

“Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital”

- “Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition...are forever forming associations. They are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute...nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.”
(Quoting Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, 1830s)
- “Historical evidence [from Putnam’s research on social capital in renaissance Italy] suggested that networks of organized reciprocity and civic solidarity, far from being an epiphenomenon of socioeconomic modernization, were a precondition for it.”
- **Social capital** “refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”
 - Fosters sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity
 - Encourages the emergence of social trust
 - Facilitates coordination and communication
 - Amplifies reputations
 - Allows dilemmas of collective action to be resolved
- So what happened to social capital in the US? Steady declines have registered in all of the following groups: election turnout, town hall meeting attendance, political rallies, serving on a committee, church-related groups, sports groups, professional societies, literary societies, labor unions, fraternal groups, veterans’ groups, and service clubs.
- And, finally, “more Americans are bowling today than ever before, but bowling in organized leagues has plummeted in the last decade or so.”

Why is this happening, and what does it mean?

1. The movement of women into the labor force
 2. Mobility: the “re-potting” hypothesis
 3. Other demographic transformations (fewer marriages, more divorce, lower real wages, etc...)
 4. The technological transformation of leisure
- What effect are electronic social and other networks having? Are they “an analogue of the first law of thermodynamics—social capital is neither created nor destroyed, merely redistributed?”
 - What are the lessons for policymakers? (examples of slum-clearance policies and school/post district consolidations as having unintended negative effects).

Do you agree with Putnam’s fundamental diagnosis of the problem?