

Thoughts on Robert Putnam, stimulated by a reading of his recent book, Better Together.

Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone has proved a social science classic of the twentieth century. He told us that Americans spend decreasing amounts of time in social activities, to the disadvantage of our health, our happiness, and our social cohesion. Putnam assembled an astonishing range of facts and statistical measures to support his central thesis. He tells us that by the late 1960s we had begun to "join less, trust less, give less, vote less, and schmooze less" (p.4, the new book). As the title indicated, we are more likely to go "bowling alone." ("Thank God" the cynics will say, Putnam does note that social capital has a dangerous and fascistic side as well)

Many critics took aim at Putnam. The strongest criticisms stressed how Putnam's measures missed new and growing measures of social participation, such as self-help groups and virtual communities. By their very nature, new forms of community participation will not be so closely reflected in available statistics. That being said, Putnam's responses were effective, if not always decisively convincing. Not all the new groups, for instance, bring social bonds. When was the last time most seniors went to an AARP meeting, or came away feeling fulfilled? Overall, Putnam's work has had lasting impact because it is deeper and more clever and better executed than its competitors.

Putnam now offers a new study – Better Together: Restoring the American Community -- with co-authors Lewis Feldstein and Don Cohen. The latest twist is more optimistic: Putnam and his co-authors examine when contemporary America has generated new and successful forms of collective participation.

Putnam is careful to skirt the potential contradiction between his old work and his new work. He understands that the reader will be suspicious at how easily he finds successes. Still he is on logically sound ground, America is a huge country, even if joining has declined surely we can find twelve good case studies of successful participation. (There is arguably a stronger tension between the Putnam of Bowling Alone and Putnam's much earlier works. His Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy outlined how north and south Italy have robustly kept varying forms of participatory traditions for hundreds of years. Yet at the same time we are to fear that television, in a generation, is wiping out a long American practice of community engagement.)

My main worry is the following: Putnam focuses on inputs (social capital) rather than outputs, such as well-being, ethical behavior, creative flourishing, or whatever else really matters.

Once we focus on outputs, it is harder to see why we might get too little joining. If joining is so great for people, why not join? True, joining may bring external benefits to others, but most of these benefits will be internal to the club, organization, or bowling league. Tyler Cowen, a non-bowler, won't benefit much if others join more bowling

leagues. So the group still captures those benefits, and can market those benefits to potential joiners.

Putnam can and does tell a story about how all of us behave better, vote better, etc. if we join bowling leagues. So maybe I do benefit if you join a bowling league. Social bonding may be a public good on a much larger scale.

First, I wonder whether these broader benefits are significant, the local, internalized benefits are easier to see. But let us grant all this, and admit that we have too little joining. Other critical parts of the Putnam argument still are hard to maintain.

Putnam tells us that joining offers lower private benefits than before, due to suburbia, the automobile, television, etc. Good enough, but then the optimal amount of joining will be lower as well. After all, the automobile brings noticeable private advantages. It will be better to have less joining, even if joining benefits others. There still will be “too little joining” but this must have been the case in times past as well. There is no particular reason to think that the magnitude of “underjoining,” relative to the optimum, has become worse. Joining has gone down, but the private benefits of joining have gone down as well.

Putnam offers much evidence to buttress his case that joining is a good thing. Joiners, for instance, are happier and healthier. But these are all gross private benefits of joining, not net benefits. If people are, for private reasons, deciding to join less, they feel the net benefits are smaller, relative to other options. The high gross benefits from joining do not themselves show that non-joining is becoming a more severe problem.

In short, Putnam does argue convincingly for two propositions: 1) Joining has declined, and 2) Joining brings some external benefits. From these, it does **not** follow that 3) The lack of joining is a bigger problem than before. The benefits of not joining have gone up too.

While I do not buy Putnam’s basic normative story, his analysis remains perceptive. At the end (p.291) of the new book we receive a how-to point: “Again and again, we find that one key to creating social capital is to build in redundancy of contact. A single pitch is not enough, whether you are pitching unionization or Christian salvation. Common spaces for commonplace encounters are prerequisites for common conversations and common debate. Furthermore, networks that intersect and circles that overlap reinforce a sense of reciprocal obligation and extend the boundaries of empathy.”

But can this really be so hard to do? Perhaps Putnam, without quite admitting it, ends up sharing the “voluntarist” position of Tocqueville, a thinker he admires greatly. In the final analysis, we are not just captives of social trends. It is up to us how much we are going to participate, in what ways, and what we are to make of our democracy.

In sum, anything by Putnam is worth reading and will stick in your mind. But the normative bottom line is becoming increasingly fuzzy.

