Praise for *Bowling Alone*

"An ambitious book . . . *Bowling Alone* is a prodigious achievement. Mr. Putnam's scholarship is wide-ranging, his intelligence luminous, his tone modest, his prose unpretentious and frequently funny."

—*The Economist*

"An important work that is likely to be the center of much debate . . . Books of sociological insight as readable and significant as David Reisman's *Lonely Crowd* and C. Wright Mills's *Power Elite* come along seldom. Putnam's work belongs in their company."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Putnam can be fliply hip. But mainly he is learned. . . . The book . . . is responsible, intricate, and balanced . . . full of convincing detail."

—Michael Pakenham, *The Baltimore Sun*

"Deserves to be compared to such classic works as *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Affluent Society.*"

—John Atlas, *Newark Star-Ledger*

"Its four hundred pages are crammed with statistics and analyses that seek to document civic decline in the United States. . . . *Bowling Alone* is to be commended for stimulating awareness of civic engagement and providing a wealth of data on trends in contemporary America."

—Francis Fukuyama, *The Washington Post*

"A mountainous, momentous work . . . This is no professorial popgun attempting the crossover from classroom to mass market; it is an antitank gun of an argument, relentlessly researched and heavily armored against academic counterassault. . . . A fabric of stunning comprehensiveness. [Putnam's] put his finger on an important sociological development."

—David Nyhan, *The Boston Globe*

"In this alarming and important study, Putnam charts the grievous deterioration over the past two generations of the organized ways in which people relate to one another and partake in civil life in the U.S. . . . Marshalling a plentiful array of facts, figures, charts, and survey results, Putnam delivers his message with verve and clarity . . . [and offers] a ray of hope in what he perceives to be a dire situation."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"A formidable book . . . There is no place, in my knowledge, where so much about the current disconnectedness of American society has been uncovered, assembled, and presented as in the text, charts, and notes within [*Bowling Alone*]."

—Curtis Gans, *Washington Monthly*

"The strength of Putnam's book is not its theoretical or conceptual novelty but its accumulation and sifting of data. . . . [Putnam] lays out with considerable precision and far more subtlety than he has yet been given credit for, the trends in civic engagement and social capital in all aspects of life."

—James Davison Hunter, *The Weekly Standard*

"A powerful sociological portrait of a democracy in imminent decline—a portrait as perspicacious, deeply felt, and firmly rooted in data as the classic American portraits rendered in . . . *The Lonely Crowd*. . . . *Bowling Alone* is a modern classic: a model of fastidious, prudent, self critical social science that manages to be data-rich without being theory-averse, scholarly yet undeniably relevant."

—Benjamin Barber, *The Nation*

"*Bowling Alone* provides important new data on the trends in civic engagement and social capital, a revised analysis of the causes of the decline, an exploration of its consequences, and ideas about what might be done. The book will not settle the debate, but it is a formidable achievement. It will henceforth be impossible to discuss these issues knowledgeably without reading Putnam's book and thinking about it."

—Paul Starr, *The New Republic*

"*Bowling Alone* is well worth the reading. The topic is important, and the passion infectious. Putnam gets you thinking about the challenges to community in a high-tech economy."

—Christopher Farrell, *BusinessWeek*

"*Bowling Alone* [is] . . . a singularly valuable beta test for anyone thinking about applying the idea of social capital to other problems. . . .This is powerful stuff. Indeed, in the wrong hands—those of a purple haired refugee from Seattle demonstrations, perhaps . . . it could be used to make an inflammatory case against corporate America."

—Walter Kiechel, *Harvard Business Review*

"A provocative discussion. [Putnam] shows us the real problems . . . and offers some broad-based goals that will help us to connect better with one another."

—*Inc. Magazine*

"This book deserves a wide audience. It deals seriously and imaginatively with one of the most urgent problems of our time."

—Sanford D. Horwitt, *The Industry Standard*

"Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* is an eloquent and powerful contribution to a long tradition of important reassessments of the American condition. His argument—buttressed by impressive scholarly research—that the United States has lost much of the social glue that once allowed our society to cohere, that we are in danger of becoming a nation of strangers to one another without adequate social bonds, is certain to become a central part of our national conversation."

—Alan Brinkley, author of *Liberalism and Its Discontents*

"A marvelously researched and well written book . . . Putnam does a splendid job of explaining our loss of social capital . . . [and] has written an extremely provocative book—one that provides a penetrating insight into the modern American psyche."

—Howard Upton, *Tulsa World*

"Plainly argued and compulsively readable . . . [*Bowling Alone*] is an agenda-setting book that will be the starting point of discussion and debate for years to come."

—Mark Chaves, *The Christian Century*

"*Bowling Alone* is a tour de force. Robert Putnam has amassed an impressive array of evidence for his original and powerful thesis on the decline of social capital and civic engagement in the past several decades. This thought-provoking book will stimulate huge academic and national public policy debates on the crisis of the American community."

—William Julius Wilson, Harvard University

"Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* is a must-read."

—Diane Ravitch, author of *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*

"Whether you agree with the central thesis of *Bowling Alone*, Putnam's argument deserves to be seriously considered by everyone interested in our social well-being. Each of us should read *Bowling Alone* alone—and then discuss it together."

—William Kristol, Editor and Publisher, *The Weekly Standard*

"Concerns about the cost of progress for traditional community spirit and neighborliness are examined in a very readable manner by Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*."

—Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern

Also by Robert D. Putnam

The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again (with Shaylyn Romney Garrett)

Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis

American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us (with David E. Campbell and Shaylyn Romney Garrett)

Better Together: Restoring the American Community (with Lewis M. Feldstein)

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BOWLING ALONE: Revised and Updated

THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Robert D. Putnam

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To Ruth Swank Putnam
and to the memory of Frank L. Putnam,
Louis Werner, and Zelda Wolock Werner,
exemplars of the long civic generation

Contents

Preface[1]

In 1995 I published an article in a well-respected but somewhat obscure academic journal, summarizing a lecture I had given in Sweden on the topic of civic engagement in America. Throughout the previous year, I had been following a hunch, poking around in various data sets attempting to piece together a picture of how Americans' participation in membership organizations and civic groups had changed over the preceding decades. My preliminary findings seemed to show a steep decline in participation. Based upon previous work I had done in Italy—which argued that healthy democracies depend upon social connectedness—I began to wonder if some of the challenges America was facing as we approached the end of the twentieth century might have their roots in a shrinking stock of social capital.

At the time, I never expected the article to receive much attention. But before I knew it, I found myself in the middle of a deluge of discussion, debate, and dissent around the questions it provoked. Were more and more Americans indeed bowling—as well as worshipping, picnicking, politicking, and engaging in countless other "social" activities—alone (or not at all)? If so, why? And what could it mean for a nation that supposedly counted community and collective action as founding virtues? Suddenly social scientists, politicians, pundits, PTA presidents, and seemingly everyone in between were talking about social capital, "bridging" and "bonding," and the fact that something palpable had begun to change in America.

The article's unexpected reception put me on a winding path to ex-

plore these questions in earnest—mining obscure troves of data, developing original methods of measurement, following a fair number of dead ends, and testing every conceivable counterhypothesis. It was a far longer research journey than I had ever imagined it would be, but the story I unearthed—with the considerable and invaluable help of some of the most skilled researchers with whom I've ever had the pleasure of working—confirmed the nascent hypotheses my article had first explored. In 2000, *Bowling Alone* was published.[2]

Academic reception of the book's thesis was nuanced and initially somewhat critical, as was perfectly appropriate. No scientific claim is ever beyond debate. And no analytical debate is ever really concluded. In fact, the only reason for readers to trust me at all is that I agree in advance to subject myself to peer criticism and incorporate both that criticism and emerging new evidence into my own unfolding understanding. That process of self-correction is how good science works. *Bowling Alone* made bold claims about the direction in which our country was headed as we rounded the corner into a new century. And now, twenty years later, we are left to wonder how those claims have held up. Most, it turns out, have held up reasonably well.[3]

- One of the central arguments of the book is that both *civic engagement* and *organizational involvement* experienced marked declines during the second half of the twentieth century.[4] According to the best available evidence, these declines have continued uninterrupted. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, fewer and fewer Americans are socializing through membership organizations.[5]
- The decline in *church membership* and *church attendance*, two other phenomena *Bowling Alone* detailed, has not only continued but sharply accelerated over the past twenty years.[6] Rates of church attendance seemed to be heading back upward as the new century opened but took a nosedive thereafter. I explored this in depth in a 2010 book with David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. That work detailed how Americans today are experiencing faith in increasingly individualistic ways. This dramatic "rise of the 'nones' " (a term for those who do not identify with and are not affiliated with any religion) is particularly pronounced among the youngest cohort of Americans, heralding yet further declines in religiosity in the years ahead.
- The decline of *union membership*, another important trend identified in the book, has also accelerated since the first edition of *Bowling Alone*. And the cultural salience of unions has also continued to wane.[7]

- The collapse of *philanthropic generosity*, which *Bowling Alone* laid bare,[8] by some measures paused during the late 1990s and early 2000s, as aggregate philanthropy (measured by total dollars given) was boosted by megagifts from the megawealthy. But after those boom years, aggregate philanthropy declined once again. Meanwhile, measures of charitable donations that looked at giving by the average American (to churches, local fundraising drives, and organizations such as the United Way) continued to fall, just as *Bowling Alone* had anticipated.[9]
- According to the best available evidence, *social trust* has deteriorated further over the past twenty years as well. This continues to be explained in part by generational replacement, as *Bowling Alone* had argued. As more trusting generations have died out, they have been succeeded by less trusting youth cohorts, leaving America a less trusting society, year after year.[10]
- Contrary to these continued declines, the last two decades have seen little to no consistent change in *volunteerism*.[11] Actually, that is consistent with what *Bowling Alone* reported,[12] although few readers remember that exception to the otherwise downward trends the book described.
- While all of the aforementioned trends that *Bowling Alone* identified are still visible more than twenty years later, the verdicts on two other hypothetical downturns are more controversial. *Political participation* is a mixed picture.[13] Since the year 2000, voting levels have gone both up and down, though basically down. Overall, campaign participation has not decreased; but political alienation has grown significantly.[14] So in some cases the declines in political participation have continued, but in other cases not.
- The nature of trends in *informal social connections* remains hotly contested.[15] A great debate between Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew E. Brashears (who reported a decline in close personal ties between 1985 and 2004[16]) and Claude Fischer (who denied such a decline[17]) was fought to a draw, in my opinion. Fischer's work showed that *complete* social isolation had not increased during that period, but McPherson et al. argued that, on average, close personal ties had in fact declined. In examining the hypothesis of a decline in informal social connections, *Bowling Alone* drew on many different data sources, but the dispute between Fischer and McPherson et al. raged entirely on the basis of a single data archive: the General Social Survey (GSS). Later work by Brashears[18] and Pew[19] confirmed that while total social isolation had not increased, the average size of Americans' core discussion networks

contracted by about one-third after 1985. Moreover, these personal networks had contracted inward, so to speak, with the biggest declines outside the family and the slightest declines inside the family.[20] Thus, as I see it, despite extensive debate and independent confirmation by other scholars, the most balanced judgment about *Bowling Alone*'s claim about a falloff of informal social connections is neither "true" nor "false," but rather merits the Scottish verdict "not proven."

