless, the book gives you plenty of reasons to hate television.

Putnam also documents the many ways in which states and cities with higher levels of civic engagement differ from states and cities with lower levels. Among other things, areas with measurably higher levels of civic engagement also have higher levels of child welfare, better schools, less crime, healthier people and better functioning democratic institutions. When civic engagement generates social capital that is outward- rather than inward-looking, when it leads to social ties that cross typical social boundaries rather than reinforce social homogeneity, many positive consequences follow.

Surprisingly, perhaps, *Bowling Alone* is an optimistic book. Though it draws attention to an alarming social trend, it also shows that our current situation is not without parallel. The decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century also were marked by rapid technological and social change, high levels of immigration, concern about the quality of urban life, and widening economic inequality. Though the civic infrastructure of the more rural 19th-century society was becoming obsolete, the turn of the century was also a progressive era, a time of social innovation, reform and institution building. To a remarkable extent, today's associational world was assembled during that period. Of all the societies and associations existing today, for example, almost twice as many were founded between 1891 and 1920 as were founded between 1961 and 1990.

It is this edifice of associations, built in the context of late 19th-century social change, that today is creaking under the pressure of contemporary social change. Perhaps we should not be surprised that institutions formed in another era are not quite up to current challenges. And perhaps we should be optimistic that, as before, new movements will emerge to reinvigorate our community life. Those who call our attention to contemporary social problems commonly try to heighten our concern by making often unjustified claims about the unprecedented nature of the challenges before us. Putnam's historical sensibility leads him away from that shallow jeremiad, and as a result he both deepens our understanding of the current situation and evokes hope that, as the book's subtitle suggests, revival will follow collapse.

Is such hope justified? On the positive side, Putnam calls attention to nascent efforts intended to move us in the right direction. Young people who volunteer or participate in certain kinds of service are more civically engaged as adults, and there are movements afoot to increase these kinds of experiences among youth. There are companies pioneering workplace practices that encourage community involvement and family connectedness among employees. Urban designers have proposed what they intend to be community-enhancing public policies and architectural ideas. A "civic journalism" movement aims to foster electronic media that reinforce rather than displace community engagement. And there are examples of cultural events in which diverse groups of people together produce dances, concerts and other works of art.

On the negative side, virtually all the innovative social-capital-generating efforts Putnam mentions are relatively small-scale and isolated. A skeptic would be justified in wondering how likely it is that family- and community-friendly workplaces will

become the norm, or that experiments in neighborhood design will slow suburban sprawl, or that changes in telecommunications will inspire us to rise from our couches in search of activity more demanding than channel surfing.

Perhaps, however, we miss something by focusing on the limited nature of current efforts self-consciously aimed at increasing civic engagement. Several of the most significant movements that provided civic infrastructure for previous generations were not, after all, designed primarily to promote community involvement. The labor movement aimed at material improvement for workers. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union advocated prohibition and other specific measures. Progressive reform movements wanted to undermine urban party machines. It may be that significant social capital will be generated in our time more as a by-product of social movements and reform efforts with other goals than as the direct result of crusades for civic engagement.

The future may surprise us by generating social capital in unexpected ways. It also may show that specific efforts to increase civic involvement can be too successful. Putnam asks us to consider this question: What if we were faced with campaigns that were wildly successful at enhancing social capital, but only in the form of tightly bonded, homogeneous social clusters—the kind of social capital that bolsters divisions between “us” and “them”? If it turns out that the easiest, and therefore most likely, way to increase social capital is via movements that encapsulate their faithful within religious, ethnic, linguistic or other enclaves, then we might be ambivalent about whether we would like to see such a future after all. This is, possibly, the most vexing issue raised by an agenda-setting book that will be the starting point of discussion and debate for years to come.