

## ROBERT PUTNAM

From *Bowling Alone*

*In one of the most influential studies of the late twentieth century, social scientist Robert Putnam explains the importance of "social capital" in Americans' lives—the person-to-person contacts that create complex networks of relationships among citizens. These networks, especially as they traditionally existed in the many civic associations that permeated American towns and cities, have dramatically declined in number and relevance in recent decades, Putnam believes. He discusses the difference between social capital and other forms of capital that is bridging. Putnam concludes the excerpt by identifying reasons why Americans today are "bowling alone." It's a problem, for citizens, he feels, because strong networks of interpersonal relationships lead to healthy, happy lives.*

NO ONE IS LEFT from the Glenn Valley, Pennsylvania, Bridge Club who can tell us precisely when or why the group broke up, even though its forty-odd members were still playing regularly as recently as 1990, just as they had done for more than half a century. The shock in the Little Rock, Arkansas, Seneca club, however, is still painful: in the mid-1980s, nearly fifty people had attended the weekly luncheon to plan activities to help the hearing- and speech-impaired, but a decade later only seven regulars continued to show up.

The Roanoke, Virginia, chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been an active force for civil rights since 1918, but during the 1990s membership withered from about 2,500 to a few hundred. By November 1998 even a heated contest for president drew only fifty-seven voting members. Black city councillor Carroll Swain observed ruefully, "Some people today are a wee bit complacent until something jumps up and bites them." VFW Post 2378 in Berwyn, Illinois, a blue-collar suburb of Chicago, was long a bustling "home away from home" for local veterans and a kind of working-class country club for the neighborhood, hosting wedding receptions and dis reunions. By 1999, however, membership had so dwindled that it was a struggle just to pay taxes on the yellow brick post hall. Although numerous veterans of Vietnam and the post-Vietnam military lived in the area, Tom

Kissel, national membership director for the VFW, observed, "Kids today just aren't joiners."

The Charity League of Dallas had met every Friday morning for fifty-seven years to sew, knit, and visit, but on April 30, 1999, they held their last meeting; the average age of the group had risen to eighty, the last new member had joined two years earlier, and president Pax Dilbeck said ruefully, "I feel like this is a sinking ship." Precisely three days later and 1,200 miles to the northeast, the Vassar alumnae of Washington, D.C., closed down their fifty-first—and last—annual book sale. Even though they aimed to sell more than one hundred thousand books to benefit college scholarships in the 1999 event, co-chair Alix Myerson explained, the volunteers who ran the program "are in their sixties, seventies, and eighties. They're dying, and they're not replaceable." Meanwhile, as Towlebury Memorial High School (TMHS), just north of Boston, opened in the fall of 1999, forty brand-new royal blue uniforms newly purchased for the marching band remained in storage, since only four students signed up to play. Roger Whistler, TMHS band director, recalled that twenty years earlier the band numbered more than eighty, but participation had waned ever since. Somehow in the last several decades of the twentieth century all these community groups and tens of thousands like them across America began to fade.

It wasn't so much that old members dropped out—at least not any more rapidly than age and the accidents of life had always meant. But community organizations were no longer continuously revitalized, as they had been in the past, by freshmen of new members. . . .

. . . In recent years social scientists have framed concerns about the changing character of American society in terms of the concept of "social capital." By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital—tools and training that enhance individual productivity—the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value. Just as a stewardship (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups.

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called "civic virtue." The difference is that "social capital" calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society

of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital . . .

[Social capital has both an individual and a collective aspect—a private face and a public face. First, individuals form connections that benefit our own interests. One pervasive strategy of ambitious job seekers is “networking” for most of us get our jobs because of whom we know not what we know—that is, our social capital, not our human capital. Economic sociologist Ronald Burt has shown that executives with bonus-ous Rolodex files enjoy faster career advancement. As Claude S. Fischer, return to social capital limited to economic rewards. Nor is the private a sociologist of friendship has noted, “Social networks are important in all our lives, often for finding jobs, move often for finding a helping hand, companionship, or a shoulder to cry on.”