- But by far the most important development over the past two decades—and one that may yet alter the verdict on *Bowling Alone*—is indeed so significant that it deserves an entire chapter of its own in this Twentieth Anniversary Edition. Though it's now hard to imagine American life without it, the Internet was a nascent invention when the book was written, and social media had yet to be invented. Would (will?) the rise of the Internet offset the downward trends *Bowling Alone* reported? When I wrote the original manuscript, I spent a good deal of time looking at the best available evidence on the topic of how the Internet might evolve and thereby affect trends in social connectedness, but my conclusions were at best speculative. Now, with two decades' worth of experience living our lives online, as well as considerable academic research on the effects of the Internet on nearly every aspect of American life, the picture is somewhat clearer—though still a subject of considerable debate. In the afterword to this edition of *Bowling Alone*, Jonah Hahn and I explore in detail the latest evidence on the effects of the *Internet* and *social media* on social capital.

In the end, the most debatable aspect of *Bowling Alone* was perhaps not the trends it identified. More often, both lay readers and academic experts were concerned with the question of causes. *Why* had social capital declined so precipitously during the latter half of the twentieth century? The past two decades have witnessed prodigious discussion and disputation about my lineup of suspects: Was it really TV or instead inequality? Urban sprawl or immigration? Or some other factor? And how about the somewhat mysterious "generational change" explanation, which was not so much a substantive cause as an accounting mechanism pointing uncertainly to the role of history.

My own views about causation have evolved over twenty years. And I have found that by far the most instructive exercise in my exploration of this question has been to widen the lens on the period of history I was aiming to understand and explain. *Bowling Alone* looked specifically at the second half of the twentieth century and saw mostly declines in measures of social capital. But it ignored the equally important first half of the century, when, as I discovered,

almost all of the measures I identified as trending downward were in fact moving in the opposite direction. The story of social capital in America during the past 125 years turns out to look like an inverted U-curve—starting the century at nearly the same low we experience today, growing until roughly the mid-1960s, then declining again.

And, even more remarkably, this essentially steady rise in America's social capital during the first two-thirds of the century and precipitous fall during the last third turns out to be mirrored in both shape and timing by trends in income equality, political comity, and even cultural communitarianism. This fact was a truly breathtaking discovery for me and launched yet another scholarly journey that produced a book of its own. Thus my latest and fullest interpretation of *why* social capital has been declining over the past half century looks at the interplay among all of these trends—through both their upswing and their downward slide. I therefore encourage readers who are curious about the broader story of change over time in America's social capital to look at my latest book, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*, which I coauthored with Shaylyn Romney Garrett. It is being published contemporaneously with this new edition of *Bowling Alone*.

The lively scholarly discussions *Bowling Alone* inspired, the seemingly endless lines of research it prompted, and the public policy debates it came to inform enriched my professional life more than I could possibly have hoped. But by far the most rewarding aspect of becoming a champion of community in America was to witness the effect it had on the lives of lay readers—both in America and far beyond.

For many years after *Bowling Alone* hit the shelves, I received countless calls, emails, and letters from individuals, community groups, and institutions of all kinds who wanted to share with me how the story of America's lost social capital had resonated with them. Ultimately, the correspondence amounted to a tower of pages nearly two feet tall. And I continue to receive such letters and emails today, some twenty years later.

A great many older Americans wrote to share their personal experience of community decline and disengagement. They related their nostalgia for a bygone America that the data in *Bowling Alone* had captured. "That's exactly how I remember my neighborhood in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in the 1950s," they'd tell me. On the other hand, a number of my own high school classmates and bowling teammates from Port Clinton, Ohio, wrote to compare notes about whether my rendition of the 1950s was in fact too rosy. Others expressed the view that the solidarity produced by hardship in the Great Depression, or military service in World War II, shaped them into communitarians who now felt unmoored in a more individualistic America.

Baby boomers, who came of age in that individualistic America, often wrote expressing fear and concern about growing social divisions and polit-

ical apathy. But they also shared a sense that they had somehow been unwitting accomplices to the unraveling of the social fabric. "You've described my life," I would often hear. "My mother belonged to Hadassah and went to meetings every week. My dad was active in Rotary and bowled in a league. I've not done any of those things as an adult, and I've often felt guilty about it. I thought it was just me, but after reading your book I now know that it's the whole country."

For the great mainline civic and religious organizations that dominated midcentury America, *Bowling Alone* articulated publicly a crisis that had long hovered just below the radar. Local newspapers across the country ran stories about local chapters of the Lions and even the Optimists dying out. Organizations like Rotary and the League of Women Voters sought my advice about how to stanch their membership losses.

College students and young people from all over the country contacted me to say that the book had inspired them to reinvest in civic engagement, localism, and relationships. They sought advice about how to enter a public service career. In fact, *Bowling Alone* seems to have had a special impact on American college campuses. Institutionally speaking, the book became, as the *Democrat and Chronicle* of Rochester, New York, wrote, "a wake-up call for universities . . . part of the reason for the increasing [nationwide] emphasis on [community] service."[21] Shortly after the book's publication, the dean of Harvard College sent me a long autobiographical account of social capital in his own life, followed by an intensive discussion of the implication of *Bowling Alone* for Harvard's policies on such topics as extracurricular activities and the promotion of public service among undergraduates.

And in an unusual example of the curricular impact of *Bowling Alone*, a group of Michigan State students were taking an open-book exam for a course in American Politics, for which they had read *Bowling Alone*. One of the questions on the final exam was, "What would Robert Putnam say about _____?" The students decided in mid-exam to call my office to *ask me* what I would say!

I heard from a great many people wanting to connect with me personally, reaching out to build social capital with a chronicler of its decline. Writers sent me piles of manuscripts, asking for advice and feedback. Readers sent me lists of books they thought I'd enjoy. People everywhere invited me to have coffee on my next visit to their hometown. Several wanted me to come play cards with their bridge group or participate in their meditation circle or attend a meeting at their local Elks Lodge. And I was sent numerous photos of bulletin boards announcing church sermons on *Bowling Alone*.

I also received myriad requests for autographed copies of the book—often to give as a gift to an inspiring civics teacher or a member of the Greatest Gen-

eration. I received fan mail from an incredibly diverse group—from a homemaker in Windermere, England, to Neil Bush of Kennebunkport, Maine. I was moved by how many readers (like a firefighter from Erie, Pennsylvania) took the time to tell me that the book had changed their life. Occasionally, readers even wrote to ask for personal advice about how to increase their own social capital. Indeed, in the very week that I drafted this preface, two decades after the publication of *Bowling Alone*, a Canadian expatriate emailed me to ask whether she should stay in London or return to Toronto for a better social-capital experience.

From Buffalo, New York, to Amarillo, Texas, scores of local papers reviewed the book and connected it to homegrown anecdotes about mounting loneliness, isolation, and alienation. On the other hand, when *USA Today* ran a *Bowling Alone*–linked story asking readers to say why they loved their communities, they were inundated with responses, most of which described the generosity, kindness, and trust that characterized the respondents' hometowns.

In fact, *Bowling Alone* stimulated scores of communities in America to reflect on their past strengths and plans for future renewal. For example, a civic leader in North Carolina wrote, "What a great crusade you have embarked on! I look forward to tracking your progress and the success of Winston-Salem in building social capital across our entire community." The book also inspired (and my research group at Harvard helped organize) a group of more than three dozen towns and cities nationwide to use scientific methods to evaluate their own levels of social capital. Participants included places as diverse as Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Duluth, Minnesota; Lewiston, Maine; San Diego, California; Chicago, Illinois; and Yakima, Washington. This effort ultimately produced the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey,[22] an unparalleled trove of data for ongoing study of community vitality across America. Furthermore, the Social Capital Index, which was an original scholarly contribution of the book[23] and combined several metrics and indicators to create a broad measuring tool for understanding community vitality, has been confirmed and reused multiple times in the past twenty years.

This pattern of communities taking inspiration from *Bowling Alone* to assess and restore their social capital extended abroad as well—to Ottawa, Canada, and even to Ireland, where the then taoiseach (prime minister) introduced me to the classic Irish "third place" by taking me from pub to pub in Dublin and invited me to address his party convention on the topic of social capital. He said publicly that *Bowling Alone* was the most important book he'd ever read. Later an Irish journalist deflated my ego a bit by telling me that the taoiseach hardly ever read anything.

It was gratifying to see social entrepreneurs developing tools and initia-

tives based on the ideas they encountered in *Bowling Alone*. The Internet site Meetup was conceived by entrepreneur Scott Heiferman, who happened to be reading *Bowling Alone* just after 9/11. "Putnam," he said, "basically sold me on the idea that local community is important."[24] Given his technical expertise, it seemed obvious to him that he could help restore local community. Joseph Kopser, a former student of mine and a U.S. Army veteran, wrote a guide to a more community-friendly strategy for counterinsurgency warfare based on the principles of social capital. Sachin Jain, another former student, built outreach programs for lonely senior citizens as the CEO of a health care company called CareMore. Eric Liu, who also studied with me, founded Citizen University, an initiative to revive civics education, and Civic Saturdays, to offer Americans a secular analog to church. And in 2004 David Crowley, a remarkable social entrepreneur from my own city of Boston, used the language and arguments of *Bowling Alone* to jump-start a highly successful new form of community engagement entitled SCI: Social Capital Inc.

Bowling Alone also sparked an interest in social capital in the most far-flung institutional settings. The American Library Association used the book as a resource in crafting its vision of a library for the Internet age, whose focus is on gathering and building community among readers, not storing dead trees. And PBS drew on *Bowling Alone* for inspiration and guidance in reinventing public broadcasting in a more individualistic world. The Franconia (NH) Heritage Council was inspired to compile a two-century history of local organizations and informal groups.[25] *Wellness Bound*, a magazine focused on healthy lifestyles, devoted an entire issue to "Why Social Capital Matters to America."[26] Numerous law review articles reflected on the implications of *Bowling Alone* for jurisprudence, both in the United States and abroad.[27] And in 2004 the Whitney Museum of American Art curated *Social Capital: Forms of Interaction, Relations in Contemporary Art*, an exhibition at the City University of New York.

Twenty-five years ago, I was an unknown academic with no pretensions of being a public intellectual. But the absolutely overwhelming response to the book thrust me into the limelight and changed the course of my career. And I've long reflected on the question of why *Bowling Alone* struck such a chord.

I tried conscientiously to write simultaneously for two different audiences—the scholarly and the public. The former turns out to have been unexpectedly powerful in explaining the "best-seller" status of the book. In fact, the lion's share of sales have been due to its inclusion as supplementary reading on the syllabi of college courses. Ironically, even though the book has been controversial among sociologists, they have assigned it overwhelmingly in their classes. As a result, a surprising proportion of college graduates have become familiar with the book, which is an important part

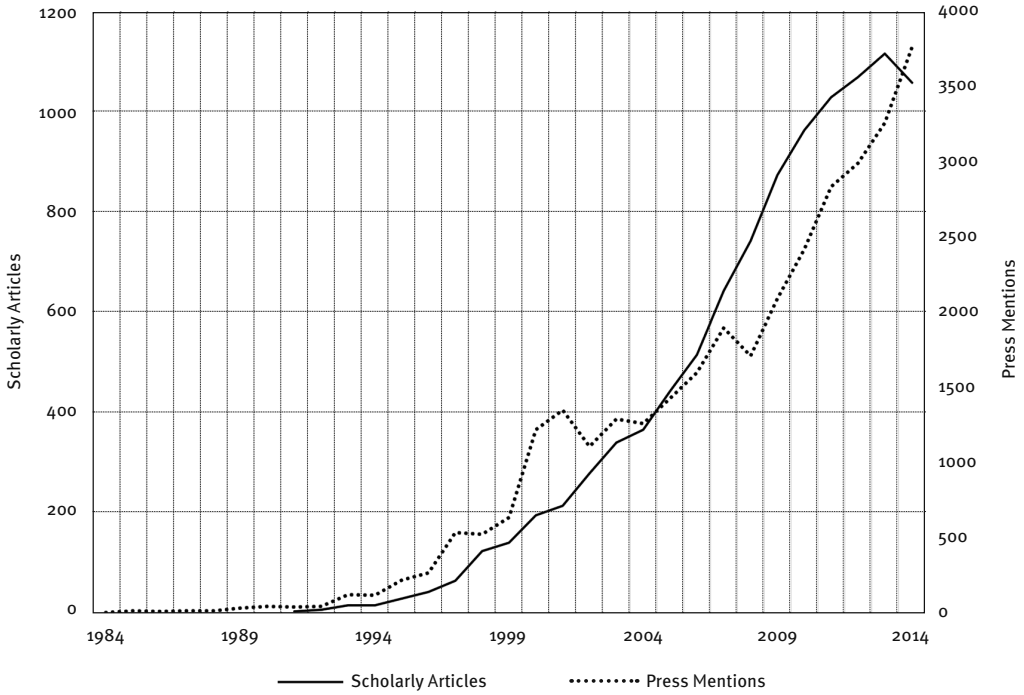

Figure A: Growth in Scholarly and Public Attention to "Social Capital" (1985–2014)

of the reason that the core ideas (and the term "bowling alone") have over time become common currency among ordinary Americans, as figure A illustrates.

