



Book review

Bowling Alone: What's the Score?[☆]

1. Wither America?

Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000) is a 10-pin strike, a major contribution to study of social networks and social cohesion. Whether, at the end of the "game," Putnam will have scored highly enough to win over most spectators, I argue, remains to be decided. After some introductory comments, I focus on two concerns: the coherence of "social capital" as the book's central concept, and whether there has indeed been a decline in social connections. My attention here is directed to the first three sections of *Bowling Alone*, the chapters that describe and explain the social changes (pp. 1–284).

There are many virtues to *Bowling Alone*. It is prodigiously bold, addressing key issues within the big question of "Whither America?" While many have speculated about a fraying of America's social fabric, none have tackled so wide a range of social action, from voting to family meals, in so systematic and empirical a fashion. It is a bravura exhibition of research technique and energy. Careful scouring of the endnotes, which I warmly recommend, only reinforces the impression that one gets from reading the main text.¹ *Bowling Alone* is also notable for the accessibility of its prose and its success in bringing important social concerns and quality social research to a wide audience.

Bowling Alone has less obvious virtues, too. It is historically grounded in ways too often uncommon in the behavioral sciences. One illustration pertains to residential mobility. Putnam notes that increasing mobility could *not* explain a decline in social involvement because mobility has *not* been increasing in the United States (p. 205)—a plain fact too many sociologists do not know.² More centrally, Putnam clearly states that he is not describing an eons-long decline in social bonds; he is not claiming a "fall from grace." Instead, he is describing a relatively recent reversal of social trends. Americans in the 1950s, he contends, were more socially connected than those who came after and those who came before. Sometimes, Putnam is misread on this point. For example Etzioni (2001, p. 224) suggests

[☆] This is a revision of a presentation at an "Author Meets Critic" session of the American Sociological Association Meetings in Anaheim, California, August 2001.

¹ I once asked Bob whether the footnotes reading "author's analysis" literally meant that he had personally ground out the statistical results. He said yes. I bow to a master number-cruncher.

² For brief examples of this blindness, see Fischer (2002).

that Putnam's argument was foretold by Robert Nisbet (in his classic *Quest for Community*). Hardly. Nisbet and others in the "mass society" vein described a loss of community exactly in the era when, Putnam argues, community-ness reached its 20th-century zenith. In such ways, *Bowling Alone* rejects simple tradition-modernity formulas in favor of historical accuracy.

Putnam also introduces some useful concepts and observations. For example *schmoozer* and *macher* – terms he uses to describe the difference between people who are merely sociable and people who are influential – are great additions to our conceptual toolkit (partly because the more Yiddish, the better). Also, his analysis of television's pernicious effects – data-based rather than merely declaimed – is a good corrective to television's apologists.³ Finally, Putnam's ability to resurrect his thesis from its premature burial by his critics is admirable. To many who followed the debates since the mid-1990s over Putnam's initial articles, it seemed that the 2000 *Bowling Alone* book would be dead on arrival, as one sociologist predicted to me. Too many of Putnam's empirical claims, which were based solely on the General Social Survey (GSS), had been cast in doubt between 1995 and 2000. *Bowling Alone* uses the GSS, but not nearly as much as it relies on other longitudinal, national surveys. By finding large, new datasets and squeezing them dry, Putnam not only salvaged his argument, but also gained the rhetorical high ground. At the moment, *Bowling Alone* is the major statement on "Whither America?"

Enough praise. One definition of "critic" in an "Author Meets Critic" session is fault-finder and I find several faults in *Bowling Alone*.

There are contradictions. Putnam discusses a few contradictory findings, notably the data showing that volunteering increased in recent decades. But some contradictions he reveals only in the endnotes;⁴ others are evident but are not fully confronted even there. For example Putnam acknowledges that attendance rates at public events, such as spectator sports, have increased. He dismisses this as evidence of increased sociability, because, says he, doing sports is better than watching sports. But exercise is not the question at hand. Public attendance at sports is public participation and is overwhelmingly done in the company of family and friends.⁵ A more significant example concerns crime, which researchers (including Putnam) typically treat as an indicator of low "social capital." Rising crime rates from about 1965 to 1990 reinforce the description of social disintegration. However, after about 1990 – and in some data, even before – crime rates dropped significantly.⁶ Such evidence contradicts the story line in *Bowling Alone*.

