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# STILL BOWLING ALONE? THE POST-9/11 SPLIT

*Thomas H. Sander and Robert D. Putnam*

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Exactly fifteen years ago, the *Journal of Democracy* published in its fifth anniversary issue an article by Robert D. Putnam entitled “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital.”<sup>1</sup> The essay struck a chord with readers who had watched their voting precincts empty out, their favorite bowling alleys or Elks lodges close for lack of patrons and members, and their once-regular card games and dinner parties become sporadic. Marshaling evidence of such trends, the article galvanized widespread concern about the weakening of civic engagement in the United States. But it also roused deep interest in the broader concept of “social capital”—a term that social scientists use as shorthand for social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust to which those networks give rise. No democracy, and indeed no society, can be healthy without at least a modicum of this resource.

Even though Putnam’s article and subsequent book-length study *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*<sup>2</sup> focused on the United States, scholars and political leaders around the world were seized by the question of how to foster the growth and improve the quality of social capital.<sup>3</sup> This interest was not altogether surprising, as research in a variety of fields was demonstrating that social capital makes citizens happier and healthier, reduces crime, makes government more responsive and honest, and improves economic productivity.<sup>4</sup>

The trend that “Bowling Alone” spotlighted was alarming: By many measures, since the 1960s or 1970s Americans had been withdrawing from their communities. Attendance at public meetings plunged by nearly half between 1973 and 1994. The family dinner seemed at risk of becoming an endangered species. Trust in strangers took a sharp

drop: In the early 1960s, more than half of all Americans said that they trusted others; fewer than a third say the same thing today. In the 1990s, as Americans' social connections withered, they increasingly watched *Friends* rather than had friends. Sociologists who had once been skeptical of Putnam's findings found to their dismay that over the last two decades the incidence of close friendships had declined.<sup>5</sup> As of 2004, a quarter of those polled in the United States reported that they lacked a confidant with whom to discuss important personal matters (the 1983 figure had been less than half that), and nearly half of all respondents reported being only one confidant away from social isolation. Since social isolation (that is, the lack of any confidants) strongly predicts premature death, these are sobering statistics.

Both *Bowling Alone* and a 2001 Harvard report known as *Better Together*<sup>6</sup> argued that America could be civically restored in two ways: by encouraging adults to socialize more, join more groups, or volunteer more; and by teaching the young, whose habits are more malleable, to be increasingly socially connected.

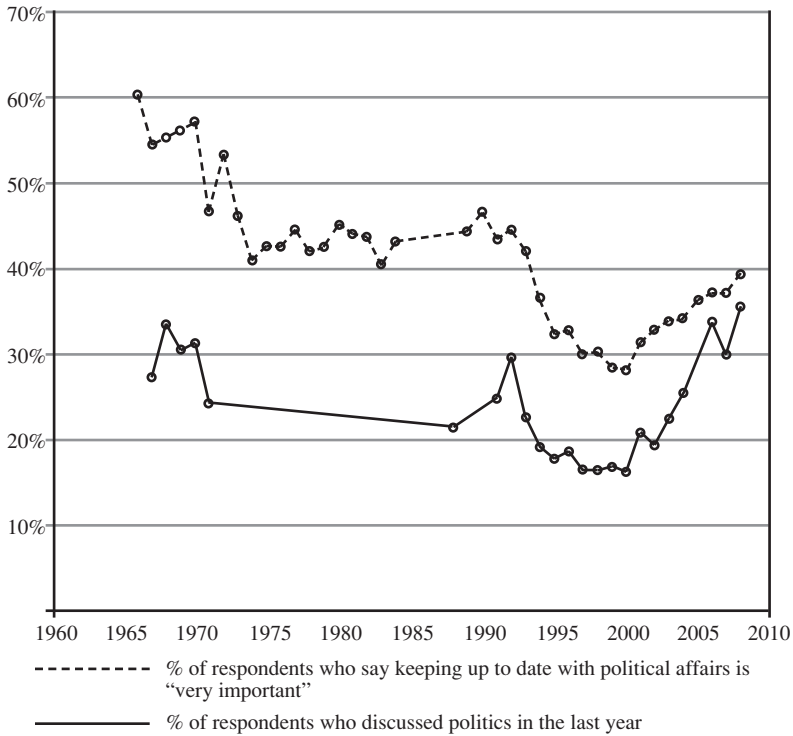
Americans need only look back two generations to see just how committed to civic life a generation can be. The "Greatest Generation" celebrated by Tom Brokaw's book of that name grew up amid the sense of solidarity generated by the Second World War and before the rise of television and its civically noxious influence. In comparison with their grandchildren, Americans born before 1930 were twice as trusting, 75 percent more likely to vote, and more than twice as likely to take part in community projects.<sup>7</sup> But the Greatest Generation, who viewed helping others as downright American, never managed to pass their civic traits on to their "Baby Boomer" children (born between 1946 and 1964) or their "Generation X" grandchildren (born during the late 1960s and the 1970s). As its older civic stalwarts have died off, America's population has become less engaged year by year.

