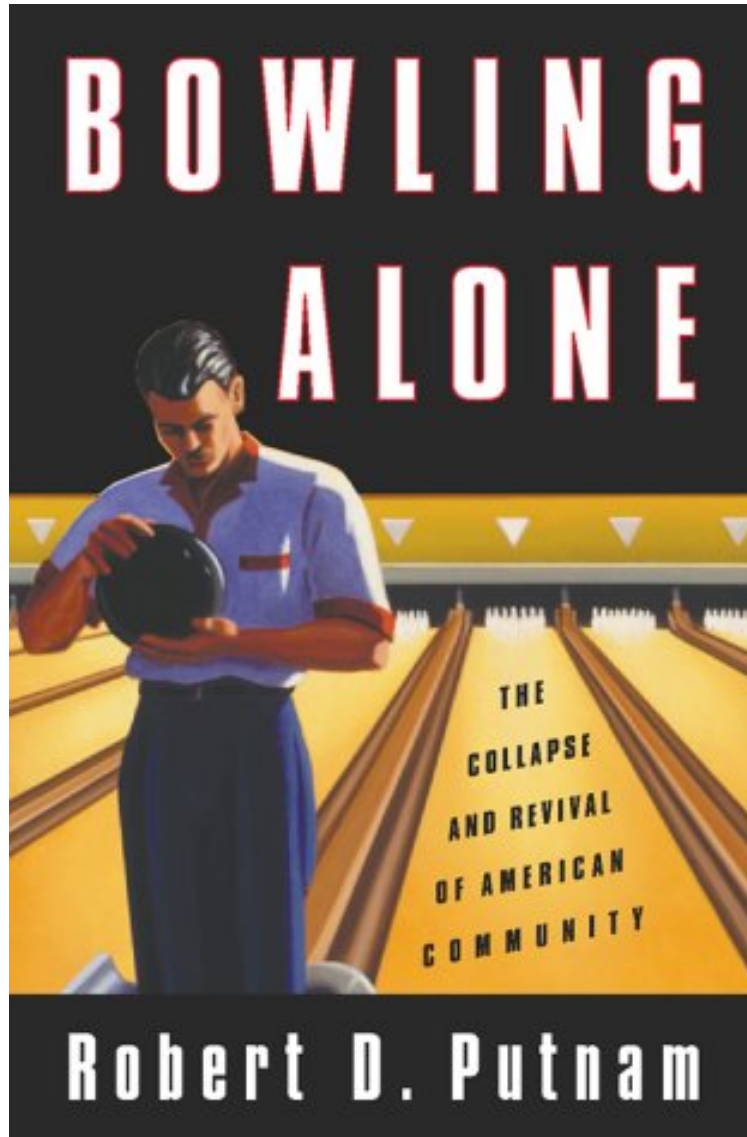


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Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community

Robert D. Putnam

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Robert D. Putnam : Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community:

47 of 48 people found the following review helpful. The Original Mainstream Work On The Erosion Of Community; So Successful It's Not Necessary To ReadBy CharlesThis is a famous book, but Bowling Alone was not what I