Putnam must also be faulted for some rhetorical overkill (e.g. pp. 39, 43). For example he describes a change, say from 10 to 8% in some activity, as a formidable "twenty percent" decline, when it really is a two-point and perhaps marginally significant decline. Elsewhere, he downplays similar variations if they are in the opposite direction. For example a 30% increase in volunteering among 20–29 year olds is labeled as "modest" (p. 129), when elsewhere such changes are described as major.

³ One response (Norris, 1996) is not persuasive because it simply shows that news-watchers are civic.

⁴ E.g., p. 110 vs. p. 460n.48; p. 142 vs. p.468n.29; p. 190 vs. p.474n.2, 3.

⁵ Fair disclosure: my family shares season tickets to the San Francisco Giants.

⁶ The 1990s drop in FBI crime statistics is well known. Victimization surveys suggest a longer trend on declining crime rates, since the early 1980s. See e.g. the *Statistical Abstract* 1999 and 1995. Putnam (p. 144) notes but downplays the drop in crime.

There are conceptual missteps as well. Notably, Putnam has further popularized that dreadful metaphor, “social capital.” Aside from the substantive issues around that term which I discuss below, the phrase itself is a problem. It is a metaphor that misleads: Where can I borrow social capital? What is the going interest rate? Can I move some of my social capital off-shore?

Putnam says that “social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). The reason he needs to re-label perfectly usable terms, such as networks and norms of reciprocity, into a “capital” is “that social networks have value . . . (they) can affect the productivity of individuals and groups.” Hold on. First, the assumption that the trust norms are part of a package with networks remains to be established (see below). Second, many things people have affect their productivity, from good looks to good luck. Shall all these be labeled a “capital?” If yes, to what use? Third, some networks and social norms often detract from productivity—bad friends and obligations to elderly parents or grasping relatives, for examples. (Shall we call all these “social liabilities?”) The *Oxford English Dictionary’s* closest definition of capital to Putnam’s use of the term is “wealth in any form used to help in producing more wealth.” Are social ties and warm feelings used to produce financial wealth? Or to produce more social ties and warm feelings or something else? Do they do so? Alas, this metaphor casts more confusion than light.

“Social capital” is also unnecessary, because clearer and simpler terms – such as membership, family, sociability and trust – serve perfectly well. Putnam implicitly recognizes the problem when he switches to other metaphors to describe types of “social capital”: “bridging” and “bonding.” These are both terms much more suited to modify the metaphor of “ties” than that of capital. “Social capitalism” has expanded in all directions like a swamp in wet weather. Glaeser et al. (2000, p. 3), for example write that “individual social capital (is) a person’s social characteristics – including social skills, charisma, and the size of his Rolodex – which enables him to reap market and non-market returns from interactions with others.” This is not much different from saying that social capital is everything psychological and sociological about a person.⁷

“Social capital” has become one of the many species of “capitals” that have recently infested sociologists’ prose (see the discussion in, e.g. Portes, 1998; Woolcock, 1998). Using them lets sociologists play in the same sandbox as economists; they have their kinds of capital and we have ours. And using the phrase probably allows sociologists more access to the ears and wallets of the powers-that-be than simply writing about, say, friendship and church attendance. On the other hand, the term has reciprocally allowed economists to colonize sociologists’ topics. Now many of them are writing about neighborhood get-togethers, PTAs, Bible-study classes, and the like (e.g. Glaeser et al., 2000; Costa and Kahn, 2001; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2000). This is not necessarily a good thing.

In the end, however, these faults are minor when compared to the achievement that is *Bowling Alone*. This review is devoted mainly to two big questions: (1) is there a thing such as so-called “social capital”? (2) Has this thing declined and, if so, has it declined for the

⁷ These complaints are some of the reasons that, as past-editor of the American Sociological Association’s popular sociology magazine, *Contexts*, I put “social capital” on the do-not-use style-sheet (unless put into ironic quotation marks).

reasons Putnam gives? Obviously, to fully answer these questions would require re-doing *Bowling Alone* itself. I merely raise some considerations.

