

# The Data Just Don't Show Erosion of America's "Social Capital"

by Everett C. Ladd

Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to get many things right when it comes to explaining American society. Nowhere is the penetrating clarity of his understanding of the infant republic more impressively on display than in his discussion of the place of associations, civic and political, in the nation's life. Tocqueville saw that the US had a breadth and depth of group participation unmatched elsewhere. He understood, too, that American democracy could not survive, or at least couldn't flourish, unless individualist citizens, confident in their ability to make and do and improve the social order, continued to participate actively, joining with others of like mind and interest to address common needs. In the pages that follow, we bring together the central strands of Tocqueville's analysis of associational America. We've added only the sideheads; all the prose is the author's, rearranged but otherwise unaltered.

“*Tocqueville argued that individualist Americans believed they were obligated to make personal effort on behalf of social amelioration, and that their society was congenial to such efforts. Contemporary research shows Americans still hold these norms and judgments. This being so, it was unlikely indeed that they would use the enhanced participatory possibilities of postindustrialism to (figuratively) “bowl alone.” And, the data show, they haven't. Individualist America in its postindustrial era is a vigorously civic America.*”

I share with many contemporary observers the judgment that Tocqueville was entirely correct about the essentiality of vigorous associational life. I would agree, then, that any sign of substantial deterioration in the country's civic participation should be viewed with great alarm. Since he published his now-famous “Bowling Alone” article in the January 1995 issue of *The Journal of Democracy*, Robert D. Putnam has been in the forefront of those arguing that just such an erosion is now taking place. He sees in contemporary America a “democratic disarray” that is linked “to a broad and continuing erosion of civic engagement that began a quarter century ago.”<sup>1</sup>

“Bowling Alone” has prompted a mountain of commentary and discussion, much siding with the author. Putnam has also received some thoughtful criticism, including an article in *The Economist*, a *Washington Post* column by Robert J. Samuelson, and a piece by Michael Schudson in *The American Prospect*.<sup>2</sup> Both *The Economist* and Samuelson discuss data that challenge Putnam's depiction of America's “social capital” as in decline, but these short pieces explored the relevant data only cursorily. My colleagues and I believe that the importance of the argument about civic decline demands we give it the most complete empirical examination our resources permit. The next 35 pages (apart from Tocqueville's commentary from the *Democracy in America*) present the results of our efforts.

Over the course of my 19 years as director of the Roper Center, I've had many occasions to review data bearing on the “civic decline” argument. In almost every instance, it has seemed to me that the information pointed in the opposite direction

from the one Bob Putnam was to adopt in “Bowling Alone.” But if I brought to the work of this issue skepticism that a comprehensive review of pertinent data would show overall *decline*, I was entirely unprepared for the extent of the *increase* the data in fact show. Not even one set of systematic data support the thesis of “Bowling Alone.”

## Flaws in Putnam's Argument

Our objective in this issue is to present a broad assortment of the best available data on the extent and vitality of associational life in the contemporary United States—not to enter into an argument with Professor Putnam. But it's testimony to the prominence of his work that it's impossible to avoid such an argument. I want to limit it, nonetheless, and keep it where it belongs—not on what any of us *thinks* or *feels* about the subject but on what reliable data *show* conditions to be.

These data frequently contradict Putnam's argument. For example, he writes in “Bowling Alone” that “by almost every measure, American's direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily and sharply over the last generation.... Every year over the last decade or two, millions more have withdrawn from the affairs of their communities.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, a huge volume of readily available information says otherwise. The “Citizen Participation Survey,” conducted in 1987 under the direction of Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady, following on earlier work done by Verba and Norman Nie, found many areas where the rate of political engagement had climbed substantially between 1967 and 1987 (see page 12). The proportion describing themselves as members of political clubs or regularly voting in presidential elections was down over this span, but contacting government officials, working with others on community needs, and forming groups to help solve local problems, were up. Gallup surveys similarly show a large increase (here from the 1950s steadily on into the 1990s) in the proportion of Americans saying they have written their member of Congress.

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The Michigan election studies show no steady movement over the last four decades in the proportion who say they have gone to rallies and other political meetings in support of candidates; it was 6.2 percent of the voting age public in 1952 and 7.3 percent in 1992—nothing to boast about but again no evidence of decline (p. 12).