Bowling Alone was fortuitously timed to resonate far beyond academia. Before I had anything of substance to say on the matter, many Americans had already noticed that they were less civically engaged than their parents had been. So when a Harvard professor came along with a tome full of charts and graphs that said, in effect, "It's not just you, it's all of us," it hit a nerve. *Bowling Alone* had unwittingly spoken to the Zeitgeist of an anxious nation slowly waking up to its own fraying social fabric.

The book's message also happened to fit the political mood of the day: the "Third Way" of Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and their contemporaries, as well as our nation's hunger for common ground in the wake of 9/11, which happened a month after the book came out in paperback. Many people were attracted to a communitarian perspective that was orthogonal to conventional party lines, and the book's "purple" policy approach was endorsed by conservatives and liberals alike. I've never hidden the fact that my own views are progressive and democratic, nor my collaboration with President Obama; but

many leading conservatives have praised my work. Jeb Bush has attributed his political and ideological resurrection after losing his first campaign for the Florida governor's post in 1994 to having read the original article "Bowling Alone,"[28] and even Rush Limbaugh flirted with the *Bowling Alone* diagnosis of modern American ills, before rejecting its proposed remedies as warmed-over liberalism.[29]

This wide and fertile ground motivated me to become something of a modern-day circuit rider, sharing what I'd found with tens of thousands of people in hundreds of local communities from coast to coast, "an Old Testament prophet with charts," in the words of one observer.[30] I cofounded the Saguaro Seminar, a think tank based at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, which brought together some of the brightest minds working to rebuild community across the country. One member of the seminar went on to occupy the Oval Office. With Lew Feldstein, a veteran community activist, I wrote a follow-up to *Bowling Alone* entitled *Better Together,* in which we highlighted examples of several successful initiatives aimed at restoring our nation's stock of social capital.[31] *Bowling Alone* was translated into nine languages, and political leaders on five continents sought advice (or at least validation) from me.

Along the way I began to embrace the idea captured by the epitaph on Marx's gravestone—that he sought not merely to interpret the world but to change it. My purpose, of course, was to try to contribute to a "revival of American community," as the subtitle of *Bowling Alone* signaled. It is now perfectly plain that, in that sense, I have so far failed.

In the words of reviewer Alan Ryan, "Putnam is too good a social scientist to be an entirely persuasive preacher."[32] Indeed, my latest book (*The Upswing,* coauthored with Shaylyn Romney Garrett) shows unequivocally just how thoroughly America has continued to regress in the intervening twenty years—a downward plunge resulting not merely in fraying community ties but also in worsening economic inequality, greater political polarization, and more cultural individualism.

The most common criticism of *Bowling Alone* has been that the prescriptive, hortatory last chapter was simply inadequate to the scope of the problem. And the problem today is even bigger than it was when those critiques were written. But perhaps greater, too, is our sense of urgency and our call to creative collective action. We have now witnessed a further two decades of the bitter fruits seeded by a disconnected and divided society. And in a full realization of where we're likely headed, we may yet find the inspiration we need to restore our bonds, mend our bridges, and bend the course of history.

The tremendous response to this book has always felt like a testament to America's embattled but never vanquished community spirit, and the inextri-

cable place of social capital in the success or failure of our democratic experiment. It is my sincere hope that in the season of this twentieth anniversary of *Bowling Alone*, America may at last return to "the better angels of our nature," in Lincoln's words, and revive the Tocquevillian virtues that the book's introductory chapter evokes.

SECTION ONE

Introduction

CHAPTER 1

Thinking about Social Change in America

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, Sertoma 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 class 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 Kissell, national membership director for the VFW, observed, "Kids today just aren't joiners."[1]

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 Pat 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 Tewksbury 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 Whittlesey, TMHS band director, recalled that twenty years earlier the band numbered more than eighty, but participation had waned ever since.[2] 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 freshets of new members. Organizational leaders were flummoxed. For years they assumed that their problem must have local roots or at least that it was peculiar to their organization, so they commissioned dozens of studies to recommend reforms.[3] The slowdown was puzzling because for as long as anyone could remember, membership rolls and activity lists had lengthened steadily.

In the 1960s, in fact, community groups across America had seemed to stand on the threshold of a new era of expanded involvement. Except for the civic drought induced by the Great Depression, their activity had shot up year after year, cultivated by assiduous civic gardeners and watered by increasing affluence and education. Each annual report registered rising membership. Churches and synagogues were packed, as more Americans worshiped together than only a few decades earlier, perhaps more than ever in American history.

Moreover, Americans seemed to have time on their hands. A 1958 study under the auspices of the newly inaugurated Center for the Study of Leisure at the University of Chicago fretted that "the most dangerous threat hanging over American society is the threat of leisure," a startling claim in the decade in which the Soviets got the bomb.[4] *Life* magazine echoed the warning about the new challenge of free time: "Americans now face a glut of leisure," ran a headline in February 1964. "The task ahead: how to take life easy."

> As a matter of fact, mankind now possesses for the first time the tools and knowledge to create whatever kind of world he wants. . . . Despite our Protestant ethic, there are many signs that the message is beginning to

> get through to some people. . . . Not only are Americans flocking into bowling leagues and garden clubs, they are satisfying their gregarious urges in countless neighborhood committees to improve the local roads and garbage collections and to hound their public servants into doing what the name implies.[5]

The civic-minded World War II generation was, as its own John F. Kennedy proclaimed at his inauguration, picking up the torch of leadership, not only in the nation's highest office, but in cities and towns across the land. Summarizing dozens of studies, political scientist Robert E. Lane wrote in 1959 that "the ratio of political activists to the general population, and even the ratio of male activists to the male population, has generally increased over the past fifty years." As the 1960s ended, sociologists Daniel Bell and Virginia Held reported that "there is more participation than ever before in America . . . and more opportunity for the active interested person to express his personal and political concerns."[6] Even the simplest political act, voting, was becoming ever more common. From 1920, when women got the vote, through 1960, turnout in presidential elections had risen at the rate of 1.6 percent every four years, so on a simple straight-line projection it seemed reasonable, as a leading political scientist later observed, to expect turnout to be nearly 70 percent and rising on the nation's two hundredth birthday in 1976.[7]

By 1965 disrespect for public life, so endemic in our history, seemed to be waning. Gallup pollsters discovered that the number of Americans who would like to see their children "go into politics as a life's work" had nearly doubled over little more than a decade. Although this gauge of esteem for politics stood at only 36 percent, it had never before been recorded so high, nor has it since. More strikingly, Americans felt increased confidence in their neighbors. The proportion that agreed that "most people can be trusted," for example, rose from an already high 66 percent during and after World War II to a peak of 77 percent in 1964.[8]

The fifties and sixties were hardly a "golden age," especially for those Americans who were marginalized because of their race or gender or social class or sexual orientation. Segregation, by race legally and by gender socially, was the norm, and intolerance, though declining, was still disturbingly high. Environmental degradation had only just been exposed by Rachel Carson, and Betty Friedan had not yet deconstructed the feminine mystique. Grinding rural poverty had still to be discovered by the national media. Infant mortality, a standard measure of public health, stood at twenty-six per one thousand births—forty-four per one thousand for black infants—in 1960, nearly four times worse than those indexes would be at the end of the century. America in *Life* was white, straight, Christian, comfortable, and (in the public square, at least) male.[9] Social reformers had their work cut out for them. However, en-

gagement in community affairs and the sense of shared identity and reciprocity had never been greater in modern America, so the prospects for broad-based civic mobilization to address our national failings seemed bright.

The signs of burgeoning civic vitality were also favorable among the younger generation, as the first of the baby boomers approached college. Dozens of studies confirmed that education was by far the best predictor of engagement in civic life, and universities were in the midst of the most far-reaching expansion in American history. Education seemed the key to both greater tolerance and greater social involvement. Simultaneously shamed and inspired by the quickening struggle for civil rights launched by young African Americans in the South, white colleges in the North began to awaken from the silence of the fifties. Describing the induction of this new generation into the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, sociologist Doug McAdam emphasizes their self-assurance:

> We were a "can do" people, who accomplished whatever we set out to do. We had licked the Depression, turned the tide in World War II, and rebuilt Europe after the war. . . . Freedom Summer was an audacious undertaking consistent with the exaggerated sense of importance and potency shared by the privileged members of America's postwar generation.[10]

The baby boom meant that America's population was unusually young, whereas civic involvement generally doesn't bloom until middle age. In the short run, therefore, our youthful demography actually tended to dampen the ebullience of civil society. But that very bulge at the bottom of the nation's demographic pyramid boded well for the future of community organizations, for they could look forward to swelling membership rolls in the 1980s, when the boomers would reach the peak "joining" years of the life cycle. And in the meantime, the bull session buzz about "participatory democracy" and "all power to the people" seemed to augur ever more widespread engagement in community affairs. One of America's most acute social observers prophesied in 1968, "Participatory democracy has all along been the political style (if not the slogan) of the American middle and upper class. It will become a more widespread style as more persons enter into those classes."[11] Never in our history had the future of civic life looked brighter.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT to civic and social life in American communities is the subject of this book. 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 screwdriver (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.

The term *social capital* itself turns out to have been independently invented at least six times over the twentieth century, each time to call attention to the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties. The first known use of the concept was not by some cloistered theoretician, but by a practical reformer of the Progressive Era—L. J. Hanifan, state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia. Writing in 1916 to urge the importance of community involvement for successful schools, Hanifan invoked the idea of "social capital" to explain why. For Hanifan, social capital referred to

> those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit. . . . The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself. . . . If he comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the coöperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors.[12]

Hanifan's account of social capital anticipated virtually all the crucial elements in later interpretations, but his conceptual invention apparently attracted no notice from other social commentators and disappeared without a trace. But like sunken treasure recurrently revealed by shifting sands and tides, the same idea was independently rediscovered in the 1950s by Canadian sociologists to characterize the club memberships of arriviste suburbanites, in the 1960s by urbanist Jane Jacobs to laud neighborliness in the modern metropolis, in the 1970s by economist Glenn Loury to analyze the social legacy of slavery, and in the 1980s by French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu and by German economist Ekkehart Schlicht to underline the social and economic resources embodied in social networks. Sociologist James S. Coleman put the

term firmly and finally on the intellectual agenda in the late 1980s, using it (as Hanifan had originally done) to highlight the social context of education.[13]

As this array of independent coinages indicates, 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 strategem 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 bounteous Rolodex files enjoy faster career advancement. Nor is the private return to social capital limited to economic rewards. As Claude S. Fischer, a sociologist of friendship, has noted, "Social networks are important in all our lives, often for finding jobs, more often for finding a helping hand, companionship, or a shoulder to cry on."[14]

If individual clout and companionship were all there were to social capital, we'd expect foresighted, 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.[15] As we shall see later in this book, 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 nod to another resident on the street.