2. Does “Social Capital” exist?

Bowling Alone analyzes a vast range of individual behavior, including voting, belonging to sororities, church outings, playing bridge, having family dinners, do-good volunteering, and professing one’s faith in one’s fellow humans to a pollster, not to mention league bowling. All of these are elements of so-called “social capital.” Are these really all of a kind? If not, what different things have been squeezed under this single rubric?

If these behaviors all reflected some underlying property of individuals – personal tendencies toward social connectedness and commitment – then we would expect people who generally do one behavior to also generally do another. But they do not. For example researchers have identified voting as a distinct practice from other sorts of political participation or “social capital.” To take a case in point: The Pew Center’s study of trust found that trusting and distrusting survey respondents voted at about the same rate (Pew Center, 2000: Table 3; see also Durlauf, 2002).⁸ Similarly, Putnam and his critics agree that volunteering seems to show a different pattern than other forms of social participation; volunteering was increasing in the last couple of decades (Ch. 7; Greeley, 1997; Wuthnow, 1997; Ladd, 1999; Costa and Kahn, 2001, report no real trend).

I briefly tested the assumption of “social capital” coherence in a quarter-decade of GSS surveys. (This exercise is reported in Appendix A.) I took seven presumed indicators – trusting most people, voting, church attendance, belonging to organizations, socializing with neighbors, socializing with friends outside the neighborhood, and giving money to charity – and asked whether respondents who reported doing one tended to also report doing another. The answer is: not really. The strongest association is between reported church attendance and reported membership in organizations ($r=0.27$). Some items are unrelated, such as voting and getting together with neighbors ($r=-0.01$). As to “norms of . . . trustworthiness that arise from (social networks)” (p. 19), the correlations of trust with seeing neighbors and friends are about zero (Appendix A). If one used such items to create a “social capital” scale for individuals, it would be a very poor one by typical standards.⁹

Maybe these attributes are components of the same thing in a different sense. Instead of being parallel expressions of personal “social capital,” perhaps they are “assets” in people’s social “portfolios,” that is, different kinds of “capital stock.” Some people “invest” in churches, some in political campaigns, some in family dinners, and yet others in being trusting souls. If people invest differently – I do friends, you do volunteering, she does churches – then we would not expect high correlations among these activities. In real financial portfolios, however, people who have more of one asset tend also to have more

⁸ Some examples of other sorts of studies that separate voting from other dimensions of “social capital,” including civic participation, are Inglehart (1997), Altschuler and Blumin (2000), and Kaufman (1999).

⁹ Brehm and Rahn (1997) report mutual effects of trust and organizational membership. It is true that each affects the other, but not more than do other variables and not at the levels one would expect if trust and membership were components of the same “thing.”

of another. Anyway, this is not how Putnam describes or uses “social capital,” although it would fit the metaphor better (see Glaeser et al., 2000).

Although we can stipulate for the moment that the great majority of Putnam’s indicators have moved in the same direction over the last quarter-century, the wholism implicit in the “social capital” concept is not persuasive. We could start to suspect that a few different things, perhaps mutually influencing one another, are involved.

One thing, for example is political. Expressions of political distrust have increased substantially, as have other signs of political alienation, such as disinterest in the news and declining turnout. The sources of this change may well lie in the body politic itself.¹⁰

Another thing is personal sociability, being connected to kin and friends. The trends here, unlike those regarding politics, are weak and mixed – e.g. less entertaining at home, yet more personal phone calls – but perhaps real. Their source may lie in the time pressures of the last few decades and women’s increasing hours away from the home. Thus, Costa and Kahn (2001), who report using the same data as Putnam, conclude that the only personal sociability trend of significance is a decline in entertaining at home, which they largely attribute to women’s increasing work.

