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In "Bowling Alone", Putnam argues that our democracy is not as good as it once was because there has been a decline in social capital during the past quarter century. Putnam defines social capital to be the "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit". There are three questions that must be addressed in evaluating his argument. First, has the quality of our democracy decreased? Since Putnam considers political participation to be an indicator of the quality of our democracy, for him the first question becomes, has the level of political participation fallen? Second, has civic engagement decreased? And finally, is there a link between civic engagement and quality of governance? This paper will argue that the quality of our democracy has decreased and the level of civic engagement has decreased, but that the relationship between them is not as clear as Putnam conceives it. The quality of our democracy has decreased, but the best indicator of this decrease is the way that we participate, rather than the amount that we participate. The way we participate in our political system is closely tied to the way that we participate in non-political social groups.

First, consider whether the level of political participation has fallen. Putnam is far from alone in his belief that political participation has declined. The author Neuman claims that currently "apathy dominates American mass politics." One indication of citizen apathy is the decline in electoral turnout. The percentage of registered voters who actually vote in presidential elections has been mostly decreasing: 62.8% in 1960, 61.9% in 1964, 60.9% in 1968, 55.5% in 1972, 54.4% in 1976, 52.3% in 1980, 52.9% in 1984. Many Americans who are eligible to vote never even register. For instance, Reagan's election in 1984 was "based on the support of less than a third of the potential electorate." 6

However, there is considerable debate as to whether Americans participate less in political life in ways other than voting. Putnam relies upon reports that the number of Americans who say that in the past year they have attended a public meeting on town or school affairs has dropped from 22% in 1973 to 13% in 1993. He also says that, "surveys show sharp declines in many measures of collective political participation, including attending a rally or a speech (down 36 percent between 1973 and 1993), attending a meeting on town or school affairs (down 39 percent), or working for a political party (down 56 percent)."
As opposed to Putnam, the researchers Verba, Schlozman, and Brady claim that "data about a wider range of political acts suggest that the decrease in voter turnout may not be part of a general erosion in political participation." They report a difference in the way that people participate, namely that "there has been an increase in the proportion reporting having contributed to a political campaign and a decrease in the share mentioning membership in a political club." They feel that their data reflect that "nationalization and professionalization have redefined the role of citizen activist as, increasingly, a writer of checks and letters." It is important to note that even if Verba, Schlozman, and Brady are correct that there has been an increase in non-voting forms of political participation, "political activity has not grown at rates that we might have expected on the basis of the substantial increase in levels of educational attainment within the public."

It appears then that a reasonable description of the political participation of Americans over the past few decades is this: There has been a sharp decrease in the proportion of people who vote in national elections, and the other ways that Americans participate in politics have certainly changed. Putnam's assertion that the quality of our democracy has declined is correct: however, this decline is better indicated by the changes in participation described by Verba, et al. Consider that, since 1980, the distribution of wealth in the United States has become increasingly unequal. For instance, the share of the wealth owned by the top 1 percent of families has increased from 27% in 1981 to 42% in 1992. A change in political participation that favors check-writing creates a situation in which there is a small segment of society with an increasing power to influence politics by monetary contributions. As stated by Brady, Verba, and Schlozman: "To the extent that money is the least equally distributed resource and to the extent that making contributions has become in recent decades an increasingly important citizen activity, the character of American politics is profoundly altered."

Next, consider the question: Has civic engagement decreased? To support his claims that there has been a decrease in civic engagement, Putnam draws on data indicating that people participate less in non-political organizations. Putnam argues that "net participation by Americans, both in religious services and in church-related groups, has declined modestly (by perhaps a sixth) since the 1960s." He cites data on volunteering that suggest that regular volunteering declined by about one-sixth from 1974 to 1989 and that fraternal organizations such as the Lions, Elks, and Jaycees, have experienced declining membership during the past 10–20 years. It seems that there is considerable evidence to suggest that people are now participating in certain social organizations less than they did a quarter century ago.

However, it would be false to conclude that the average American spends his or her life in the privacy of his or her home, never seeing other people. As with political life, it is not the case that people just don't participate at all anymore, rather that people participate differently. There has been a change in the kinds of groups people participate in. Instead of joining a
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fraternal organization, people are choosing to join a health club or a support group.\textsuperscript{15}

Now we consider the question: Is there a link between civic engagement and quality of governance? Part of why Putnam argues that a link exits between quality of governance and civic engagement is the research he conducted in Italy. Fifteen regional governments were established in Italy in 1970.\textsuperscript{16} The regions possessed essentially identical constitutions and mandates, but the social contexts of the regions were quite different. Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti studied the development of the regional governments. The question they wanted to answer was: “What are the conditions for creating strong, responsive, effective representative institutions?”\textsuperscript{17} They found that the characteristics of a region with a successful regional government were “strong traditions of civic engagement—voter turnout, newspaper readership, membership in choral societies and literary circles, Lions Clubs, and soccer clubs.”\textsuperscript{18} It is assumed that we can generalize from regions in Italy to democracy in other countries. In general then, democracy appears to be more successful in communities with a great deal of social capital. Drawing on this data from Italy, Putnam and others would claim that the unsatisfactory state of our political system is a result of a decrease in social capital. He feels that “there is reason to suspect that this democratic disarray may be linked to a broad and continuing erosion of civic engagement that began a quarter-century ago.”\textsuperscript{19}