If individual doubt and companionship were all there were to social capital, we’d expect frightened, self-interested individuals to invest the right amount of time and energy in creating or acquiring it. However, social capital also can have “externalities” that affect the wider community, so that not all the costs and benefits of social connections accrue to the person making the contact. As we shall see later . . . a well-connected individual in a poorly connected society is not as productive as a well-connected individual in a well-connected society. And even a poorly connected individual may derive some of the spillover benefits from living in a well-connected community. If the crime rate in my neighborhood is lowered by neighbors keeping an eye on one another’s homes, I benefit even if I personally spend most of my time on the road and never even need to another resident on the street.

Social capital can thus be simultaneously a “private good” and a “public good.” Some of the benefits from an investment in social capital goes to by-standers, while some of the benefit redounds to the immediate interest of the person making the investment. For example, service clubs like Rotary or Lions, mobilize local energies to raise scholarships or fight disease at the same time that they provide members with friendships and business connections that pay off personally.

Social connections are also important for the rules of conduct that they sustain. Networks involve (almost by definition) mutual obligations; they are not interesting as mere “contacts.” Networks of community engagement foster sturdy norms of reciprocity. I’ll do this for you now, in the expectation that you (or perhaps someone else) will return the favor. “Social capital is akin to what Tom Wolfe called ‘the favor bank’ in his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*,” notes economist Robert Frank

It was, however, neither a novelist nor an economist, but Yogi Berra who offered the most succinct definition of reciprocity: “If you don’t go to somebody’s funeral, they won’t come to yours.”

Sometimes, as in these cases, reciprocity is *specific*. I’ll do this for you if you do that for me. Even more valuable, however, is a norm of *generalized* reciprocity: I’ll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road. The Golden Rule is one formulation of generalized reciprocity. Equally instructive is the T-shirt slogan used by the Gold Beach, Oregon, Volunteer Fire Department to publicize their annual fund-raising effort: “Come to our breakfast, we’ll come to your fire.” We act on a norm of specific reciprocity,” the firefighters seem to be saying, but onlookers smile because they recognize the underlying norm of generalized reciprocity—the firefighters will come even if you don’t. When Blanche Dubois depended on the kindness of strangers, she too was relying on generalized reciprocity.

A society characterized by generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society, for the same reason that money is more efficient than barter. If we don’t have to balance every exchange instantly, we can get a lot more accomplished. Trustworthiness lubricates social life. Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity. Civic engagement and social capital entail mutual obligation and responsibility for action. As L. J. Hanifan and his successors recognized, social networks and norms of reciprocity can facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. When economic and political dealing is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism and malfeasance are reduced. This is why the diamond trade, with its extreme possibilities for fraud, is concentrated within close-knit ethnic enclaves. Dense social ties facilitate gossip and other valuable ways of cultivating reputation—in an essential foundation for trust in a complex society.

Physical capital is not a single “thing,” and different forms of physical capital are not interchangeable. An eggbeater and an aircraft carrier both appear as physical capital in our national accounts, but the eggbeater is not much use for national defense, and the carrier would not be much help with your morning omelet. Similarly, social capital—that is, social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity—comes in many different shapes and sizes with many different uses. Your extended family represents a form of social capital, as do your Sunday school class, the regulars who play poker on your commuter train, your college roommates,

Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological supplegue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40. Bonding social capital, by creating strong in-group loyalty, may also create strong out-group antagonism, as Thomas Greene and his neighbors in New Bedford knew, and for that reason we might expect negative external effects to be more common with this form of social capital. Nevertheless, under many circumstances both bridging and bonding social capital can have powerfully positive social effects.

Many groups simultaneously bond along some social dimensions and bridge across others. The black church, for example, brings together people of the same race and religion across class lines. The Knights of Columbus was created to bridge cleavages among different ethnic communities while bonding along religious and gender lines. Internet chat groups may bridge across geography, gender, age, and religion, while being tightly homogeneous in education and ideology. In short, bonding and bridging are not "either-or" categories into which social networks can be neatly divided, but "more or less" dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital.

Before October 29, 1997, John Lambert and Andy Boschma knew each other only through their local bowling league at the Ypsi-Abor Lanes in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Lambert, a sixty-four-year-old retired employee of the University of Michigan hospital, had been on a kidney transplant waiting list for three years when Boschma, a thirty-three-year-old accountant, learned casually of Lambert's need and unexpectedly approached him to offer to donate one of his own kidneys.