Yet another thing is organizational participation. Here, Wuthnow (1998) makes a persuasive case that civic activity has shifted in form. Instead of participating through the sorts of bureaucracies exemplified by the Rotary Club, people increasingly participate in ad hoc, specialized ways, as illustrated by an AIDS walk, beach cleanup, or lobbying campaign. People can be altruistic individualistically. A nifty illustration of Wuthnow’s (1991) description is the award-winning web site, www.volunteermatch.org, which allows people to join particular do-gooder activities on a one-time basis and even do “remote volunteering.” It claimed 1,427,192 referrals to 26,561 organizations as of January 21, 2004. (On the other hand, this kind of volunteering might be just the sort of *Bowling Alone* activity that Putnam is pointing to, doing good outside of a “league.”¹¹)

More generally, Putnam’s odd lot of behaviors could be organized under at least two more specific – and more sociological – conceptual canopies. One is the familiar construct of individualism. It is surprising that Putnam does not acknowledge that much of his subject matter is what most people call “individualism.” He mentions the term rarely (e.g. p. 82) and does not include it in the book’s index. Perhaps, individualism is a concept so barnacled with old debates that it would make *Bowling Alone* sound like earlier jeremiads. But, is not most of the book really about Durkheim’s egoism: Americans giving less money to charity, being less sociable, or being more materialistic? Several topics in *Bowling Alone* would be better labeled individualism rather than “social capital” if we define individualism as social practices that favor individual interests over group interests. Addressing individualism would place *Bowling Alone* into a familiar literature, but with a radical departure from that literature, that individualism actually decreased through most of the 20th century and increased only after the 1950s when Americans began indulging in “the worship of choice” (Ehrenhalt, 2000, p. 251).

The second alternative label might be privatism. Even if we stipulate, for the sake of discussion, that Americans have withdrawn from public activities such as politics and civic

¹⁰ For an overview, see the collection by Nye et al. (1997).

¹¹ Point suggested by Michael Hout.

clubs, the question arises as to whether they have withdrawn all the way into their isolated, lonely selves (ultimate individualism), or have withdrawn into a more private world of family, work, and friends—a story of greater, but still social privatism. This analysis is consistent with Banfield's (1958) account of civic abandonment. Civic life in Italian villages suffered, he claimed, not because Italians were individualistic, but because they were amorally familistic, putting the private group above the public good.¹² Between these two alternatives, *Bowling Alone* leans toward the individualism argument. Putnam contrasts the happy picture of a grandfather who, after serving his nation in World War II, belonged to the Elks, was a church deacon, and bowled in a league to the dismal picture of his grandson who does little more than commute, work, and watch television—and does so all alone. But much in *Bowling Alone* better fits the formulation of a shift from public to private sociality.¹³

When Putnam concedes that some kinds of social activity – fundamentalist religious denominations, self-help groups, and “new age” movements, volunteering – have increased, his trump card is to critique those forms for being inward-looking rather than outwardly civic-minded. Fundamentalist churches, for example tend to focus on saving members' souls rather than on civic philanthropy; they engage in “privatized religion” (Ch. 4). Fair enough, but parochial sociality is quite different than no sociality at all; it is still sociality. Similarly, Putnam's distinction between “bridging” and “bonding” types of “social capital” (better phrased as bridging versus in-bound social networks) reinforces a contrast between public and private rather than a contrast between social and asocial.

Putnam presents several findings that suggest a decline in all forms of sociality, private as well as public—lowered church attendance, fewer family meals, less frequent social entertaining, and so on. On the whole, this evidence is more mixed than his evidence showing civic withdrawal and is subject to quite different explanations, such as the effects of time constraints. Take the case of voting. Census surveys asked Americans who were registered but failed to vote why they had not voted. Between 1980 and 1996, the biggest change in responses was a leap from 8 to 22% who said “busy/no time.” Answers indicative of political disenchantment (“not interested” plus “did not like the candidates”) did not increase, 28 and 29% (United States Bureau of the Census 1998).

Either this public versus private formulation or the individualism formulation better captures the common issues in the potpourri of behaviors Putnam labels “social capital.” Moreover, the historical trends concerning these separate domains – politics, organizations, individualism, and privatism – may be only apparently coincident.

3. Is *Bowling Alone* true?

Have many forms of sociality declined since about 1970? If so, have they declined because of the reasons Putnam presents? Many scholars responded to Putnam's first articles with a verdict of “case not proven.” Now, given the wealth of data in *Bowling Alone*, the burden of proof is on the critics.

¹² Banfield and his student, James Q. Wilson, went on to study “public- vs. private-regardingness” (e.g. Wilson and Banfield, 1964).