Nevertheless, surveying the landscape of the late 1990s, *Bowling Alone* spotted one hopeful trend: an increase in youth volunteering that potentially heralded broader generational engagement. Putnam noted that the task of sparking this greater engagement "would be eased by a palpable national crisis, like war or depression or natural disaster, but for better and for worse, America at the dawn of the new century faces no such galvanizing crisis."<sup>8</sup>

## Newly Engaged? The Rise of the Post-9/11 Generation

Just a year after those words were written, a massive national crisis struck. The terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks were aiming to ruin America's confidence and resolve, but the roughly three-thousand days that have passed since that fateful day seem instead to have strengthened the civic conscience of young people in the United States.

**FIGURE—INTEREST IN POLITICS AMONG AMERICAN COLLEGE FRESHMEN, 1966–2008**



Whether they were in college, high school, or even grade school when the twin towers and the Pentagon were hit, the members of the 9/11 generation<sup>9</sup> were in their most impressionable years and as a result seem to grasp their civic and mutual responsibilities far more firmly than do their parents. While the upswing in volunteering that Putnam observed in the mid-1990s may have been largely an effect of school-graduation requirements or the desire to gain an edge while seeking admission to selective colleges,<sup>10</sup> the years since 9/11 have brought an unmistakable expansion of youth interest in politics and public affairs. For example, young collegians' interest in politics has rapidly increased in the last eight years, an increase all the more remarkable given its arrival on the heels of thirty years of steady decline. From 1967 to 2000, the share of college freshmen who said that they had "discussed politics" in the previous twelve months dropped from 27 to 16 percent; since 2001, it has more than doubled and is now at an all-time high of 36 percent.

First-year college students also evince a long-term decline and then post-2001 rise in interest in "keeping up to date with political affairs."<sup>11</sup> Surveys of high-school seniors show a similar and simultaneous decline and then rise in civic engagement.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, between 2000 and 2008, voting rates rose more than three times faster for Americans under age

29 than they did for Americans over 30.<sup>13</sup> The turning point in 2001 is unmistakable. On college campuses nationwide, this civic-engagement “youth movement” has evoked the spirit of the early John F. Kennedy years.

While the post-9/11 spike in community-mindedness among adults was short-lived, the shift appears more lasting among those who experienced the attacks during their impressionable adolescent years.<sup>14</sup> Why? As we wrote four years after 9/11:

The attacks and their aftermath demonstrated that our fates are highly interdependent. We learned that we need to—and can—depend on the kindness of strangers who happen to be near us in a plane, office building or subway. Moreover, regardless of one’s political leanings, it is easy to see that we needed effective governmental action: to coordinate volunteers, police national borders, design emergency response preparedness, engage in diplomacy, and train police and firefighters. Government and politics mattered. If young people used to wonder why they should bother to vote, Sept[ember] 11 . . . gave them an answer.<sup>15</sup>

If this effect persists among young people who lived through 9/11, the inevitable turnover of generations will provide the cause of civic engagement with a powerful following wind. Amid such generational change, even if no present-day *adults* deepen their community engagement, the United States may witness a gradual yet inexorable reversal of the civic decline that *Bowling Alone* chronicled.

The final size of the “Post-9/11 Generation” remains unclear, however, since its lower age boundary is still a mystery. How likely is it that those who were grade-schoolers in 2001 will be counted as members of this generation? One less than encouraging hint may be gleaned from anecdotal evidence suggesting that those born in the early to mid-1990s increasingly say that they cannot remember 9/11.<sup>16</sup> How decisive can that day be for those who never had or no longer possess a vivid firsthand memory of it? Educators are experimenting with programs to freshen the memory of 9/11 among younger Americans, but a solitary lesson plan is likely to have far less impact than the raw immediacy of the suicide attacks and the pervasive discussions and reflection that followed. This suggests that while the 9/11 Generation is real, the attack’s effects may be most concentrated among Americans born in the 1980s.