In discussing how associations could be an important prerequisite for successful democracy, Putnam says, “associations instill in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity, and public-spiritness.”\textsuperscript{20} He argues that associations, including non-political organizations, teach “skills of cooperation and as well as a sense of shared responsibility for collective endeavors.”\textsuperscript{21} His claims are supported by research conducted by Almond and Verba in which surveys of citizens in five countries show that “members of associations displayed more political sophistication, social trust, political participation, and ‘subjective civic competence’.”\textsuperscript{22}

However, the indications are that people do not form fewer associations and participate less in social groups, but that they join different groups. This raises the question: do these new groups teach the same habits of cooperation and trust? It would appear that they do not since there has been a decline in the degree to which Americans trust other individuals.\textsuperscript{23} I think this is because there are fundamental differences between the kind of organizations that have become popular and the kind that used to be popular. For instance, Putnam argues that a support group does not play the same role as a traditional civic association because the participants focus on themselves and there are few obligations.\textsuperscript{24} Another difference is that the social organizations we join are increasingly defined by the physical space we meet in rather than by long-lasting connections and trust between the members. The words we use to describe these activities indicate that we feel differently about them. Notice that people say that they, “participate in the Lions Club”, but they say that they “go
to the health club”. Consider that in a report intended to contradict Putnam’s claims of decreased civic engagement, the authors say, “the gymnasium and the church are the principal centers for the informal social activities.” Yet the PTA would still be the PTA no matter where the meeting was held. The other difference in the organizations we join now is that in general they are more focused in their purpose. People join health clubs to get fit, sports clubs to play basketball, and support groups to get help with some particular problem. But why do they join a fraternal organization such as the Knights of Columbus or the Lions Club? These groups don’t appear to “do” any one thing at all: They raise money for charity, they hold dinners, visit nursing homes, and march in parades. People join these groups because of who they will be doing things with rather than what they will be doing.

Putnam has claimed that the link between political participation and participation in social groups is that social organizations teach habits of trust and cooperation. Other researchers have claimed that social organizations affect political participation in other ways as well. Brady, Verba, and Schlozman addressed the issue of how civic engagement could affect political participation in the development of their Civic Volunteerism Model (CVM). “The most fundamental claim of the CVM is that resources, political engagements, and recruitment through social networks are the basic sources of political participation”. The resources they consider are time, money, and civic skills. Civic skills are “the communication and organizational skills that facilitate effective participation.”

The kinds of political activities in which Putnam demonstrated decreasing participation tend to be the ones that require giving time, e.g., attending a meeting. It is possible that the most important effect of declining social capital on decreased participation in activities that require giving time has been through civic skills. If a person has interest in politics but few of the communication and organizational skills necessary, he will not participate in activities that require giving time. Not all non-political organizations offer the opportunity to learn and improve civic skills. In general, the organizations that are most popular now do not improve civic skills. For instance, attending a health club or church will probably not involve much practice in letter writing or giving speeches or other relevant skills. As far as the effect of social participation on political participation is concerned, the decline in the PTA membership matters, even if the former PTA members join a health club.

Brady, Verba, and Schlozman find that “the major determinant of giving money is having money” and that “years of education also matter, but neither free time nor civic skills affect monetary contributions.” They also find that political interest has only a modest impact. It seems then that monetary contributions should be the form of political participation least likely to decrease with a deterioration in the social connectedness of society since it is unlikely that participation in non-political groups will have a major impact on the participants’ wealth. This finding is relevant to their data.
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indicating that citizen activists have increasingly become “writers of checks.”

If Americans participate by writing checks, then the people with more money will be participating more, and are likely then to be having more effect on who is in control and what policies they implement. In recent responses to critics, Putnam appears to acknowledge this possibility: “Financial capital grows in political importance, while social capital declines. To those Americans who have more money than time, this may seem a mere change in coinage, but the transformation is fundamentally debasing our democracy.”

In conclusion, Putnam’s claim that there has been an decrease in civic engagement is incorrect since it is clear that there are high levels of participation in social organizations. However, the kinds of organizations most people join have changed considerably over the past 25 years. These new kinds of organizations do not foster habits of trust and cooperation because generally they focus on the needs of individuals, because each group focuses on a certain kind of need, and because these groups are strongly tied to the physical space where they meet. The data of Verba, et al indicate that participation in social groups can provide benefits in terms of civic skills. However, the new organizations in general do not teach these skills.

Endnotes

6. Putnam, “Bowling Alone.” pg. 68. He cites the “Roper Organization” as being the source of this statistic.
7. Robert D. Putnam, “The Strange Disappearance of Civic America,” The American Prospect no. 24 (Winter 1996 [http://epn.org/prospect/24/24putn.html]). approx. pg. 1–2. The source of these statistics is probably also the Roper Organization since: (1.0 – 0.39) * (0.22) = 0.1342 which is approximately 13%.
15. Putnam, “Bowling Alone.” Putnam points out that support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous have increased in membership. This matches with the Pew Research Center’s summary of their study entitled: “Trust and Citizen Engagement in Metropolitan Philadelphia: A Case Study,” which indicates that many people participate in health clubs and support groups.
22. Making Democracy Work. Putnam. pg. 90. The research he cites is in chapter 11 of Civic Culture by Almond and Verba, which was written in 1965.