¹³ For some relevant discussions on privatism, see e.g. Seligman (1998), Wientraub (1997), McClay (1995), and Laslett (1973).

Putnam's initial and central claim was that membership in civic organizations had declined. This is now one of his weaker assertions. Rates of membership, in a gross sense, seem not to have declined or to have declined in only a few specific types of organizations. Part of the Putnam's original results turned out to be statistical error. Critics noted that the GSS survey counted not memberships, but types of organizations to which people belonged (e.g. three veteran's groups would count only as one type). Moreover, a decline in the average number of membership types appeared only once education was held constant—a controversial procedure, as the trend has been for Americans to complete more grades in school (see e.g. Nie et al., 1996; Helliwell and Putnam, 1999). Critics also pointed out that new sorts of groups were not captured by the standard list (e.g. Cohen, 1999; Ammerman, 1997; Baumgartner and Walker, 1988 versus Smith, 1990 and following comment). Other analysts have found that the decline in membership was restricted to only a few types of organizations, notably unions, veterans, and church groups (author's analysis; see also, Costa and Kahn, 2001; Wuthnow, 1997; Ladd, 1999; Paxton, 1999).

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam essentially shifted his argument (and his data) to focus on active participation in organizations. The book presents much evidence of a decline in activities, such as attending political rallies. But volunteering time and labor is up, or at least steady (e.g., Rotolo, 1999). With respect to politics, researchers have pointed out that some sorts of political activity, such as writing congressmen and mobilizing neighbors, may have become more common since the 1960s (e.g. Verba et al., 1995: p. 72; Inglehart, 1997; Ladd, 1999). Verba et al. (1995: 72), for example, also report an increase between 1967 and 1987 of from 14 to 17% in the percentage of Americans who had “form(ed) a group to help solve local problems”—an increase in Putnam's generous metric of “a full” 21%.

In some cases, readers might be skeptical that the size of changes warrants so much fuss (e.g. Greeley, 2001). For example church membership rates, according to Gallup Polls, declined from a high of about 75% around 1950 to a roughly stable level of around 68% since the mid-1970s (Gallup Poll, 2001). This 7-point drop (9% in Putnam's calculus) over 50 years is well within the sort of error posed by variations in polling procedures, response rates, and the like—and is largely confined to Catholics.

Finally, a looming issue is the trustworthiness of one of Putnam's key datasets, the multi-year DDB Needham marketing poll. Putnam does a good job of defending the data, but the survey does violate key assumptions in scientific polling, resting on a sample of respondents who represent 5% of those approached. Many of Putnam's strongest claims depend on that data.

Another contention of critics is that Putnam has failed to consider other sorts, perhaps better sorts, of measures of “social capital,” especially informal associations and new organizational inventions, such as support groups—forms of “social capital” that may have increased in recent decades.¹⁴ Some critics suggest that the very nature of civic and political participation has changed. It has become more diffuse, in ways that are real and effective, but poorly measured in the standard surveys (e.g. Schudson, 1998). The Howard Dean campaign, informally organized through the Internet, is a good example. Personal relations also may have evolved – not eroded – in ways not captured by the standard measures (e.g. Starr, 2000). For example social ties at work may have become relatively more important,

¹⁴ For example Wuthnow (1991, 1998); although Putnam has a thorough response in *Bowling Alone*.

especially with women working more. (Putnam notes the point about work but reports that there is no evidence that work ties have increased or decreased in recent decades; pp. 85ff.) This line of argument contends that social connectedness has changed rather than declined. We still await empirical support for the argument.

If we grant the descriptive claims in *Bowling Alone*, that Americans are participating less in many forms of social and civic activity, the next questions arise about the explanations that Putnam proffers. He places greatest weight on generational succession because most of the survey data show big differences between successive generations but smaller differences between time periods for any particular generation.¹⁵ Putnam argues that some part of the generational differences is the product of being raised with television. He attributes lesser causal effect to increased work and commuting hours.