expected. What I expected was social commentary. What I got was social science, proving with reams of statistics what is now a commonplace, that social capital in America has eroded massively over the past several decades. Of course, that its a commonplace is due largely to this book, published in 2000 as a follow-up to a 1995 article, so thats hardly a criticism of the book. But, paradoxically, its not clear that most readers nowadays will get much value, by itself, out of reading this very valuable book. Thats not to say readers cant get much value out of this book. But to do so today, you have to evaluate the data it provides with frameworks it doesnt provide. I found that reading this book while keeping in mind some of the insights provided by Yuval Levins recent *A Fractured Republic* helped me better understand the causes of the decline in social capital. In particular, Levin notes that after World War II, Americans have become increasingly individualistic, in a rebound effect from prior consolidation, which helps explain the trends Putnam documents. Putnam begins by convincingly demonstrating that the same pattern of erosion of social capital has occurred in nearly every area of American life. That pattern is, basically, an increase in participation (and resultant social capital) at the beginning of the 20th Century; an even greater increase in participation after World War II; and a precipitous fall-off from roughly 1970 through the 1990s. He demonstrates that this is true of all forms of political participation, civic participation, religious participation, workplace interactions, informal social connections, volunteering and philanthropy, and mutual trust. After proving this erosion to his, and the readers, satisfaction, Putnam tries to figure out why this has happened. He carefully parses various possibilities, from increased pressures for time and money, women entering the work force, suburbanization, TV and the Internet, generational change and others. He concludes there is no single culprit and each of these has some responsibility, although TV is the largest driver. Putnam considers only materialist drivers and does not consider philosophical shifts in American thought, probably because those would be difficult to capture in social science surveys (although it seems to me it could be done, by asking about opinions, rather than activities, while keeping in mind that such self-reporting is subject to all sorts of biases and inaccuracies). Putnam does an excellent job of sub-analyzing the data he presents. For example, he is careful to distinguish trends across generations from those occurring within generations (generally, intra-generational trends are swamped by inter-generational trends in other words, its the younger generations in which social capital is actually eroding). He is also careful to note where the data is uncertain, and to avoid sweeping conclusions. And he makes interesting distinctions that are relevant to his arguments, such as between bridging social capital, that creates new connections among disparate people, and bonding social capital, that creates tighter social connections among people with something in common. Finally, Putnam optimistically lays out a program for restoring social capital, analogizing the current age to the late 19th Century Gilded Age and, among other things, citing Booth Tarkingtons laments about the decline of social capital in the early 20th Century as evidence, given the increase in social capital later in the 20th Century, that the pattern can be reversed. Putnams specific suggestions are not very detailed they are couched as, for example, Let us find ways to ensure that by 2010 significantly more Americans will participate in (not merely consume or appreciate) cultural activities from group dancing to songfests to community theater to rap festivals. How this is to be done Putnam does not really say, other than to claim that top-down versus bottom-up is a false dichotomy the roles of national and local institutions in restoring American community need to be complementary. But the problem here is that top-down actions have been a major cause of the problem of eroding social capital, and one that Putnam mostly ignores, since he assigns causal value exclusively to bottom-up causes. Long before Putnam, commentators noted that the growth of the Leviathan state was crowding out intermediary institutions of the type whose decline Putnam decries. In 1953, Robert Nisbet pointed this out, though he did it qualitatively, not with Putnams quantitative approach. Nisbet noted that as Leviathan grows, as it did from Progressive times on but most of all starting in the 1960s, intermediary institutions decay, since people seek meaning, and when they cannot obtain meaning on the local level, they will turn to national meaning, thus strengthening the central state (while obtaining only counterfeit meaning). Similarly, this year (2016), Yuval Levin (who extensively cites Putnam) noted that As the national government grows more centralized, and takes over the work otherwise performed by mediating institutions from families and communities to local governments and charities individuals become increasingly atomized; and as individuals grow apart from one another, the need for centralized government provision seems to grow. Moreover, In liberating many individuals from oppressive social constraints, we have also estranged many from their families and unmoored them from their communities, work and faith. In accepting a profusion of options in every part of our lives to meet our particular needs and wants, we have also unraveled the institutions of an earlier era, and with it the publics broader faith in institutions of all kinds. Levin points both to the expansion of government and to a widespread acceptance of expressive individualism as causes for the erosion in social capital. These are the type of framework insights Putnam does not provide, and they suggest that government may be the problem, or a large part of it. Thats not to say that the national government is unable to help with the decline in social capital, but it is to say that its nature is not best suited to that role, and recognizing its culpability in the erosion of social capital is necessary to properly analyze the problem. Similarly, its important to recognize philosophical shifts in Americans themselves. In fact, at no point does Putnam assign blame to government action as a possible base cause for the national decline in social capital (although government actions, such as splitting Indianapolis with an interstate, do occasionally figure in anecdotes). The huge increase in government scope and power that began in the 1960s is exactly coterminous with the

drop in social capital that Putnam documents. That, by itself, proves nothing. But its at least a coincidence that is worth addressing, and Putnam doesnt. Government, in fact, figures nearly not at all in Putnams book, other than indirectly, with respect to individuals reduced civic engagement in the political process. In my mind, this blind spot is the biggest defect of Putnams book. That said, I am less convinced by a related frequent criticism of Putnams argument that he ignores modern reasons why Americans might choose to be less politically involved, such as the perception both on the Left and the Right that the system is rigged. The supporters of Bernie Sanders point to the political power of the rich and connected; conservatives point to the federal governments, and particularly the Supreme Courts, seizing of power that used to be devolved to the local level, where individuals could have an impact. But if you think about it for a little while, those things may be true, and they may affect civic engagement in politics, but they say little about areas of social capital other than political involvement, such as religious involvement and workplace interaction. Therefore, this seems like a weak criticism, although attractive to those who view the world solely or largely through a political lens. Putnam has written books since this one, including a recent one on income immobility which seems like it might be very interesting. Im curious if there is data from the past fifteen years on the trends that Putnam addresses. While *Bowling Alone* does have a website, most of the links in it dont work, which is too bad. If he hasnt already, itd be great if Putnam updated some of his data from this book, and let us know if his analysis and conclusions have changed. For example, Putnam notes that non-privatized (i.e., public) religious belief is the single largest driver of social capital. How has the modern tendency away from religious belief, accelerating since 2000, affected social capital? And, of course, this book was written before the rise of social media (although Putnam does discuss Internet social activity in some detail, as it existed when the book was written, including its impact on reducing constraints of simultaneous timing on communication, and the poverty of social cues in Internet communication). How has the utter dominance of Facebook and similar media affected social capital? These, and many similar questions, would be worth answering. So, while Putnams conclusions have, I think, been very valuable for society, Im not sure that actually reading this book is necessary or valuable for most people. But if you are very interested in the topic, and read this in conjunction with other works, it may well be worth your time, even today.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. You don't have to Bowl Alone ppl...put down the phone and LIVE! By kamikazemind I learned about this in one of my urban planning classes and finally went ahead and bought the book a few years later. I'm still not done but it really gives great detail into how america is even more "alone" with technology...even though many advances (ie. Social media) was supposed to keep us together. Its a great read. But sometimes I feel the author can go on and on on a certain topic...but its only to give in depth detail and examples to back up his claims.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Enlightening read, more sources than an encyclopedia

