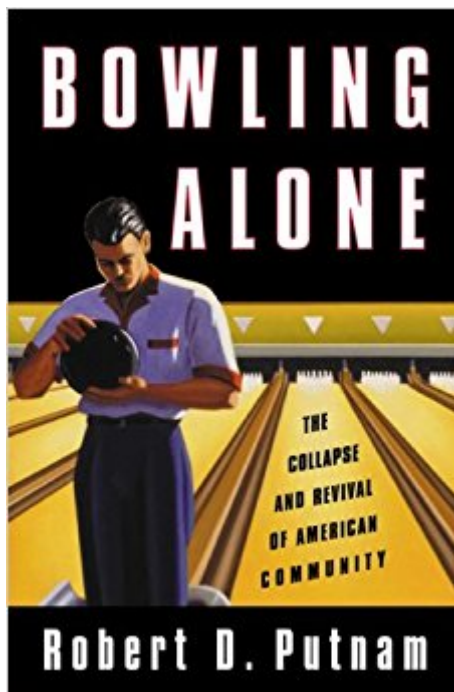


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Bowling Alone



Synopsis

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 in this brilliant volume, *Bowling Alone*, which *The Economist* hailed as "a prodigious achievement." Drawing on vast new data that reveal Americans' changing behavior, Putnam shows how we have become increasingly disconnected from one another and how social structures -- whether they be PTA, church, or political parties -- have disintegrated. Until the publication of this groundbreaking work, no one had so deftly diagnosed the harm that these broken bonds have wreaked on our physical and civic health, nor had anyone exalted their fundamental power in creating a society that is happy, healthy, and safe. Like defining works from the past, such as *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Affluent Society*, and like the works of C. Wright Mills and Betty Friedan, Putnam's *Bowling Alone* has identified a central crisis at the heart of our society and suggests what we can do.

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Customer Reviews

This 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 it's a commonplace is due largely to this book, published in 2000 as a follow-up to a 1995 article, so that it's hardly a criticism of the book. But, paradoxically, it's not clear that most readers nowadays will get much value, by itself, out of reading this very valuable book. That it's not to say readers can't get much value out of this book. But to do so today, you have to evaluate the data it provides with frameworks it doesn't provide. I found that reading this book while keeping in mind some of the insights provided by Yuval Levin's recent book "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 reader's, 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, it's 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 Tarkington's lamentations 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.

Putnam's 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 Putnam's 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 public's 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. That’s 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, it’s 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 it’s at least a coincidence that is worth addressing, and Putnam doesn’t. Government, in fact, figures nearly not at all in Putnam’s 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 Putnam’s book. That said, I am less convinced by a related frequent criticism of Putnam’s 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 government’s, and particularly the Supreme Court’s, 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. I’m 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 don’t work, which is too bad. If he hasn’t already, it’d 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 Putnam’s conclusions have, I think, been very valuable for society, I am 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.

Robert Putnam has something very important to say that I think would be of interest to any American whether in a small town or a big city. Putnam is making the case that Americans are less civically engaged than they were a generation or two previous and that this disengagement is troubling for the health and functioning of American society. This idea is nothing remarkable, just turn on your television and watch the news and hear about the violence in this country. There seems to be a general lack of respect for the value of human life these days and this disconnection could potentially be explained in part by our declining sense of community outlined by Putnam in *Bowling Alone*. The problem is that Putnam’s core thesis of declining civic engagement being problematic for American society is buried underneath an admittedly impressive array of figures and statistics that left a man that has a Master’s Degree befuddled at times. This opens up a bigger problem, it is a dense and heavy slog that while fine as an academic work, may not make its way into the hands of the people who could really use the information to affect change within their community. Not everyone is blessed to have had access to the book smarts that I have, nor should we believe that a bunch of academics are going to be the saviors of the world. Street smarts and community knowledge are going to be needed just as much as academics to deal with this problem. While other reviewers have brought up the validity issue of some or all of the measures of social engagement that Putnam uses, I am more sympathetic because it is a difficult concept to measure. *Bowling Alone* was for me a very sobering analysis that made me reconsider the things in my own personal life and if a book can do that, then it is obviously quite valuable. I just wish that I didn’t have to wade through 411 pages of verbose prose and stats to have this sobering wake up call.

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