Social capital can thus be simultaneously a "private good" and a "public good." Some of the benefit from an investment in social capital goes to bystanders, 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.[16] 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—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, 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.

Sometimes "social capital," like its conceptual cousin "community," sounds warm and cuddly. Urban sociologist Xavier de Souza Briggs, however, properly warns us to beware of a treacly sweet, "kumbaya" interpretation of social capital.[17] Networks and the associated norms of reciprocity are generally good for those inside the network, but the external effects of social capital are by no means always positive. It was social capital, for example, that enabled Timothy McVeigh to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. McVeigh's network of friends, bound together by a norm

of reciprocity, enabled him to do what he could not have done alone. Similarly, urban gangs, NIMBY ("not in my backyard") movements, and power elites often exploit social capital to achieve ends that are antisocial from a wider perspective. Indeed, it is rhetorically useful for such groups to obscure the difference between the pro-social and antisocial consequences of community organizations. When Floridians objected to plans by the Ku Klux Klan to "adopt a highway," Jeff Coleman, grand wizard of the Royal Knights of the KKK, protested, "Really, we're just like the Lions or the Elks. We want to be involved in the community."[18]

Social capital, in short, can be directed toward malevolent, antisocial purposes, just like any other form of capital.[19] (McVeigh also relied on physical capital, like the explosive-laden truck, and human capital, like bomb-making expertise, to achieve his purposes.) Therefore it is important to ask how the positive consequences of social capital—mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness—can be maximized and the negative manifestations—sectarianism, ethnocentrism, corruption—minimized. Toward this end, scholars have begun to distinguish many different forms of social capital.

Some forms involve repeated, intensive, multistranded networks—like a group of steelworkers who meet for drinks every Friday after work and see each other at mass on Sunday—and some are episodic, single stranded, and anonymous, like the faintly familiar face you see several times a month in the supermarket checkout line. Some types of social capital, like a Parent-Teacher Association, are formally organized, with incorporation papers, regular meetings, a written constitution, and connection to a national federation, whereas others, like a pickup basketball game, are more informal. Some forms of social capital, like a volunteer ambulance squad, have explicit public-regarding purposes; some, like a bridge club, exist for the private enjoyment of the members; and some, like the Rotary club mentioned earlier, serve both public and private ends.

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).[20] 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 fashionable 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, markets, 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."[21]

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 bustling 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 firesides [from the lyceum] with kindlier feelings toward one another, because we have learned to know one another better.[22]

Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, 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.

It would obviously be valuable to have distinct measures of the evolution of these various forms of social capital over time. However, like researchers on global warming, we must make do with the imperfect evidence that we can find, not merely lament its deficiencies. Exhaustive descriptions of social net-

works in America—even at a single point in time—do not exist. I have found no reliable, comprehensive, nationwide measures of social capital that neatly distinguish "bridgingness" and "bondingness." In our empirical account of recent social trends in this book, therefore, this distinction will be less prominent than I would prefer. On the other hand, we must keep this conceptual differentiation at the back of our minds as we proceed, recognizing that bridging and bonding social capital are not interchangeable.

"Social capital" is to some extent merely new language for a very old debate in American intellectual circles. Community has warred incessantly with individualism for preeminence in our political hagiology. Liberation from ossified community bonds is a recurrent and honored theme in our culture, from the Pilgrims' storied escape from religious convention in the seventeenth century to the lyric nineteenth-century paeans to individualism by Emerson ("Self-Reliance"), Thoreau ("Civil Disobedience"), and Whitman ("Song of Myself") to Sherwood Anderson's twentieth-century celebration of the struggle against conformism by ordinary citizens in *Winesburg, Ohio* to the latest Clint Eastwood film. Even Alexis de Tocqueville, patron saint of American communitarians, acknowledged the uniquely democratic claim of individualism, "a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself."[23]

Our national myths often exaggerate the role of individual heroes and understate the importance of collective effort. Historian David Hackett Fischer's gripping account of opening night in the American Revolution, for example, reminds us that Paul Revere's alarum was successful only because of networks of civic engagement in the Middlesex villages. Towns without well-organized local militia, no matter how patriotic their inhabitants, were AWOL from Lexington and Concord.[24] Nevertheless, the myth of rugged individualism continues to strike a powerful inner chord in the American psyche.

Debates about the waxing and waning of "community" have been endemic for at least two centuries. "Declensionist narratives"—postmodernist jargon for tales of decline and fall—have a long pedigree in our letters. We seem perennially tempted to contrast our tawdry todays with past golden ages. We apparently share this nostalgic predilection with the rest of humanity. As sociologist Barry Wellman observes,

> It is likely that pundits have worried about the impact of social change on communities ever since human beings ventured beyond their caves. . . . In the [past] two centuries many leading social commentators have been gainfully employed suggesting various ways in which large-scale social

> changes associated with the Industrial Revolution may have affected the structure and operation of communities. . . . This ambivalence about the consequences of large-scale changes continued well into the twentieth century. Analysts have kept asking if things have, in fact, fallen apart.[25]

At the conclusion of the twentieth century, ordinary Americans shared this sense of civic malaise. We were reasonably content about our economic prospects, hardly a surprise after an expansion of unprecedented length, but we were not equally convinced that we were on the right track morally or culturally. Of baby boomers interviewed in 1987, 53 percent thought their parents' generation was better in terms of "being a concerned citizen, involved in helping others in the community," as compared with only 21 percent who thought their own generation was better. Fully 77 percent said the nation was worse off because of "less involvement in community activities." In 1992 three-quarters of the U.S. workforce said that "the breakdown of community" and "selfishness" were "serious" or "extremely serious" problems in America. In 1996 only 8 percent of all Americans said that "the honesty and integrity of the average American" were improving, as compared with 50 percent of us who thought we were becoming less trustworthy. Those of us who said that people had become less civil over the preceding ten years outnumbered those who thought people had become more civil, 80 percent to 12 percent. In several surveys in 1999 two-thirds of Americans said that America's civic life had weakened in recent years, that social and moral values were higher when they were growing up, and that our society was focused more on the individual than the community. More than 80 percent said there should be more emphasis on community, even if that put more demands on individuals.[26] Americans' concern about weakening community bonds may be misplaced or exaggerated, but a decent respect for the opinion of our fellow citizens suggests that we should explore the issue more thoroughly.

It is emphatically not my view that community bonds in America have weakened steadily throughout our history—or even throughout the last hundred years. On the contrary, American history carefully examined is a story of ups and downs in civic engagement, *not just downs*—a story of collapse *and* of renewal. As I have already hinted in the opening pages of this book, within living memory the bonds of community in America were becoming stronger, not weaker, and as I shall argue in the concluding pages, it is within our power to reverse the decline of the last several decades.

Nevertheless, my argument is, at least in appearance, in the declensionist tradition, so it is important to avoid simple nostalgia. Precisely because the theme of this book might lend itself to gauzy self-deception, our methods must be transparent. Is life in communities as we enter the twenty-first century really so different after all from the reality of American communities in the 1950s and 1960s? One way of curbing nostalgia is to count things. Are club meetings

really less crowded today than yesterday, or does it just seem so? Do we really know our neighbors less well than our parents did, or is our childhood recollection of neighborhood barbecues suffused with a golden glow of wishful reminiscence? Are friendly poker games less common now, or is it merely that we ourselves have outgrown poker? League bowling may be passé, but how about softball and soccer? Are strangers less trustworthy now? Are boomers and X'ers really less engaged in community life? After all, it was the preceding generation that was once scorned as "silent." Perhaps the younger generation today is no less engaged than their predecessors, but engaged in new ways. In the chapters that follow we explore these questions with the best available evidence.

THE CHALLENGE of studying the evolving social climate is analogous in some respects to the challenge facing meteorologists who measure global warming: we know what kind of evidence we would ideally want from the past, but time's arrow means that we can't go back to conduct those well-designed studies. Thus if we are to explore how our society is like or unlike our parents', we must make imperfect inferences from all the evidence that we can find.

The most powerful strategy for paleometeorologists seeking to assess global climate change is to triangulate among diverse sources of evidence. If pollen counts in polar ice, and the width of southwestern tree rings, and temperature records of the British Admiralty all point in a similar direction, the inference of global warming is stronger than if the cord of evidence has only a single strand. For much the same reason, prudent journalists follow a "two source" rule: Never report anything unless at least two independent sources confirm it.

In this book I follow that same maxim. Nearly every major generalization here rests on more than one body of independent evidence, and where I have discovered divergent results from credible sources, I note that disparity as well. I have a case to make, but like any officer of the court, I have a professional obligation to present all relevant evidence I have found, exculpatory as well as incriminating. To avoid cluttering the text with masses of redundant evidence, I have typically put confirmatory evidence from multiple studies in the notes, so skeptical "show me" readers should examine those notes as well as the text.[27]

I have sought as diverse a range of evidence as possible on continuities and change in American social life. If the transformation that I discern is as broad and deep as I believe it to be, it ought to show up in many different places, so I have cast a broad net. Of course, social change, like climatic change, is inevitably uneven. Life is not lived in a single dimension. We should not expect to find everything changing in the same direction and at the same speed, but those very anomalies may contain important clues to what is happening.

American society, like the continent on which we live, is massive and polymorphous, and our civic engagement historically has come in many sizes

and shapes. A few of us still share plowing chores with neighbors, while many more pitch in to wire classrooms to the Internet. Some of us run for Congress, and others join self-help groups. Some of us hang out at the local bar association and others at the local bar. Some of us attend mass once a day, while others struggle to remember to send holiday greetings once a year. The forms of our social capital—the ways in which we connect with friends and neighbors and strangers—are varied.

So our review of trends in social capital and civic engagement ranges widely across various sectors of this complex society. In the chapters that follow we begin by charting Americans' participation in the most public forum—politics and public affairs. We next turn to the institutions of our communities—clubs and community associations, religious bodies, and work-related organizations, such as unions and professional societies. Then we explore the almost infinite variety of informal ties that link Americans—card parties and bowling leagues, bar cliques and ball games, picnics and parties. Next we examine the changing patterns of trust and altruism in America—philanthropy, volunteering, honesty, reciprocity. Finally we turn to three apparent counterexamples to the decline of connectedness—small groups, social movements, and the Internet.

In each domain we shall encounter currents and crosscurrents and eddies, but in each we shall also discover common, powerful tidal movements that have swept across American society in the twentieth century. The dominant theme is simple: For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.

The impact of these tides on all aspects of American society, their causes and consequences and what we might do to reverse them, is the subject of the rest of this book. Section III explores a wide range of possible explanations—from overwork to suburban sprawl, from the welfare state to the women's revolution, from racism to television, from the growth of mobility to the growth of divorce. Some of these factors turn out to have played no significant role at all in the erosion of social capital, but we shall be able to identify three or four critical sources of our problem.