"Andy saw something in me that others didn't," said Lambert. "When we were in the hospital Andy said to me, 'John, I really like you and have a lot of respect for you. I wouldn't hesitate to do this all over again. I got choked up.'" Boschma returned the feeling: "I obviously feel a kinship [with Lambert]. I cared about him before, but now I'm really rooting for him." This moving story speaks for itself, but the photograph that accompanied this report in the *American News* reveals that in addition to their differences in profession and generation, Boschma is white and Lambert is African American. That they bowled together made all the difference, in small ways like this—yet in larger ways, too—we Americans need to reconnect with one another.

Something important happened to social bonds and civic engagement in America over the last third of the twentieth century. Before exploring why, let's summarize what we have learned.

During the first two-thirds of the century Americans took a more and more active role in the social and political life of their communities—

the civic organizations to which you belong, the Internet chat group in which you participate, and the network of professional acquaintances recorded in your address book.

Of all the dimensions along which forms of social capital vary, perhaps the most important is the distinction between *bridging* (or inclusive) and *bonding* (or exclusive). Some forms of social capital are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups. Examples of bonding social capital include ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based women's reading groups, and faith-based country clubs. Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement, many youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organizations.

Bonding social capital is good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity. Dense networks in ethnic enclaves, for example, provide crucial social and psychological support for less fortunate members of the community, while furnishing start-up financing, mentors, and reliable labor for local entrepreneurs. Bridging networks, by contrast, are better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion. Economic sociologist Mark Granovetter has pointed out that when seeking jobs—or political allies—the "weak" ties that link me to distant acquaintances who move in different circles from mine are actually more valuable than the "strong" ties that link me to relatives and intimate friends whose sociological niche is very like my own. Bonding social capital is, as Xavier de Souza Briggs puts it, good for "getting by," but bridging social capital is crucial for "getting ahead."

Moreover, bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves. In 1829 at the founding of a community lyceum in the budding whaling port of New Bedford, Massachusetts, Thomas Greene eloquently expressed this crucial insight:

We come from all the divisions, ranks and classes of society . . . to teach and to be taught in our turn. While we mingle together in these pursuits, we shall learn to know each other more intimately, we shall remove many of the prejudices which ignorance or partial acquaintance with each other had fostered . . . in the parties and sects into which we are divided, we sometimes learn to love our brother at the expense of him whom we do not in so many respects regard as a brother. . . . We may return to our homes and friends [from the lyceum] with kinder feelings toward one another, because we have learned to know one another better.

in churches and union halls, in bowling alleys and clubrooms, around computer cables and card tables and dinner tables. Year by year we gave more generosity to charity, we pitched in more often on community projects, and (insofar as we can still find reliable evidence) we behaved in an increasingly unworshipful way toward one another. Then, mysteriously and more or less simultaneously, we began to do all those things less often.

We are still more civically engaged than citizens in many other countries, but compared with our own recent past, we are less connected. We remain interested and critical spectators of the public scene. We blither but we don't play. We maintain a facade of formal affiliation, but we rarely show up. We have invented new ways of expressing our demands that demand less of us. We are less likely to turn out for collective deliberation—whether in the voting booth or the meeting hall—and when we do, we find that discouragingly few of our friends and neighbors have shown up. We are less generous with our money and (with the important exception of senior citizens) with our time, and we are less likely to give strangers the benefit of the doubt. They, of course, return the favor.

Not all social networks have atrophied. Thin, single-stranded, surf-by-interactions are gradually replacing dense, multistranded, well-exercised bonds. More of our social connectedness is one-shot, special purpose, and self-oriented. As sociologist Morris Janowitz foresaw several decades ago, we have developed "communities of limited liability," or what sociologists Claude Fischer, Robert Jackson, and their colleagues describe more hopefully as "personal communities." Large groups with local chapters, long histories, multiple objectives, and diverse constituencies are being replaced by more evanescent, single-purpose organizations, smaller groups that "reflect the fluidity of our lives by allowing us to bond easily but to break our attachments with equivalent ease." Grassroots groups that once brought us face-to-face with our neighbors, the agreeable and disagreeable alike, are overshadowed by the veriginous rise of trait-fled interest groups purpose built to represent our narrower selves. Place-based social capital is being supplanted by function-based social capital. We are withdrawing from those networks of reciprocity that once constituted our communities. . . .