By Travis P The old English idiom "elephant in the room," meaning an obvious truth that is being ignored or unaddressed, depicts the state of community involvement in America in the latter half of the 20th century. Through his insightful book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam explores the decline of civic engagement and social connectedness in modern American society. Putnam uses his work to shed light on reasons for such decline in community involvement and social capital, as well as posits suggestions and strategies for reversing this trend. There is very little I could argue or disagree with, as the author meticulously presented every statement and observation with credible sources. I did find a bit of his work redundant and repetitive, though he did a fascinating job of substantiating every claim he made. As it was published in 2000, twelve years have now passed. Are we better off today than we were at the end of the 20th century? Have we reversed the trend of civic engagement? It is hard to say. Kevin Kelly's article, "The Universe is conspiring to help us," found on the "this I believe" program of National Public Radio (NPR) presents a perfect example of what we should strive for in our community today. "When I was in my 20s, I would hitchhike to work every day. I'd walk down three blocks to Route 22 in New Jersey, stick out my thumb and wait for a ride to work. Someone always picked me up, and I was never late. Each morning, I counted on the service of ordinary commuters who had lives full of their own worries and yet, without fail, at least one of them would do something generous, as if on schedule" (2008). As a result of networking and of bridging social capital during 1970s, this man was able to rely on his fellow community members. What one could accomplish through societal norms of the day and age is a strong reflection of the presence (or lack thereof) of social capital. Although the first 352 or so pages are quite somber and depressing, the last few chapters are invigorating and inspirational. Despite the fact that the second half of the 20th century has seen a significant decline in civic engagement and community involvement, there is hope yet. Looking back to the enthusiastic idealism of the Progressive Era, evidence of social change and revival is possible, as long as the Institutions of our age as well as this country's fellow citizens make a concerted effort to do so.

Once we bowled in leagues, usually after work; but no longer. This seemingly small phenomenon symbolizes a significant social change that Robert Putnam has identified and describes in this brilliant volume, "*Bowling Alone*." Drawing on vast new data from the Roper Social and Political Trends and the DDB Needham Life Style -- surveys that report in detail on Americans' changing behavior over the past twenty-five years -- Putnam shows how we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and social structures, whether the PTA, church,

recreation clubs, political parties, or bowling leagues. Our shrinking access to the "social capital" that is the reward of communal activity and community sharing is a serious threat to our civic and personal health. Putnam's groundbreaking work shows how social bonds are the most powerful predictor of life satisfaction. For example, he reports that getting married is the equivalent of quadrupling your income and attending a club meeting regularly is the equivalent of doubling your income. The loss of social capital is felt in critical ways: Communities with less social capital have lower educational performance and more teen pregnancy, child suicide, low birth weight, and prenatal mortality. Social capital is also a strong predictor of crime rates and other measures of neighborhood quality of life, as it is of our health: In quantitative terms, if you both smoke and belong to no groups, it's a close call as to which is the riskier behavior. A hundred years ago, at the turn of the last century, America's stock of social capital was at an ebb, reduced by urbanization, industrialization, and vast immigration that uprooted Americans from their friends, social institutions, and families, a situation similar to today's. Faced with this challenge, the country righted itself. Within a few decades, a range of organizations was created, from the Red Cross, Boy Scouts, and YWCA to Hadassah and the Knights of Columbus and the Urban League. With these and many more cooperative societies we rebuilt our social capital. We can learn from the experience of those decades, Putnam writes, as we work to rebuild our eroded social capital. It won't happen without the concerted creativity and energy of Americans nationwide. Like defining works from the past that have endured -- such as "The Lonely Crowd" and "The Affluent Society" -- and like C. Wright Mills, Richard Hofstadter, Betty Friedan, David Riesman, Jane Jacobs, Rachel Carson, and Theodore Roszak, Putnam has identified a central crisis at the heart of our society and suggests what we can do.