Whereas section III asks "Why?" section IV asks "So What?" Social capital turns out to have forceful, even quantifiable effects on many different aspects of our lives. What is at stake is not merely warm, cuddly feelings or frissons of community pride. We shall review hard evidence that our schools and neighborhoods don't work so well when community bonds slacken, that our economy, our democracy, and even our health and happiness depend on adequate stocks of social capital.

Finally, in section V we turn from the necessary but cheerless task of diag-

nosis to the more optimistic challenge of contemplating possible therapies. A century ago, it turns out, Americans faced social and political issues that were strikingly similar to those that we must now address. From our predecessors' responses, we have much to learn—not least that civic decay like that around us can be reversed. This volume offers no simple cures for our contemporary ills. In the final section my aim is to provoke (and perhaps contribute to) a period of national deliberation and experimentation about how we can renew American civic engagement and social connectedness in the twenty-first century.

BEFORE OCTOBER 29, 1997, John Lambert and Andy Boschma knew each other only through their local bowling league at the Ypsi-Arbor 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 *Ann Arbor 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.[28] In small ways like this—and in larger ways, too—we Americans need to reconnect with one another. That is the simple argument of this book.

SECTION TWO

Trends in Civic Engagement and Social Capital

CHAPTER 2

Political Participation

THE CHARACTER of Americans' involvement with politics and government has been transformed over the past three decades. This is certainly not the only alteration in the way we connect with our communities. It is not even the most dramatic and unequivocal example of change. But it is the most widely discussed, and it is thus a good place to begin.

With the singular exception of voting, American rates of political participation compare favorably with those in other democracies. We have multiple avenues for expressing our views and exercising our rights—contacting local and national officials, working for political parties and other political organizations, discussing politics with our neighbors, attending public meetings, joining in election campaigns, wearing buttons, signing petitions, speaking out on talk radio, and many more. Not all of us do all these things, but more of us are active in these ways than are citizens in many other advanced democracies. We are reminded each election year that fewer voters show up at the polls in America than in most other democracies: our turnout rate ranks us just above the cellar—narrowly besting Switzerland, but below all twenty-two other established democracies.[1] Nevertheless, Americans are fairly active politically outside the ballot booth. However, our interest here is not "How are we doing compared with other countries?" but "How are we doing today compared with our own past?" The answer to that question is less encouraging.

We begin with the most common act of democratic citizenship—voting. In 1960, 62.8 percent of voting-age Americans went to the polls to choose between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. In 1996, after decades of

slippage, 48.9 percent of voting-age Americans chose among Bill Clinton, Bob Dole, and Ross Perot, very nearly the lowest turnout in the twentieth century. Participation in presidential elections has declined by roughly a quarter over the last thirty-six years. Turnout in off-year and local elections is down by roughly this same amount.[2]

For several reasons, this widely reported fact understates the real decline in Americans' commitment to electoral participation. For most of the twentieth century Americans' access to the voting booth was hampered by burdensome registration requirements. The conventional explanation for our low turnout as compared with other democracies points precisely to the hurdles of registration. Over the last four decades, however, registration requirements in America have been greatly relaxed. The nationwide introduction of "motor voter" registration, on which states have collectively spent $100 million to try to swell the ranks of new voters, is merely the most visible example of this trend. Turnout has declined despite the fact that the most commonly cited barrier to voting has been substantially lowered.[3] Even facing a lower hurdle, fewer Americans are making the jump.

A second qualification is even more important. For much of our history many people in the South, especially blacks, were disenfranchised. To provide an accurate picture of how current voting rates compare with those of the past, figure 1 traces presidential turnout in southern and nonsouthern states over most of the history of the American Republic.

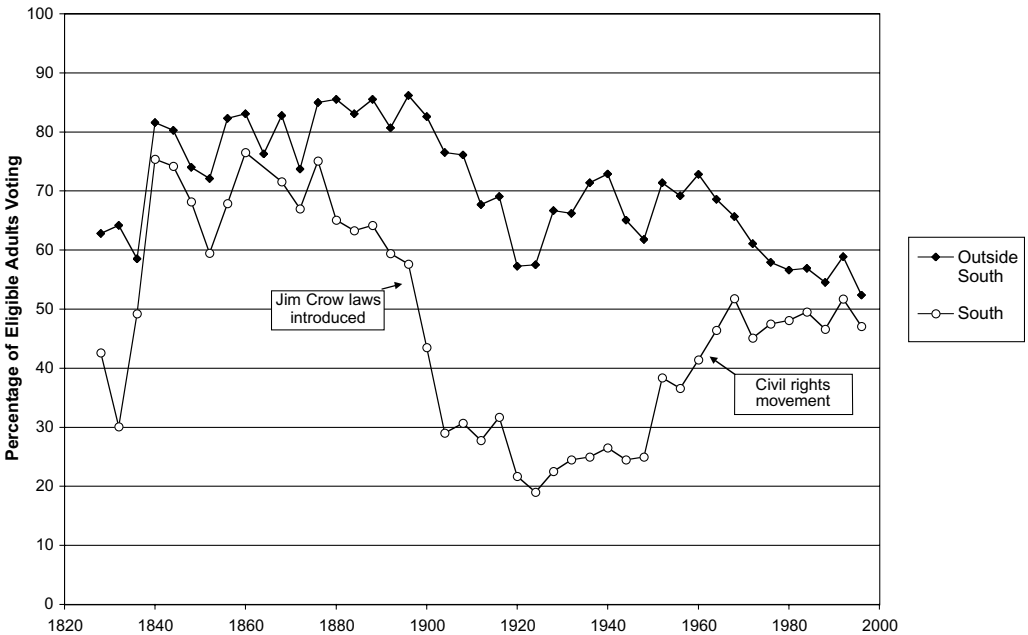

Figure 1: Trends in Presidential Voting (1828–1996), by Region

From the end of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth virtually all African Americans (along with some poor whites) in southern states were prevented from voting by poll taxes, literacy tests, fraud, and violence. This Jim Crow disenfranchisement of southern blacks in the 1890s decimated turnout in the South and artificially depressed the national average for the next seventy years. Since most standard measures of turnout lump those disenfranchised millions with other nonvoters, those measures understate the effective turnout during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century among Americans who were free to vote.[4]

With the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, millions of newly enfranchised men and women in the South were able for the first time in the twentieth century to exercise the right to vote. This influx of new voters partially masked the decline in turnout among the rest of the American electorate.[5] In effect, American national turnout figures took credit for the inclusion of southern blacks in the electorate, obscuring the fact that fewer and fewer of the rest of us who had had the right to vote all along are now actually exercising it.

Outside the South the slide in electoral participation since 1960 is, by now, the longest decline in American history, and voting in the 1996 and 1998 elections was substantially lower than in any other presidential and off-year elections in nearly two centuries.[6] Even within the South, turnout in 1996 was (except for the period of forced disenfranchisement between 1896 and 1964) very nearly the lowest in 164 years. In short, not in nearly two centuries have so many American citizens freely abstained from voting as in the past few years.

Who are these nonvoters, and why are they missing in action? Many explanations have been offered—growing distrust of government, declining party mobilization, fraying social bonds, political dealignment, and many more. Beneath the ups and downs of individual elections, however, virtually all the long-run decline in turnout is due to the gradual replacement of voters who came of age before or during the New Deal and World War II by the generations who came of age later.

Because generational change will be an important theme in our story, we should pause briefly here to consider how social change and generational change are interrelated. As a matter of simple accounting, any social change—from the rise of rap music to the decline of newspapers—is always produced by some combination of two very different processes. The first is for many individuals to change their tastes and habits in a single direction simultaneously. This sort of social change can occur quickly and be reversed just as quickly. If large numbers of Americans, young and old, fall in love with sport utility vehicles, as they did in the 1990s, the automotive marketplace can be quickly transformed, and it can be transformed in a different direction just as quickly. Sociologists sometimes call this type of change "intracohort," because the change is detectable within each age cohort.

The second sort of social change is slower, more subtle, and harder to reverse. If different generations have different tastes or habits, the social physiology of birth and death will eventually transform society, *even if no individual ever changes.* Much of the change in sexual mores over the last several decades has been of this sort. Relatively few adults changed their views about morality, and most of those who did actually became more conservative. In the aggregate, however, American attitudes toward premarital sex, for example, have been radically liberalized over the last several decades, because a generation with stricter beliefs was gradually replaced by a later generation with more relaxed norms. Sociologists call this type of change "intercohort," because the change is detectable only across different age groups. Precisely because the rhythm of generational change is slower paced, it is more nearly inexorable.[7]

Most social change involves both individual and generational processes. The use of new technology, like the telephone or the Internet, illustrates this sort of mixture. When the innovation is introduced, many people try out the new phone or the new Web browser. As individuals change their behavior, virtually none of the early growth in usage is attributable to generational change. Change is, however, easier for young people, so the immediate impetus for growth is dampened by the ingrained habits of older generations. Many middle-aged Americans today recall how reluctantly their parents picked up the phone for a long-distance call, well after long-distance rates had fallen. Gradually, generational differences became the dominant feature of this social change. Virtually all of the decline in personal letter writing over the past several decades is attributable not to individuals' changing their habits, but to the replacement of one generation accustomed to communicating with distant friends and relatives in writing by a younger generation more accustomed to picking up the phone.[8]

The distinction between intracohort and intercohort change is crucial to understanding what's been happening to turnout in America over the last thirty years. Very little of the net decline in voting is attributable to individual change, and virtually all of it is generational. Throughout their lives and whatever their station in life and their level of political interest, baby boomers and their children have been less likely to vote than their parents and grandparents. As boomers and their children became a larger and larger fraction of the national electorate, the average turnout rate was inexorably driven downward.[9]

This generation gap in civic engagement, as we shall see, is common in American communities these days. It is one reason why the decline in turnout continues so ineluctably, seeming to defy all efforts to reverse it (such as motor voter registration) and why the trend is pervasive, affecting not just presidential politics, but also state and local elections and even voting on bond issues. Whatever the ups and downs of individual candidates and issues, each campaign's efforts to get out the vote must begin at a lower base level, for every

year the Grim Reaper removes another swath of the most politically engaged generation in the American electorate.

Voting is by a substantial margin the most common form of political activity, and it embodies the most fundamental democratic principle of equality. Not to vote is to withdraw from the political community. Moreover, like the canary in the mining pit, voting is an instructive proxy measure of broader social change. Compared to demographically matched nonvoters, voters are more likely to be interested in politics, to give to charity, to volunteer, to serve on juries, to attend community school board meetings, to participate in public demonstrations, and to cooperate with their fellow citizens on community affairs. It is sometimes hard to tell whether voting causes community engagement or vice versa, although some recent evidence suggests that the act of voting itself encourages volunteering and other forms of good citizenship. So it is hardly a small matter for American democracy when voting rates decline by 25 percent or more.[10]

On the other hand, in some important respects voting is not a typical mode of political participation. Based on their exhaustive assessment of different forms of participation in American politics, political scientists Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady conclude that "it is incomplete and misleading to understand citizen participation solely through the vote. . . . Compared with those who engage in various other political acts, voters report a different mix of gratification and a different bundle of issue concerns as being behind their activity. . . . [V]oting is sui generis." Declining electoral participation is merely the most visible symptom of a broader disengagement from community life.[11] Like a fever, electoral abstention is even more important as a sign of deeper trouble in the body politic than as a malady itself. It is not just from the voting booth that Americans are increasingly AWOL.