Yet, *Bowling Alone* probably underestimates the importance of work pressures and of women's increasing participation in the paid labor force (see, e.g. [Costa and Kahn, 2001](#)). After all, much of what the book discusses are precisely time-consuming activities. As individual and family time demands accumulate – such as commuting, which Putnam does focus on, but also work hours and child care – something has to give, although neither attention to children nor religion seem to be one of those.¹⁶

The increasing preoccupation of women with work surely accounts for much of the strains on voluntary associations. Putnam argues that women's participation in the labor force cannot be a major explanation for declining civic participation because the decline is at least as strong among non-working women. But that argument neglects contextual effects. As energetic and socially skilled wives get careers, it becomes harder for those women remaining at home to sustain civic activities. (A principle of most voluntary organizations is that 10% of the people do at least 90% of the work.) Indeed, employed women might show lesser decline in their participation because they take their energies into professional activities and because their professional work can assist their civic work. For example, some lawyers provide an environmental group with pro bono advice. Those out of the labor force are left to shoulder much of the voluntary association burden alone – especially in traditional organizations, such as women's clubs – and many cannot sustain the effort. [Wuthnow \(1998\)](#) describes a couple of cases such as this.

While Putnam covers a wide range of explanations, there are others that are insufficiently explored. For example, two studies suggest that widening inequalities in American society undermine organizational membership ([Alesina and La Ferrara, 2000](#); [Costa and Kahn, 2001](#)). Others point to particular news events and social changes since the mid-1960s for creating both political withdrawal and a general sense of malaise. Scandals, crises, and political difficulties – together with their close coverage by the media – may well explain much of Americans' disenchantment with politics (see e.g. [Paxton, 1999](#); [Kleppner, 1982](#); [King, 1997](#); [Nye and Zelikow, 1997](#)). Americans' recent distrust of politics may simply reflect

¹⁵ For example in the case of trust (p. 141).

¹⁶ On increased work hours, see [Jacobs and Gerson \(1998\)](#). Although the issue is contested, most authorities believe that total work time – at least among two-job American couples in the prime working years – has increased. On some of the consequences, see [Family and Work Institute \(1999\)](#) and [Bianchi et al. \(2000\)](#). [Bianchi \(2000\)](#) reports that parent-child contact, however, did not decline in the last couple of decades. [Fischer et al. \(2000\)](#) find limited effects of family time pressures on church membership or attendance.

what they have recently learned about politics. Similarly, Americans may have become more anxious and distrusting since the 1950s because their social milieus have become more frightful. For example Americans' answers to the questions about distrusting "people" track closely with the national homicide rate and personal experiences of crime (Pew Center, 2000: Fig. 6; Smith, 1997; see also Mansbridge, 1997; Lipset, 1995). These alternative explanations – ones that point to time constraints, or political events, or particular social changes – differ from Putnam's. First, they are topic-specific, and second, they link concrete events to changes in individual behavior instead of positing a global change in a diffuse quality such as civic-mindedness or sociability.

The diffuseness of Putnam's favored explanation – generational change – is another problem. To say that generational turnover – or historical time – "explains" something is not really to explain but to label. What about different generations would lead those who are now senior citizens to be highly civic-minded and their children to be much less so? Television provides a partial answer: Perhaps because baby-boomers were the first to grow up watching television that habit permanently sapped their social energies. The television argument gains special persuasiveness because a variety of evidence – not just survey-data correlations, but also observational studies, experiments, and individual-level and community-level longitudinal studies – all point to the anti-social effects of television-watching (e.g. Williams, 1986; Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Wartella and Mazzarella, 1990).

Beyond television, the generational explanation is vague and weakly supported. Putnam devotes considerable space to arguing that World War II instilled an esprit de corps in the "Greatest Generation," but the evidence for that is largely impressionistic (pp. 267ff). One could tell a similar story of how the shared experience of overcrowded schools, political traumas in the 1960s, and the efflorescence of youth culture bonded a generation that danced together in the streets to the beat of Motown. Yet that would describe the "Worst Generation." In truth, the source of the generational differences – the special civic mindedness of Americans born between 1910 and 1940 – remains mysterious. Another quirk in the explanation is that *Bowling Alone* attributes the high participation level of Americans born between 1910 and 1940 largely to their adult experiences, the war, but the low participation level of the Baby Boomers largely to their childhood experiences, watching television.