In his 2008 campaign for the U.S. presidency, Barack Obama ably surfed this wave of post-9/11 youthful civic engagement. Though the initial ripple had been visible years before he became a national figure, he and his campaign mightily amplified it. Some credit Internet-based social networking for bolstering youthful interest in politics and community life, but the advent of the well-known social-networking sites Facebook (2004) and Twitter (2006) occurred years after the initial upturn in civic engagement by young people. Nonetheless, the Obama

campaign adroitly deployed classic organizing techniques to expand the impact of such new technologies. For example, the campaign created an iPhone application to enable Obama supporters to rank-order the campaign phone calls that they should make to friends, based on whether their friends lived in swing states; it also compiled millions of mobile-phone numbers and e-mail addresses to mobilize citizens for old-style, face-to-face politicking during the campaign and after. Campaign workers exploited cutting-edge technology to find volunteers, decide which wards to visit, and record people's political leanings, but relied on old-school door-knocking as the chief means of actually connecting with voters.

The Obama campaign, with its heavy use of young volunteers and workers, not only counted on an upwelling of youth civic engagement, but contributed to it as well. In the United States, the share of those aged 18 to 29 who avowed complete agreement with the claim that "it's my duty as a citizen to always vote" rose by almost 50 percent between 1999 and 2009. During the same years, the comparable rate among those older than 30 stayed flat. A closer look at trends among the 18-to-29 group, moreover, reveals a spike in agreement during the years surrounding the Obama campaign.<sup>17</sup>

The long-term civic effects of the Obama campaign on the 9/11 Generation remain uncertain. If Obama's campaign promises on issues such as health care, financial reform, and equality of opportunity go unrealized, young voters could become politically dispirited. Or perhaps such failure would only strengthen their political resolve. As Yogi Berra observed, prediction is hard, especially about the future.

### Are Only the Young "Haves" Engaged?

The emergence of the 9/11 Generation since 2001 is undoubtedly to be cheered. But it is only part of an ominous larger and longer-term picture whose main feature is a growing civic and social gap in the United States between upper-middle-class young white people and their less affluent counterparts. (A similar gap has not appeared within the ranks of black youth, though an overall black-white gap in engagement remains wide and troubling.)

Over the last thirty years, and with growing intensity over the latter half of that period, white high-school seniors from upper middle-class families have steadily *deepened* the degree to which they are engaged in their communities, while white high-school seniors from working- or lower-class backgrounds have shown a propensity to withdraw from (or never undertake) such engagement.<sup>18</sup> Advantaged kids increasingly flocked to church, while working-class kids deserted the pews. Middle-class kids connected more meaningfully with parents, while working-class kids were increasingly left alone, in large part because single par-

enting has proliferated among lower- and working-class whites, while becoming rarer among upper-middle-class families. Among “have-not” high-school seniors, trust in other people plummeted, while seniors from the “right side of the tracks” showed no decline at all in social trust. On

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***If the United States is to avoid becoming two nations, it must find ways to expand the post-9/11 resurgence of civic and social engagement beyond the ranks of affluent young white people.***

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indicator after indicator—general and academic self-esteem, academic ambition, social friendships, and volunteering—the kids who could be described as the “haves” grew in confidence and engagement while their not-so-well-off contemporaries slipped farther into disengagement with every year.<sup>19</sup> Among other things, this means that the overall rise in youth political engagement and volunteering since 9/11 masks a pair of subtrends that are headed in different directions, with lower-class youth growing less involved while better-off youngsters

become more involved. Since public discussion in the United States often tends to conflate class and race, it is important to emphasize that *this* growing gap among different groups of young people is about the former and not just the latter.

If the United States is to avoid becoming two nations, it must find ways to expand the post-9/11 resurgence of civic and social engagement beyond the ranks of affluent young white people. The widening gaps that we are seeing in social capital, academic ambition, and self-esteem augur poorly for the life chances of working-class youngsters. If these gaps remain unaddressed, the United States could become less a land of opportunity than a caste society replete with the tightly limited social mobility and simmering resentments that such societies invariably feature.

The basic, if unstated, social contract in America is this: We generally do not worry about how high the socioeconomic ladder extends upward (even to the heights scaled by Bill Gates and Warren Buffett), as long as everyone has a chance to get on the ladder at roughly the same rung. Of course, the image of exact equality of opportunity has never been entirely realistic, but as a statement of our national aspiration, it has been important, and as the discrepancy between aspiration and reality grows, a fundamental promise of American life is endangered. The growing class gap among high-school seniors erodes this promise.