.com Few people outside certain scholarly circles had heard the name Robert D. Putnam before 1995. But then this self-described "obscure academic" hit a nerve with a journal article called "Bowling Alone." Suddenly he found himself invited to Camp David, his picture in People magazine, and his thesis at the center of a raging debate. In a nutshell, he argued that civil society was breaking down as Americans became more disconnected from their families, neighbors, communities, and the republic itself. The organizations that gave life to democracy were fraying. Bowling became his driving metaphor. Years ago, he wrote, thousands of people belonged to bowling leagues. Today, however, they're more likely to bowl alone: Television, two-career families, suburban sprawl, generational changes in values-- these and other changes in American society have meant that fewer and fewer of us find that the League of Women Voters, or the United Way, or the Shriners, or the monthly bridge club, or even a Sunday picnic with friends fits the way we have come to live. Our growing social-capital deficit threatens educational performance, safe neighborhoods, equitable tax collection, democratic responsiveness, everyday honesty, and even our health and happiness. The conclusions reached in the book *Bowling Alone* rest on a mountain of data gathered by Putnam and a team of researchers since his original essay appeared. Its breadth of information is astounding--yes, he really has statistics showing people are less likely to take Sunday picnics nowadays. Dozens of charts and graphs track everything from trends in PTA participation to the number of times Americans say they give "the finger" to other drivers each year. If nothing else, *Bowling Alone* is a fascinating collection of factoids. Yet it does seem to provide an explanation for why "we tell pollsters that we wish we lived in a more civil, more trustworthy, more collectively caring community." What's more, writes Putnam, "Americans are right that the bonds of our communities have withered, and we are right to fear that this transformation has very real costs." Putnam takes a stab at suggesting how things might change, but the book's real strength is in its diagnosis rather than its proposed solutions. *Bowling Alone* won't make Putnam any less controversial, but it may come to be known as a path-breaking work of scholarship, one whose influence has a long reach into the 21st century. --John J. Miller From Publishers Weekly "If you don't go to somebody's funeral, they won't come to yours," Yogi Berra once said, neatly articulating the value of social networks. In this alarming and important study, Putnam, a professor of sociology at Harvard, charts the grievous deterioration over the past two generations of the organized ways in which people relate to one another and partake in civil life in the U.S. For example, in 1960, 62.8% of Americans of voting age participated in the presidential election, whereas by 1996, the percentage had slipped to 48.9%. While most Americans still claim a serious "religious commitment," church attendance is down roughly 25%-50% from the 1950s, and the number of Americans who attended public meetings of any kind dropped 40% between 1973 and 1994. Even the once stable norm of community life has shifted: one in five Americans moves once a year, while two in five expect to move in five years. Putnam claims that this has created a U.S. population that is increasingly isolated and less empathetic toward its fellow citizens, that is often angrier and less willing to unite in communities or as a nation. Marshaling a plentiful array of facts, figures, charts and survey results, Putnam delivers his message with verve and clarity. He concludes his analysis with a concise set of potential solutions, such as educational programs, work-based initiatives and funded community-service programs, offering a ray of hope in what he perceives to be a dire situation. Agent, Rafe Sagalyn. 3-city tour; 20-city radio satellite tour. (June) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal Putnam (Stanfield Professor of International Peace, Harvard) probes American history to identify, interpret, and weigh the forces influencing the major drop in civic involvement that characterized American society in the last third of the 20th century. Buttressing his arguments with a wide range of resources, references, and statistics from government, academic, and commercial sources, he explores the roles of

generational, social, and technological factors as they relate to the dwindling of our nation's social capital. Putnam argues that "[the level of] social connectedness matters to our lives in the most profound way." How to respond to its current nadir? Putnam finds striking parallels between the situation today and the declining levels of social interaction in the late 1800s. He cites the rejuvenating waves of change and reform generated during the Progressive Era, which stemmed that earlier decline, and suggests that a comparable burst of social inventiveness and political reform could activate the much-needed rebuilding of civic involvement and social connection in our time. This substantive and stimulating work is highly recommended for academics and a thoughtful general public audience.---Suzanne W. Wood, SUNY Coll. of Technology at Alfred Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.