Perhaps what we have in the generational differences is some sort of long-term cyclical pattern. Some ideas and customs – just like some organizations – wax and wane. For example in the 1920s, the Rotary was an exciting break with the stodgy old men's fraternities like the Moose; in the 1970s, spiritual exploration was an exciting break with the stodgy old men's clubs like the Rotary. Maybe, cultural patterns expand until they break of their own weight, giving way to something new. If so, perhaps the social unraveling Putnam describes has run its course. Here and there in *Bowling Alone*, Putnam notes hopeful new signs, such as increasing volunteering (see also Putnam, 2002). Other signs are there, too. For example crime is down almost to levels of the 1960s; trust in government rebounded in the 1990s (Moore, 2000; Nie et al., 1996; Pew Center, 2000); early teen sexual experimentation declined (Lindberg et al., 2000); and new forms of social connections, some aided by technology, emerged. Maybe the wheel is about to turn again. Perhaps even stylized responses to surveys will shift from the ironic and cynical back toward the more pollyannaish self-presentations of the 1950s. Robert Putnam may have founded a movement for more civic-mindedness just as Americans were moving that way on their own accord.

4. Keeping score

These criticisms should not detract from the great accomplishment that *Bowling Alone* is. Putnam has racked up a high score and many social scientists will be busy in the next several years playing catch-up. He has mightily contributed an impressive catalog of well-documented social changes and a set of provocative ideas about those changes. Whether Putnam has accurately interpreted the changes or explained them is more questionable. My major debates with *Bowling Alone* involve:

- objecting to “social capital,” both as terminology and as concept;
- suggesting that we would get more theoretical traction by thinking about individualism and privatism than about “social capital”;
- observing that disaggregating the topics now lumped together under “social capital” would also yield a better empirical understanding of what has been going on. The contradictions in data and trends might be better resolved by seeing the social changes as roughly coincident but different phenomena;
- noting limits in the persuasiveness of the generational explanation and the promising possibilities of turning to other explanations;
- expecting that new research – so much stimulated by Robert Putnam – will revise the claims in *Bowling Alone*.

That is for the future. For now, *Bowling Alone* is the prime reference on “Whither America?”

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Appendix A. Exploring the intercorrelations among “Social Capital” items

The following reports a modest exercise in assessing whether elements of Putnam’s “social capital” cohere in a fashion one would expect if they all indicated a global property of individuals. The data are the 1972–2000 General Social Surveys.

I took seven measures:

- (1) Trust: whether the respondent reported trusting “most” people (three-point scale).
- (2) Voted: whether the respondent reported voting in the previous presidential election (no/yes).
- (3) Attendance: reported frequency of attendance at church services (7-point scale).
- (4) Organizations: the number of organization types the respondent reported belonging to (0–4 or more—the famous NUMMEM scale).
- (5) Neighbors: respondents’ reports of how often they got together with neighbors (7-point scale).

- (6) Friends: respondents' reports of how often they got together with friends outside the neighborhood (7-point scale).
- (7) Giving: how many types of organizations, out of 13 (including informal giving and "other" giving), the respondent reported giving money to in 1995 (0–4 or more; available only for the 1996 GSS).

The zero-order correlations among them are:

	Trust	Voted	Attendance	Organizations	Neighbors	Friends	Giving
Trust		0.18	0.04	0.18	0.02	0.05	0.18
Voted			0.18	0.27	−0.01	−0.02	0.23
Attendance				0.27	0.04	−0.00	0.19
Organizations					0.10	0.15	n/a
Neighbors						0.20	0.04
Friends							0.05

The partial correlations among them controlling for age, education, marital status, and race are:

	Trust	Voted	Attendance	Organizations	Neighbors	Friends	Giving
Trust		0.10	0.03	0.09	0.04	0.05	0.08
Voted			0.13	0.18	0.03	0.05	0.11
Attendance				0.27	0.07	0.06	0.17
Organizations					0.12	0.13	n/a
Neighbors						0.18	0.05
Friends							0.08

The controls do little to improve the picture of quite modest associations for items meant to all indicate one thing.

This is, of course, only a quick look, not an in-depth analysis. But if the "social capital" concept presumes a tight interconnection among its various elements, that does not immediately appear in the data.

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