Even voter turnout doesn't back the thesis of declining political participa-

**Voter Turnout—U.S. Presidential Elections, 1932-1992**

Election Year	Percent Who Voted
1960	62.8%
1964	61.9%
1952	61.6%
1968	60.9%
1956	59.3%
1940	58.9%
1936	56.9%
1992	56.2%
1944	56.0%
1972	55.2%
1980	55.1%
1984	54.5%
1976	53.5%
1932	52.5%
1988	51.4%
1948	51.1%

tion as Professor Putnam has stated it. The accompanying table shows official Census data on the percentage of the voting age public casting valid ballots for president in each election, 1932-1992. The 1992 turnout was exactly middle of the pack for this span. The Census compilations do show turnout dropping nine points from its modern high in 1960 to just 53.5 percent in 1976.

Since then, turnout has essentially plateaued—at a level that is low compared to other Western democracies, but not unusual in twentieth-century American experience. Turnout in 1988 was about what it was in 1948; in 1976 about what it was in 1932; and turnout in 1992 was almost exactly what it was in 1936 when Franklin Roosevelt, the history books tell us, energized the country and won his massive triumph.

**Parental Involvement In School Affairs Isn't Down**

Robert Putnam has made much of the fact that PTA membership declined sharply from the early 1960s through the early 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Yet, if the 56 percent decline in membership over this span is disheartening as an indicator of eroding social capital, then the 28 percent rise in membership since 1982 should be seen as demonstrating a heartening recovery. We show (page 6) that part of the swing, in both directions, reflected nothing more than changes in the size of the school-age population. Parents are likely to be in the PTA only when they have children in grades K-8. The numbers of such parents declined from the 1960s through to the early 1980s, when their ranks began growing again.

The important question, though, isn't why PTA membership declined over this 20-year period. Organizations lose members for many reasons—most of which have nothing to do with the vitality of civic participation. The real question is one Putnam alludes to but then doesn't confront, when he observes that "parental involvement in the educational process represents a particularly productive form of social capital." Indeed it does. But where is the evidence such involvement has diminished? A number of survey sources (see pages 7-8) show parental involvement very high and if anything increasing. Though PTA membership fell from 1962 through 1982, "parental involvement in the educational process" isn't declining in contemporary America.

**Impressive Civic Participation**

I hope that everyone concerned about American civic life will take a few minutes to review the range of information bearing on it that we have assembled here. Again and again these data tell a story of high and increasing engagement. For example, surveys done by Gallup and by Princeton Survey Research Associates show a large increase in social service activities over the past twenty years. Cross-national polling shows Americans markedly more inclined to belong to civic associations than their European counterparts: We're still distinctively the joiner nation Tocqueville depicted (p. 10). Similarly the survey research by Sidney Verba and his colleagues show high contemporary participation in a great variety of group activities (p. 11). The Independent Sector has been tracking volunteerism over the last decade, and they've found Americans volunteering their time for all manner of groups and causes in huge numbers—and numbers that aren't declining. Even older organizations that confronted problems as the proportion of women in the labor force rose, such as the Girl Scouts and Red Cross, show their volunteer ranks remaining strong (p. 14). Especially heartening are the robust rates of volunteering by teenagers, civic America's next generation (pp. 15-16).

Giving of one's time to help people and otherwise promote good works is a key part of a nation's civic life, but so too is philanthropy. Here, the data show a steady increase in real, per person charitable giving over the past 65 years. Private philanthropy—mostly by individuals, not foundations or corporations—rose from a per capita figure of \$88 (in dollars of 1993 purchasing power) in 1930 to \$522 in 1995 (p. 17). As discretionary income has risen, then, so, dramatically, has the amount of our giving. Churches and other religious groups receive the largest share of private giving, but health and human service organizations, schools and colleges, and groups dedicated to the arts and humanities are also major recipients (p. 18). The inclina-

tion of Americans to set up foundations, small ones as well as giants like Ford and Rockefeller, has long been a distinctive feature of this society—and the rate at which new foundations are being established isn't falling off. On the contrary, in the 1980s, the last decade for which systematic data are available, the number of foundations (with a million dollars or more in assets) established annually stood at 180, a rate matched in twentieth-century experience only in the 1950s (page 20).