Political knowledge and interest in public affairs are critical preconditions for more active forms of involvement. If you don't know the rules of the game and the players and don't care about the outcome, you're unlikely to try playing yourself. Encouragingly, Americans in the aggregate at century's end are about as likely to know, for example, which party controls the House of Representatives or who their senators are as were their grandparents a half century ago. On the other hand, we are much better educated than our grandparents, and since civics knowledge is boosted by formal education, it is surprising that civics knowledge has not improved accordingly. The average college graduate today knows little more about public affairs than did the average high school graduate in the 1940s.[12]

Roughly every other month from 1974 to 1998 Roper pollsters asked Americans, "Have you recently been taking a good deal of interest in current

events and what's happening in the world today, some interest, or not very much interest?" Popular interest in current events naturally tends to rise and fall with what's in the news, so this chart of attention to public affairs looks like the sawtooth traces left by an errant seismograph. Beneath these choppy waves, however, the tide of the public's interest in current events gradually ebbed by roughly 20 percent over this quarter century. Similarly, another long-term series of annual surveys found that political interest steadily slumped by one-fifth between 1975 and 1999.[13] Scandals and war can still rouse our attention, but generally speaking, fewer Americans follow public affairs now than did a quarter century ago.

Even more worrying are intergenerational differences in political knowledge and interest. Like the decline in voting turnout, to which it is linked, the slow slump in interest in politics and current events is due to the replacement of an older generation that was relatively interested in public affairs by a younger generation that is relatively uninterested. Among both young and old, of course, curiosity about public affairs continues to fluctuate in response to daily headlines, but the base level of interest is gradually fading, as an older generation of news and politics junkies passes slowly from the scene. The fact that the decline is generation-specific, rather than nationwide, argues against the view that public affairs have simply become boring in some objective sense.

The post–baby boom generations—roughly speaking, men and women who were born after 1964 and thus came of age in the 1980s and 1990s—are substantially less knowledgeable about public affairs, despite the proliferation of sources of information. Even in the midst of national election campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, these young people were about a third less likely than their elders to know, for instance, which political party controlled the House of Representatives.[14]

Today's generation gap in political knowledge does not reflect some permanent tendency for the young to be less well informed than their elders but is instead a recent development. From the earliest opinion polls in the 1940s to the mid-1970s, younger people were at least as well informed as their elders were, but that is no longer the case. This news and information gap, affecting not just politics, but even things like airline crashes, terrorism, and financial news, first opened up with the boomers in the 1970s and widened considerably with the advent of the X generation. Daily newspaper readership among people under thirty-five dropped from two-thirds in 1965 to one-third in 1990, at the same time that TV news viewership in this same age group fell from 52 percent to 41 percent. Today's under-thirties pay less attention to the news and know less about current events than their elders do today or than people their age did two or three decades ago.[15]

• • • •

So voting in America is down by about a quarter, and interest in public affairs by about one-fifth, over the last two or three decades. Not all measures of political interest are declining. Americans seem to follow national election campaigns no less today than three or four decades ago. During the national elections of the 1990s, as many of us said that we "talked about politics" or tried to persuade someone else how to vote as people did in the 1950s and 1960s. But this surface stability conceals a growing generation gap. Members of today's older generation are slightly *more* interested in electoral campaigns than were their predecessors four decades ago, while youths today are *less* interested than youths were in the 1950s and 1960s.[16] This generation gap in civic engagement, if it persists, will further depress political participation in the future.

Voting and following politics are relatively undemanding forms of participation. In fact, they are not, strictly speaking, forms of social capital at all, because they can be done utterly alone. As we have seen, these measures show some thinning of the ranks of political spectators, particularly at the end of the stadium where the younger generation sits. But most of the fans are still in their seats, following the action and chatting about the antics of the star players. How about the grassroots gladiators who volunteer to work for political parties, posting signs, attending campaign rallies, and the like? What is the evidence on trends in partisan participation?

On the positive side of the ledger, one might argue, party organizations themselves are as strong as ever at both state and local levels. Over the last thirty to forty years these organizations have become bigger, richer, and more professional. During presidential campaigns from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, more and more voters reported being contacted by one or both of the major political parties. After a slump from 1980 to 1992, this measure of party vitality soared nearly to an all-time high in 1996, as GOTV ("Get out the vote") activities blossomed.[17]

Party finances, too, skyrocketed in the 1970s and 1980s. Between 1976 and 1986, for example, the Democrats' intake rose at more than twice the rate of inflation, while the Republicans' rose at more than four times the rate of inflation. More money meant more staff, more polling, more advertising, better candidate recruitment and training, and more party outreach. The number of political organizations, partisan and nonpartisan, with regular paid staff has exploded over the last two decades. Nearly every election year since 1980 has set a new record by this standard of organizational proliferation, and the pace of growth has clearly tended to accelerate. The growth chart for this political "industry" (see figure 2) exhibits an ebullience more familiar in Silicon Valley. The business of politics in America has never been healthier, or so it would seem.[18]

Yet viewed by the "consumers" in the political marketplace, this picture of vigorous health seems a bizarre parody. The rate of party identification—the

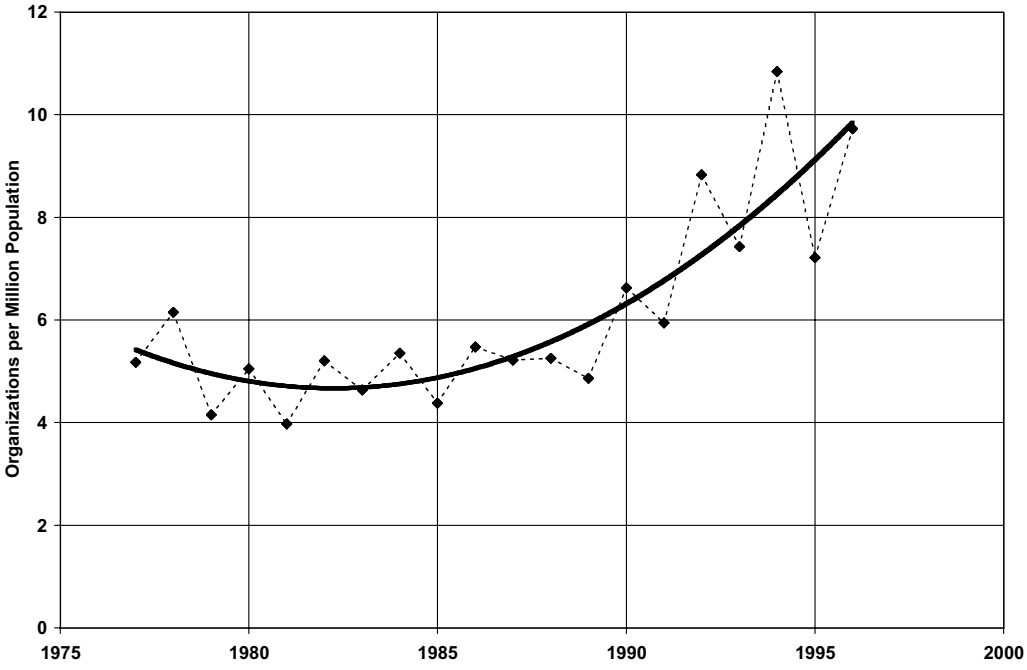

Figure 2: Political Organizations with Regular Paid Staff, 1977–1996

voter's sense of commitment to her own team—fell from more than 75 percent around 1960 to less than 65 percent in the late 1990s. Despite a partial recovery in the late 1980s, at century's end party "brand loyalty" remained well below the levels of the 1950s and early 1960s. What is more, this form of political engagement is significantly lower in more recent cohorts, so that as older, more partisan voters depart from the electorate to be replaced by younger independents, the net attachment to the parties may continue to decline.[19] Again, the Grim Reaper is silently at work, lowering political involvement.

Beyond party identification, at the grassroots level attending a campaign meeting or volunteering to work for a political party has become much rarer over the last thirty years. From the 1950s to the 1960s growing numbers of Americans worked for a political party during election campaigns, ringing doorbells, stuffing envelopes, and the like. Since 1968, however, that form of political engagement has plunged, reaching an all-time low for a presidential election year in 1996. Attendance at political meetings and campaign rallies has followed a similar trajectory over the last half century—up from the 1950s to the 1960s, instability in the 1970s, and general decline since the 1980s.[20] (Figure 3 charts these trends.) In short, while the parties themselves are better financed and more professionally staffed than ever, fewer and fewer Americans participate in partisan political activities.

How can we reconcile these two conflicting pictures—organizational

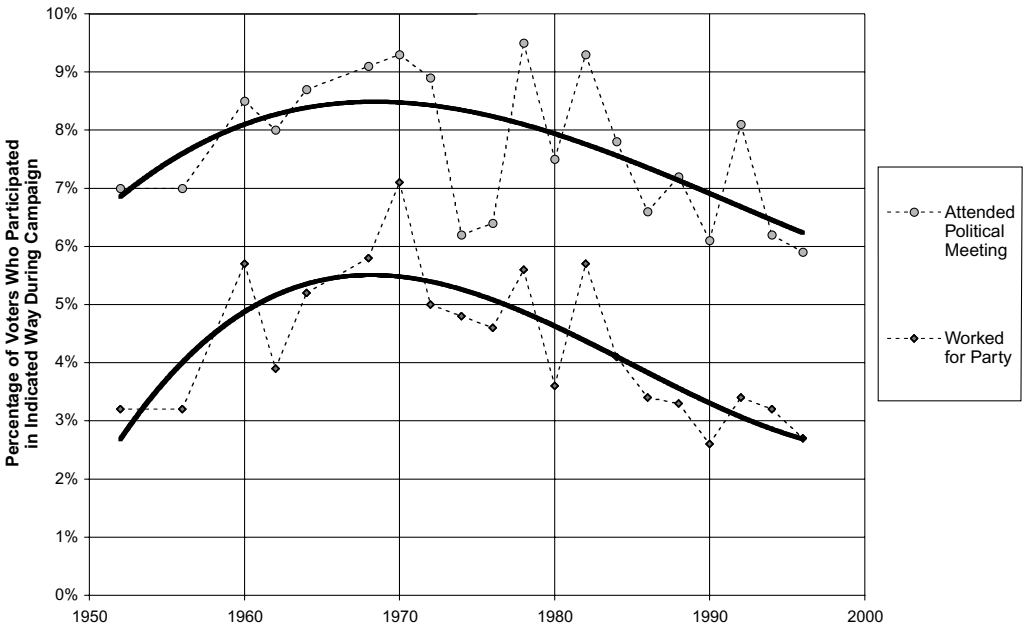

Figure 3: Citizen Participation in Campaign Activities, 1952–1996

health, as seen from the parties, and organizational decay, as seen from the voters' side? One clue to this paradox is the ratio of voters who say they have been *contacted by* a party in the latest campaign to voters who say that they have *worked for* a party in that same campaign. The last three decades of the twentieth century witnessed an accelerating trend toward more and more voter contacts but fewer and fewer party workers. By 1996 this ratio was 2.5 times greater than the equivalent figure in 1968.[21]

At first blush one might admire the growing "productivity" in this flourishing industry. Each "worker" seems to be producing more and more "contacts." In reality, however, this trend is evidence of the professionalization and commercialization of politics in America. The "contacts" that voters report are, in fact, less and less likely to be a visit from a neighborhood party worker and more and more likely to be an anonymous call from a paid phone bank. Less and less party activity involves volunteer collaboration among committed partisans. More and more involves the skilled (and expensive) techniques of effective mass marketing. This trend goes hand in hand with the explosive growth of direct-mail fund-raising and political action committees (PACs) formed to channel financial support to party organizations. During the same period that citizen involvement in party activities was slumping by more than half, spending on presidential nomination and election campaigns exploded from $35 million in 1964 to over $700 million in 1996, a nearly fivefold increase even in constant dollars. The bottom line in the political industry is this:

Financial capital—the wherewithal for mass marketing—has steadily replaced social capital—that is, grassroots citizen networks—as the coin of the realm.[22]

On reflection, then, the contrast between increasing party organizational vitality and declining voter involvement is perfectly intelligible. Since their "consumers" are tuning out from politics, parties have to work harder and spend much more, competing furiously to woo votes, workers, and donations, and to do that they need a (paid) organizational infrastructure. Party-as-organization and party-in-government have become stronger, even as the public has grown less attached to the parties.[23] If we think of politics as an industry, we might delight in its new "labor-saving efficiency," but if we think of politics as democratic deliberation, to leave people out is to miss the whole point of the exercise.