Having noted above that greater engagement on the part of adults is another path toward civic restoration, we may ask how adult Americans are behaving on this score. Are they becoming more civically engaged? While there is no convincing evidence of such an encouraging trend over the last decade, adult Americans are engaging *differently*. Graduates reconnect with lost classmates on Facebook. Stay-at-home



moms befriend each other through Meetup. Americans can locate proximate friends through BeaconBuddy. Brief posts on Twitter (known as “tweets”) convey people’s meal or sock choices, instant movie reactions, rush-hour rants, and occasionally even their profound reflections. Measured against the arc of history, such technological civic invention is in its infancy. In a world where Facebook “friendship” can encompass people who have never actually met, we remain agnostic about whether Internet social entrepreneurs have found the right mix of virtual and real strands to replace traditional social ties. But technological innovators may yet master the elusive social alchemy that will enable online behavior to produce real and enduring civic effects. If such effects do come about, they will benefit young and adult Americans alike—and fortify the civic impact of our new 9/11 Generation.

## NOTES

1. Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January 1995): 65–78.

2. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

3. The year 1994 saw the publication of a dozen scholarly articles on social capital. For 2008, that figure was nearly fifty times greater, with a comparable rise in press mentions of the concept.

4. See Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, section 4. While much of the work on social capital is correlational, some work done since 2000 consists of panel data suggesting that social capital *causes* these beneficial outcomes.

5. Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew E. Brashears, “Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades,” *American Sociological Review* 71 (June 2006): 353–75. For a subsequent methodological debate about this study, see Claude Fischer, “The 2004 GSS Finding of Shrunken Social Networks: An Artifact?” *American Sociological Review* 74 (August 2009): 657–69, plus the original authors’ rejoinder, “Models and Marginals: Using Survey Evidence to Study Social Networks,” *American Sociological Review* 74 (August 2009): 670–81.

6. Available at [www.bettertogether.org/thereport.htm](http://www.bettertogether.org/thereport.htm).

7. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 253.

8. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 402.

9. It is worth noting that at any *single* instant, one cannot differentiate *life-cycle patterns* (how frequently people do something at one age or another) from *generational patterns* (the variation in how frequently people born in different periods do something). In our discussion of age differences, we rely on evidence gathered over many years and emphasize differences between one generation and another rather than lifecycle-related differences.

10. Such motivations may matter little, however: Those who are introduced to volunteerism while they are young typically volunteer more often throughout their lives.

11. From 2000 to 2008, the share of first-year U.S. college students who responded to a survey taken by the U.S. Higher Education Research Institute by saying that they considered keeping up with political affairs to be “essential” or “very important” rose from 28.1 to 39.5 percent. That was still below the all-time high, which came in 1966, when 60 percent of college first years said that they considered keeping up with politics to be “essential” or “very important.” See [www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/pr-display.php?prQry=28](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/pr-display.php?prQry=28).

12. The data are from “Monitoring the Future,” an annual survey of more than fifty-thousand U.S. high-school seniors that has been taken under the auspices of the U.S. National Institutes of Health since 1976. The survey’s main focus is drug use, but there are also many questions on social attitudes, social capital, self-esteem, ambition, materialism, and so on. For more information, see [www.monitoringthefuture.org](http://www.monitoringthefuture.org). This class gap was discovered by Rebekah Crooks Horowitz in her 2005 Harvard College senior thesis, “Minding the Gap: An Examination of the Growing Class Gap in Youth Volunteering and Political Participation.”

13. According to U.S. Current Population Survey data compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau and Labor Department, 60 percent of U.S. registered voters aged 30 or older actually cast ballots in 1996 and 2000, while only 36 percent of those aged 18 to 29 did so. In 2008, turnout among the over-30s rose modestly to 68 percent even as it shot up to 51 percent for those aged 18 to 29. Since 2000, campaign volunteering has risen at an average rate of about 5.5 percent per presidential election among Americans over 30, and by almost 20 percent among those from 18 to 29 years old.

14. During the first six weeks after 9/11, Americans in general reported rising trust in government, rising trust in the police, greater interest in politics, more frequent attendance at political meetings, and more work on community projects. Among adults surveyed, all these increases had vanished by March 2002. See Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Together,” *American Prospect*, 11 February 2002.

15. Thomas H. Sander and Robert D. Putnam, “Sept. 11 as Civics Lesson,” *Washington Post*, 10 September 2005.

16. Sarah Schweitzer, “When Students Don’t Know 9/11,” *Boston Globe*, 11 September 2009.

17. See the report by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987–2009: Independents Take Center Stage in Obama Era,” 21 May 2009, 75. Available at <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/517.pdf>. Statistics also from crosstabs conducted by Leah Christian at the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 25 September 2009.

18. Social class in this analysis is measured by parental educational levels, so by “upper middle class” we mean kids with at least parent who has a postgraduate education, whereas by “working [or lower] class” we mean kids whose parents have not gone beyond high school, if that.

19. These results come from our unpublished analyses of “Monitoring the Future” data.