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Bowling Alone

Sumana Chattopadhyay
Marquette University, sumana.chattopadhyay@marquette.edu

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Bowling Alone

Bowling Alone is a book written by Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam. In this book, Putnam talks about the decline in civic life in America. He specifically talks about the erosion in relationships, networks, and interactions, a concept which he refers to as social capital, which is somewhat similar to financial or human capital. Social capital allows greater productivity, promotes volunteerism, and instills concern about the society as a whole. Putnam points to evidence of decline in participation in a variety of civic arenas—politics, churches, labor unions, parent-teacher organizations, and fraternal organizations. The title of the book derives from Putnam's observation that civil society is breaking down as Americans are becoming more disconnected from their families, neighbors, and communities. Thus the organizations that sustain democracy are fast disappearing. Putnam uses the bowling metaphor to highlight the difference between the past and the present—there was a time when thousands of people belonged to bowling leagues, but today, they are more likely to bowl alone.

In *Bowling Alone* Putnam identifies two kinds of social capital—bridging and bonding social capital. The former, he says, refers to the value assigned to social networks between homogeneous groups of people and the latter to social networks between socially heterogeneous groups. Typical examples could be that criminal gangs create bonding social capital, while choirs and bowling clubs create bridging social capital. Putnam argues that bridging social capital in particular is more beneficial for societies, governments, individuals, and communities.

Despite suggesting the two kinds of social capital, Putnam's *Bowling Alone* is not a treatise on social capital. In this book, Putnam first raises his concern about the civic decline and then goes on to provide possible explanations for why this kind of phenomenon is taking place. He identifies television, both parents working, and the growth of suburbs leading to longer commutes as a few probable culprits leading to this decline in civic life.

Putnam's thesis, however, has been heavily criticized in recent years. One criticism that has particularly been noted is that by focusing on formal membership in organizations such as the League of Women Voters, the Boy Scouts, and the Elks, Putnam has overlooked other, newer forms of civic engagement which have compensated for the fall in membership in these particular organizations. Critics suggest that declining church attendance may have actually been offset by increased participation in small support groups and that shrinking membership in the League of Women Voters and the Shriners may have been replaced by increase in membership in other forums such as the Sierra Club or the American Association of Retired Persons. Bowling leagues might be shrinking, but perhaps other sports clubs are gaining in popularity. So the harshest criticism is that Putnam mistook change for decline, failing to recognize that the vessels through which Americans channel their civic engagement may have changed, but the overall level of engagement remains stable. However, despite these criticisms, *Bowling Alone* continues to be a popular book on civic participation

Sumana Chattopadhyay

See also Political Engagement

Further Readings

Chaves, M. (2000). [Review of the book *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*]. *Christian Century,* 754–756.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community.* New York: Simon & Schuster.