Participation in politics is increasingly based on the checkbook, as money replaces time. While membership in a political club was cut in half between 1967 and 1987, the fraction of the public that contributed financially to a political campaign nearly doubled. "Nationalization and professionalization have redefined the role of citizen activist as, increasingly, a writer of checks and letters," conclude political scientist Verba and his colleagues. "Whatever puzzles there may be concerning the trajectory of participation over the past few decades, there was an unambiguous increase in the amount of money donated to politics over the period from the late 1970s to the late 1980s."[24] There may be nearly as many fans in the political stadium nowadays, but they are not watching an amateur or even a semipro match. Whether the slick professional game they have become accustomed to watching is worth the increasingly high admission price is another matter.

So far we have been considering political participation from the important but limited perspective of partisan and electoral activities. For most Americans, however, national election campaigns occupy only a small part of their time and attention. What about trends in political participation outside the context of national elections, especially at the local level? Until recently we lacked any systematic evidence of long-term trends in how involved Americans are in community affairs. However, a recently retrieved archive of unparalleled depth enables us to track in great detail a wide range of civic activities.

Roughly every month from 1973 through 1994 the Roper survey organization presented thousands of Americans with a simple checklist of a dozen different civic activities—from signing a petition or attending a public meeting to working for a political party or running for office.[25] "Which, if any, of these things have you happened to do in the past year?" the pollsters asked. Some of the activities are relatively common: each year across these two decades roughly one in three of us has signed a petition and roughly one in six has attended a public meeting on town or school affairs. On the other hand, some

items on the checklist are quite rare. For example, fewer than one American in a hundred has run for public office in the past twelve months. Altogether these more than four hundred thousand interviews provide exceptionally rich raw material for compiling detailed civic statistics for Americans over more than two decades.

How did patterns of civic and political participation change over this period? The answer is simple: *The frequency of virtually every form of community involvement measured in the Roper polls declined significantly, from the most common—petition signing—to the least common—running for office.* Americans are playing virtually every aspect of the civic game less frequently today than we did two decades ago.

Consider first the new evidence on trends in partisan and campaign activities. (Figure 4 charts these trends.)[26] In round numbers, Americans were roughly half as likely to work for a political party or attend a political rally or speech in the 1990s as in the 1970s. Barely two decades ago election campaigns were for millions of Americans an occasion for active participation in national deliberation. Campaigning was something we did, not something we merely witnessed. Now for almost all Americans, an election campaign is something that happens around us, a grating element in the background noise of everyday life, a fleeting image on a TV screen. Strikingly, the dropout rate from these campaign activities (about 50 percent) is even greater than the dropout rate in the voting booth itself (25 percent).

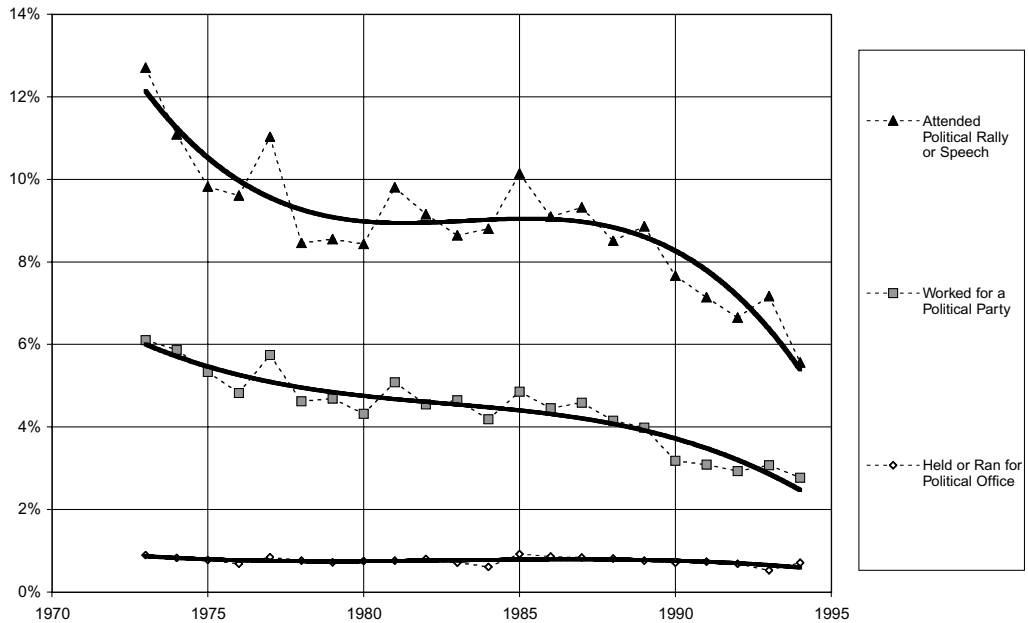

Figure 4: Trends in Civic Engagement I: Partisan Activities

The new evidence also includes a much more demanding measure of political involvement—that is, actually running for or holding office. So few people ever become this involved politically that it takes a social microscope like that provided by the Roper archive to discover that even this intense form of participation has faded. Over the last two decades the number of office seekers in any year at all levels in the American body politic—from school board to town council—shrank by perhaps 15 percent.[27] As a result of this decline, Americans lost more than a quarter million candidates annually to choose among. It is impossible to know what price we paid collectively for the loss of those potential grassroots leaders—not only in terms of talent and creativity, but also in terms of competitive pressure on incumbent officeholders—but it is hard to believe that there was no loss at all.

That Americans in recent years have deserted party politics is perhaps not astonishing news, for antiparty sentiments had become a commonplace of punditry even before Ross Perot rode the antiparty bandwagon to national prominence in 1992. But how about communal forms of activity, like attending local meetings, serving local organizations, and taking part in "good government" activities? Here the new evidence is startling, for involvement in these everyday forms of community life has dwindled as rapidly as has partisan and electoral participation. (The relevant evidence is summarized in figure 5.) The pattern is broadly similar to that for campaign activities—a slump in the late 1970s, a pause in the early 1980s, and then a renewed and intensified decline from the late 1980s into the 1990s.

Between 1973 and 1994 the number of Americans who attended even one public meeting on town or school affairs in the previous year was cut by 40 percent. Over the same two decades the ranks of those who had served as an officer or a committee member for a local club or organization—*any* local club or organization—were thinned by an identical 40 percent. Over these twenty years the number of members of "some group interested in better government" fell by one-third.[28]

Like battlefield casualties dryly reported from someone else's distant war, these unadorned numbers scarcely convey the decimation of American community life they represent. In round numbers every single percentage-point drop represents two million fewer Americans involved in some aspect of community life every year. So, the numbers imply, we now have sixteen million fewer participants in public meetings about local affairs, eight million fewer committee members, eight million fewer local organizational leaders, and three million fewer men and women organized to work for better government than we would have had if Americans had stayed as involved in community affairs as we were in the mid-1970s.

Keep in mind, too, that these surveys invited people to mention *any* local organization—not only "old-fashioned" garden clubs and Shriners lodges with their odd hats, but also trendy upstarts, like environmental action com-

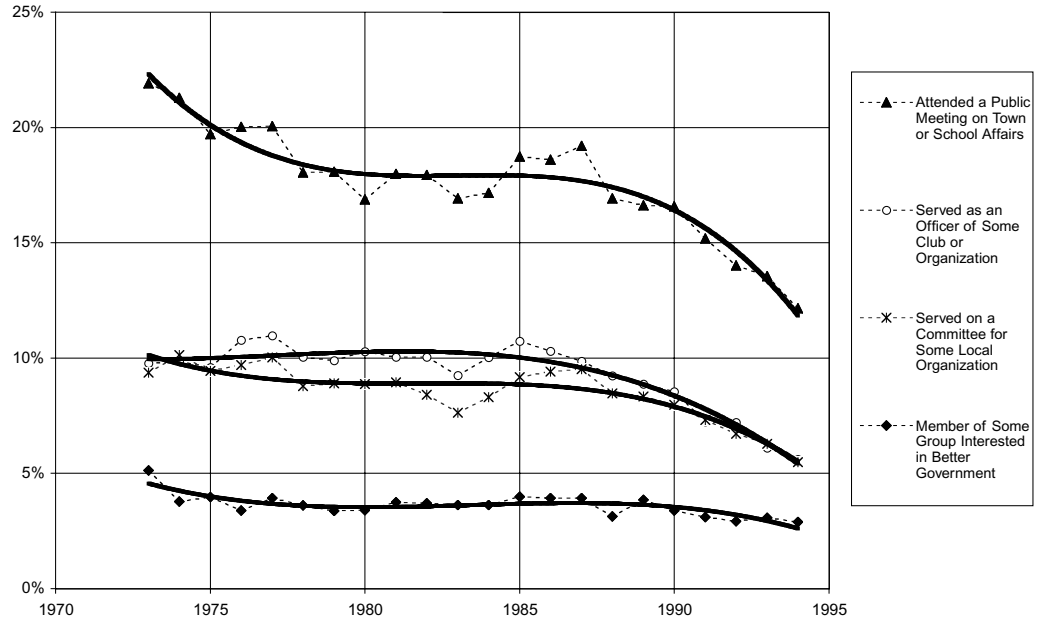

Figure 5: Trends in Civic Engagement II: Communal Participation

mittees and local branches of the antiabortion movement. People were asked whether they had attended *any* public meeting on town or school affairs in the last year—not merely droning sessions of the planning board, but also angry protests against condom distribution in the high school or debates about curbside recycling. Year after year, fewer and fewer of us took part in the everyday deliberations that constitute grassroots democracy. In effect, more than a third of America's civic infrastructure simply evaporated between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s.