Let us sum up what we have learned about the factors that have contributed to the decline in civic engagement and social capital. . . .

First, pressures of time and money, including the special pressures on two-career families, contributed measurably to the diminution of our social and community involvement during these years. My best guess is that no more than 10 percent of the total decline is attributable to that set of factors.

Second, suburbanization, commuting, and sprawl also played a supporting role. Again, a reasonable estimate is that these factors together might account for perhaps an additional 10 percent of the problem.

Third, the effect of electronic entertainment—above all, television—in privatizing our leisure time has been substantial. My rough estimate is that this factor might account for perhaps 25 percent of the decline.

Fourth and most important, generational change—the slow, steady, and ineluctable replacement of the long civic generation by their less involved children and grandchildren—has been a very powerful factor. The effects of generational succession vary significantly across different measures of civic engagement—greater for more public forums, less for private volunteering—but as a rough rule of thumb we concluded. . . .

By virtually every conceivable measure, social capital has eroded steadily and sometimes dramatically over the past two generations. The quantitative evidence is overwhelming, yet most Americans did not need to see charts and graphs to know that something bad has been happening in their communities and in their country. Americans have had a growing sense at some visceral level of disintegrating social bonds. It is perhaps a coincidence that on the eve of the millennium the market for civic nostalgia was hotter than the market for blue-chip stocks. For example, newscauter Tom Brokaw's book profiling the heroic World War II generation got mixed reviews from critics yet was a runaway best-seller. In Los Angeles there was an on-again, off-again movement to rename the LAX airport after the actor Jimmy Stewart, a military hero in real life who brought civic heroes Jefferson Smith and George Bailey to the silver screen. American nostalgia in the late twentieth century is no run-of-the-mill, rosy-eyed remembrance of things past. It is an attempt to recapture a time when public-spiritedness really did carry more value and when communities really did "work." As we buy books and rename airports, we seem to be saying that as a profound level civic virtue and social capital do matter.

Are we right? Does social capital have salutary effects on individuals, communities, or even entire nations? Yes, an impressive and growing body of research suggests that civic connections help make us healthy, wealthy, and wise. Living without social capital is not easy, whether one is a villager in southern Italy or a poor person in the American inner city or a well-

healed entrepreneur in a high-tech industrial district. If we are to believe that social capital benefits individuals and communities, we must first understand how social capital works its magic. High levels of trust and citizen participation operate through a variety of mecha-

nisms to produce socially desirable outcomes. Obviously the mechanism(s) at work will vary by the circumstance and outcome in question. But in general, social capital has many features that help people translate aspirations into realities.

First, social capital allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily. Social scientists have long been concerned about "dilemmas" of collective action. Such dilemmas are ubiquitous, and their dynamics are straightforward. People often might all be better off if they cooperate with each doing her share. But each individual benefits more by shirking her responsibility, hoping that others will do the work for her. Moreover, even if she is wrong and the others shirk, too, she is still better off than if she had been the only sucker. Obviously if every individual thinks that the others will do the work, nobody will end up taking part, and all will be left worse off than if all had contributed.

Supporting government through a tax system is a dilemma of collective action. So is limiting lawn sprinklers and long showers during arid summers. These and other coordination challenges go by various names—"collective-action problems," "the prisoner's dilemma," "the free-rider problem," and "the tragedy of the commons," to name a few. But they all share one feature: They are best solved by an institutional mechanism with the power to ensure compliance with the collectively desirable behavior. Social norms and the networks that enforce them provide such a mechanism.

Second, social capital greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly. Where people are trusting and trustworthy, and where they are subject to repeated interactions with fellow citizens, everyday business and social transactions are less costly. There is no need to spend time and money making sure that others will uphold their end of the arrangement or penalizing them if they don't. Economists such as Oliver Williamson and political scientists such as Elinor Ostrom have demonstrated how social capital translates into financial capital and resource wealth for businesses and self-governing units. Indeed, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Kenneth Arrow has concluded, "Virtually every commercial transaction has within itself an element of trust, certainly any transaction conducted over a period of time. It can be plausibly argued that much of the economic backwardness in the world can be explained by a lack of mutual confidence."

A third way in which social capital improves our lot is by widening our awareness of the many ways in which our fates are linked. People who have active and trusting connections to others—whether family members, friends, or fellow bowlers—develop or maintain character traits