**Experience Matches Theory**

The experience these data describe is encouraging for all of us who see vigorous civic participation essential to the nation's health. These findings should not surprise us though; they are well accounted for by a body of theory and accompanying data on contemporary socio-economic development. Writing in *The Coming of Postindustrial Society* (1973), Daniel Bell described the emergence of the US (and other economically advanced countries) into a broad new era of development. He contrasted this "postindustrial" period with its predecessor, writing that whereas "industrial society is the coordination of machines and men for the production of goods," postindustrial society is "organized around knowledge." The key developments defining postindustrialism, Bell argued, are "the exponential growth and branching of science, the rise of a new intellectual technology, the creation of systematic research through R & D budgets, and...the codification of theoretical knowledge."<sup>5</sup> The technological revolutions of the postindustrial era have also dramatically expanded wealth. Thus, postindustrialism enlarges the resources for civic participation. It increases dramatically the proportion of

the public given advanced educational skills and new communication tools. It frees broad segments of the populace from grinding physical toil. And, by extending material abundance, it widens the range of individual choice and invites millions to explore civic life in ways previously out of reach for them.

Tocqueville argued that individualist Americans believed they were obligated to make personal effort on behalf of social amelioration, and that their society was congenial to such efforts. Individuals *should* participate, then, and when they do *it works*. Contemporary research shows Americans still hold these norms and judgments. This being so, it was unlikely indeed that they would use the enhanced participatory possibilities of postindustrialism to (figuratively) "bowl alone." And, the data show, they haven't. Individualist America in its postindustrial era is a vigorously civic America.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *The Journal of Democracy*, p. 77. Professor Putnam has subsequently extended his argument: "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America," *The American Prospect*, Winter 1996, pp. 34-48; and "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, December 1995, pp. 664-683.

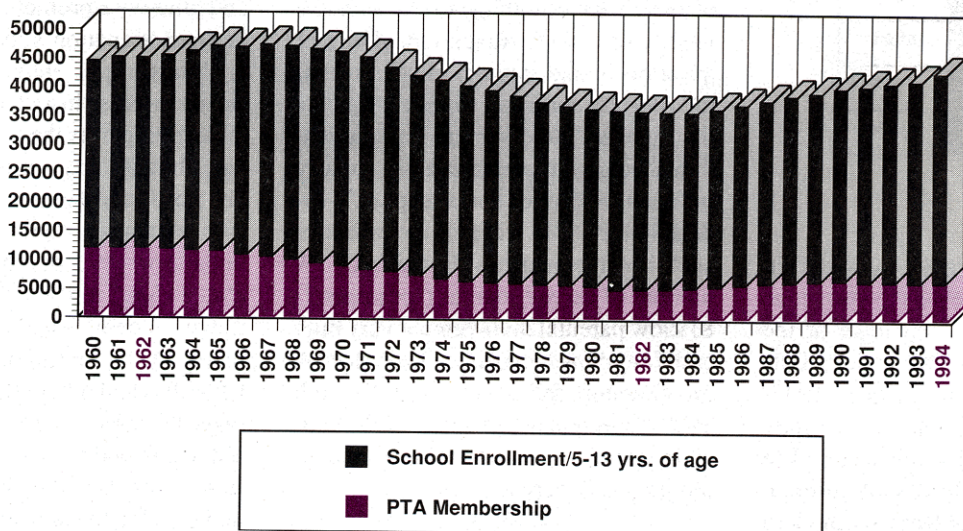
<sup>2</sup>See "The Solitary Bowler," *The Economist*, February 18, 1995, pp. 21-22; Robert J. Samuelson, "'Bowling Alone' is Bunk," the *Washington Post*, April 10, 1996; and Michael Schudson, "What if Civic Life Didn't Die?," *The American Prospect*, March/April 1996, pp. 17-20.

<sup>3</sup>Bowling Alone," p. 68.

<sup>4</sup>See "Bowling Alone," p. 69.

<sup>5</sup>Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Postindustrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 20, 44.

**The PTA Story: Membership Down 56%, 1962-1982; Up 28% From 1982-1994; Shift Follows, in Part, Changes in Size of School-Age Population**



Source: The membership data are from PTA records; the school enrollment data are from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.