Finally, the Roper surveys also shed light on trends in various forms of public expression—signing petitions, writing Congress, writing an article or a letter to the editor, and making a speech. Once again, each of these types of activity has become less common over these twenty years. (See figure 6 for details.) This is most visible in the case of petition signing, because it is the single most common form of political activity measured in the Roper surveys, but the decline is also clear in the case of letters to Congress. In both cases, however, the chart is essentially flat for the first half of this period and then steadily downward in the second half. Much smaller proportions of the population claim to have given a speech or written a letter to the editor or an article for a newspaper or magazine within the previous year, so clear trends are harder to spot at this degree of magnification, though here too the general tendency is downward.[29]

The changes in American political participation traced in the Roper ar-

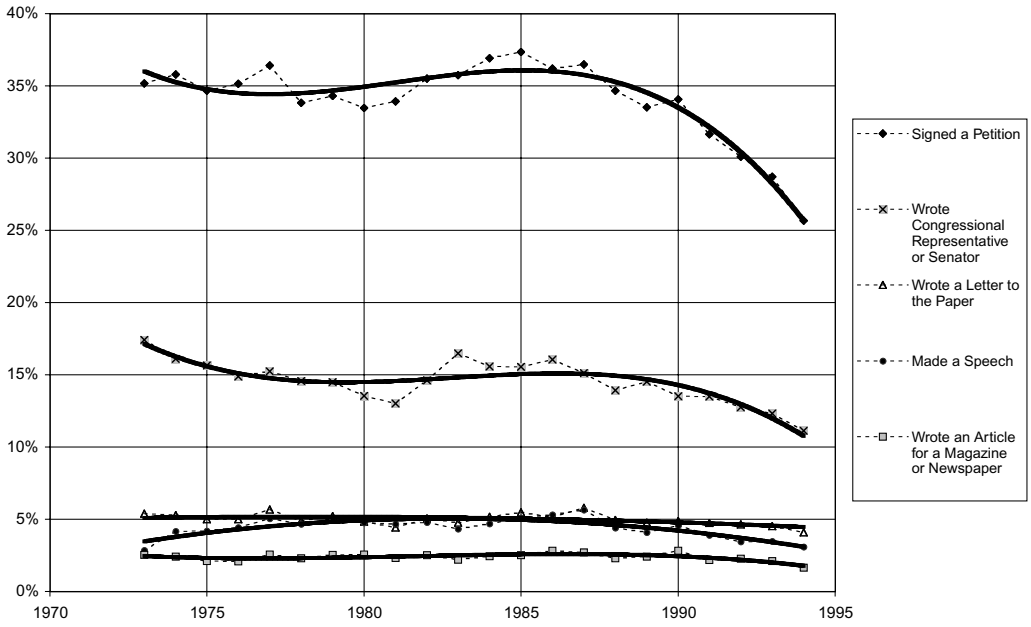

Figure 6: Trends in Civic Engagement III: Public Expression

chive are not identical across all forms of involvement. In some cases, such as attending a public meeting or a political rally, the trend is more or less steadily downward across the two decades, but in other cases, such as signing a petition, the drop is concentrated in the latter half of the period. And in some cases, such as running for office or writing an article for a magazine or newspaper, the decline is quite modest. Across the entire repertoire, however, the decline appears to have accelerated after 1985. Across the twelve separate activities, the average decline was 10 percent between 1973–74 and 1983–84, compared with 24 percent between 1983–84 and 1993–94.

The fraction of the American public utterly uninvolved in any of these civic activities rose by nearly one-third over these two decades. In 1973 most Americans engaged in at least one of these forms of civic involvement every year. By 1994 *most did not engage in any*. Thirty-two million fewer American adults were involved in community affairs in the mid-1990s than would have been involved at the proportional rate of two decades earlier.

We can get a better clue as to the implications of this loss of community life by arraying the dozen activities according to the degree of decline. (See table 1.) Strikingly, the forms of participation that have withered most noticeably reflect organized activities at the community level. The verbs describing these modes of involvement in the top half of the table reflect action in cooperation with others: "serve," "work," "attend." Each of these activities can be undertaken only if others in the community are also active. Conversely, the ac-

tivities (in the bottom half of the table) that have declined most slowly are, for the most part, actions that one can undertake as an individual. Indeed, most of these activities merely require a pen or a keyboard, for the most common verb in this section of the list is "write."

In other words, the more that my activities depend on the actions of others, the greater the drop-off in my participation.[30] Even if everyone else in my town is a civic dropout, I can still write my congressman—or even run for Congress myself. On the other hand, if I'm the only member of a committee, it's not a "committee," and if no one else comes to a meeting on the bond issue, it is not a "meeting," even if I show up. Knowing that, I may well back out, too. In other words, it is precisely those forms of civic engagement most vulnerable to coordination problems and free riding—those activities that brought citizens *together*, those activities that most clearly embody social capital—that have declined most rapidly.[31]

One politically important consequence is that "cooperative" forms of behavior, like serving on committees, have declined more rapidly than "expressive" forms of behavior, like writing letters. It takes (at least) two to cooperate, but only one to express himself. Collaborative forms of political involvement engage broader public interests, whereas expressive forms are more individualistic and correspond to more narrowly defined interests. Any political system needs to counterpoise moments for articulating grievances and moments for resolving differences.

The changing pattern of civic participation in American communities

Table 1: Trends in political and community participation

	Relative change 1973–74 to 1993–94
served as an officer of some club or organization	−42%
worked for a political party	−42%
served on a committee for some local organization	−39%
attended a public meeting on town or school affairs	−35%
attended a political rally or speech	−34%
participated in at least one of these twelve activities	−25%
made a speech	−24%
wrote congressman or senator	−23%
signed a petition	−22%
was a member of some "better government" group	−19%
held or ran for political office	−16%
wrote a letter to the paper	−14%
wrote an article for a magazine or newspaper	−10%

Source: Roper Social and Political Trends surveys, 1973–1994

over the last two decades has shifted the balance in the larger society between the articulation of grievances and the aggregation of coalitions to address those grievances. In this sense, this disjunctive pattern of decline—cooperation falling more rapidly than self-expression—may well have encouraged the single-issue blare and declining civility of contemporary political discourse.[32]

These declines in participation appear all along the spectrum from hyperactivists to civic slugs. The fraction of the public who engaged in *none* of these dozen forms of civic participation rose by more than one-third over this period (from 46 percent in 1973 to 64 percent in 1994), while the band of civic activists who engaged in at least three different types of activity was cut nearly in half (from 20 percent to 11 percent). Moreover, these trends appear consistently in all sections of the population and all areas of the country—men and women, blacks and whites, central cities, suburbs, and rural areas, Northeast, South, Midwest, and West, upper class and lower class, and so on.

In absolute terms, the declines are greatest among the better educated. Among the college educated, attendance at public meetings was nearly halved from 34 percent to 18 percent. On the other hand, because the less educated were less involved to begin with, in relative terms their rates of participation have been even harder hit. Attendance at public meetings fell from 20 percent to 8 percent among those whose education ended in high school and from 7 percent to 3 percent among those who attended only elementary school. The last several decades have witnessed a serious deterioration of community involvement among Americans from all walks of life.

Let's sum up what we've learned about trends in political participation. On the positive side of the ledger, Americans today score about as well on a civics test as our parents and grandparents did, though our self-congratulation should be restrained, since we have on average four more years of formal schooling than they had.[33] Moreover, at election time we are no less likely than they were to talk politics or express interest in the campaign. On the other hand, since the mid-1960s, the weight of the evidence suggests, despite the rapid rise in levels of education Americans have become perhaps 10–15 percent less likely to voice our views publicly by running for office or writing Congress or the local newspaper, 15–20 percent less interested in politics and public affairs, roughly 25 percent less likely to vote, roughly 35 percent less likely to attend public meetings, both partisan and nonpartisan, and roughly 40 percent less engaged in party politics and indeed in political and civic organizations of all sorts. We remain, in short, reasonably well-informed spectators of public affairs, but many fewer of us actually partake in the game.

Might all this be explained as a natural consequence of rising public alienation from politics and declining confidence in political activity of all sorts? Perhaps the trends we have reviewed thus far simply reflect the fact that more Americans than ever before are "turned off" and "tuned out" from politics. Certainly political unhappiness of all sorts has mushroomed during these

past three decades. Americans in the mid-1960s were strikingly confident in the benevolence and responsiveness of their political institutions. Only about one in four agreed then with sentiments like "People like me don't have much say in government" and "Public officials don't care what people like me think." Three in four said that you *could* "trust the government in Washington to do what is right all or most of the time." Whether or not they were fooling themselves, Americans in the 1960s felt politically effective.

Such views nowadays seem antiquated or naive. In virtually every case the proportions agreeing and disagreeing with such ideas essentially have been reversed. In the 1990s roughly three in four Americans *didn't* trust the government to do what is right most of the time. A single comparison captures the transformation: In April 1966, with the Vietnam War raging and race riots in Cleveland, Chicago, and Atlanta, 66 percent of Americans *rejected* the view that "the people running the country don't really care what happens to you." In December 1997, in the midst of the longest period of peace and prosperity in more than two generations, 57 percent of Americans *endorsed* that same view.[34] Today's cynical views may or may not be more accurate than the Pollyannaish views of the early sixties, but they undermine the political confidence necessary to motivate and sustain political involvement.

So perhaps because of the dysfunctional ugliness of contemporary politics and the absence of large, compelling collective projects, we have redirected our energies away from conventional politics into less formal, more voluntary, more effective channels. Whether the story of our disengagement from public affairs is as straightforward as that depends on what we find when we turn next to trends in social and civic involvement.

CHAPTER 3

Civic Participation

> Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There 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.[1]

These lines from Alexis de Tocqueville, a perceptive French visitor to early-nineteenth-century America, are often quoted by social scientists because they capture an important and enduring fact about our country. Today, as 170 years ago, Americans are more likely to be involved in voluntary associations than are citizens of most other nations; only the small nations of northern Europe outrank us as joiners.[2]

The ingenuity of Americans in creating organizations knows no bounds. Wandering through the *World Almanac* list of 2,380 groups with some national visibility from the Aaron Burr Society to the Zionist Organization of America, one discovers such intriguing bodies as the Grand United Order of Antelopes, the Elvis Presley Burning Love Fan Club, the Polish Army Veterans Association of America, the Southern Appalachian Dulcimer Association, and the National Association for Outlaw and Lawman History. Some of these groups may be the organizational equivalent of vanity press publications, but surveys of American communities over the decades have uncovered an impressive organizational vitality at the grassroots level. Many Americans today are ac-

tively involved in educational or school service groups like PTAs, recreational groups, work-related groups, such as labor unions and professional organizations, religious groups (in addition to churches), youth groups, service and fraternal clubs, neighborhood or homeowners groups, and other charitable organizations. Generally speaking, this same array of organizational affiliations has characterized Americans since at least the 1950s.[3]

Official membership in formal organizations is only one facet of social capital, but it is usually regarded as a useful barometer of community involvement. What can we learn from organizational records and social surveys about Americans' participation in the organized life of their communities? Broadly speaking, American voluntary associations may be divided into three categories: community based, church based, and work based. Let us begin with the most heterogeneous, all those social, civic, and leisure groups that are community based—everything from B'nai B'rith to the Parent-Teacher Association.

The record appears to show an impressive increase in the sheer number of voluntary associations over the last three decades. The number of nonprofit organizations of national scope listed in the *Encyclopedia of Associations* more than doubled from 10,299 to 22,901 between 1968 and 1997. Even taking account of the increase in population during this period, the number of national organizations per capita has increased by nearly two-thirds over the last three decades (see figure 7). Excited by this fact, some observers speak, perhaps too hastily, of a "participation revolution" in American politics and society. This impression of a rapid growth in American organizational life is reinforced—but also qualified—by numerous recent studies of the explosion of interest groups represented in Washington since the 1960s. What these studies reveal is ever more groups speaking (or claiming to speak) on behalf of ever more categories of citizens.[4]

In fact, relatively few of the tens of thousands of nonprofit associations whose proliferation is traced in figure 7 actually have mass membership. Many, such as the Animal Nutrition Research Council, the National Conference on Uniform Traffic Accident Statistics, and the National Slag Association, have no individual members at all. A close student of associations in America, David Horton Smith, found that barely half of the groups in the 1988 *Encyclopedia of Associations* actually had individual members. The median membership of national associations in the 1988 *Encyclopedia* was only one thousand. A comparable study of associations represented in the 1962 *Encyclopedia of Associations* had found a median size of roughly ten thousand members.[5] In other words, over this quarter century the number of voluntary associations roughly tripled, but the average membership seems to be roughly one-tenth as large—more groups, but most of them much smaller. The organizational eruption between the 1960s and the 1990s represented a proliferation of letterheads, not a boom of grassroots participation.

Also revealing is the increasing geographic concentration of national