The “Bowling Alone” Controversy Revisited

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A few years have passed since an alarm was sounded by Professor Robert Putnam of Harvard that democracy is in danger from a decline in volunteerism. The catch phrase for this is “Bowling Alone”, based on Professor Putnam’s frequent references to the decline of bowling leagues as the number of “couch potatoes” grows and watching television replaces civil participation. He included Freemasonry among his examples of those organizations whose decline illustrates his thesis. The health of American society was questioned in this debate. Cliche-makers took up the cry, muttering about a Nation of Strangers, the Land of the Disinvolved, and the Politics of Mistrust.

While Professor Putnam has made a valuable contribution by sparking discussion over whether American volunteerism has indeed ebbed, an issue of major interest to all Masons, there is countervailing evidence that other forms of social interaction are growing throughout the world. The spirited social exchanges of the Internet and the enormous non-paid activity in constructing World Wide Web archives show another side. All manner of groups have sprung up via the Net.

Professor Putnam relied on surveys showing a decline in membership in organizations that he may not fully have appreciated were in trouble many years ago because of changes in interest and constituency. Patient research by Dr. Brent Morris, one of our leading Scottish Rite scholars,
shows that some of the organizations that Putnam cites as evidence of the recent decline in volunteerism actually began their decline a long time before the difficulties that the phrase "Bowling Alone" conjures up.7 Research by Dr. Brent Morris documents the last year of growth for several: Knights of Pythias (1921), Odd Fellows (1923), Grotto (1925), Knights Templar (1926), Royal Arch Masons (1926), Shrine (1926), Royal and Select Master Masons (1927), Freemasonry in general (1928) and Scottish Rite Masons (1929). He observes, “By the 1920’s, fundamental changes in American society were beginning to cause changes in fraternities...It is important to note that nearly all had experienced declining membership before 1929, and in fact had only insignificant increases before their last year of growth. By this time, many of the needs formerly filled by fraternal orders either were not pressing or were met by other groups.”8

This contradicts a thesis of decline based on, to quote Dr. Putnam, the “last decade or two”. The figures he uses look convincing only until one realizes that several groups we now are asked to worry about started disappearing during the Coolidge administration.9 Doubts about the health of American civil society were expressed long prior to the current controversy. Seymour Martin Lipset cautioned in Agrarian Socialism (1950) that individual organizations rise and fall, and that so far no complex society has discovered the secret of equilibrium when it comes to particular ones maintaining their stability and social gains.10

Although obviously the issue is much larger than the status of bowling leagues, since Dr. Putnam so frequently mentioned them as a prime example, the real significance of changes in bowling needs a long look, as some of the
developments in bowling amend past perceptions of the sport as a blue collar avocation and may be as significant as any move from league to single bowling.  

Bowling enthusiasts, some of whom are ardent conservatives and dislike any changes, list such rational and irrational causes for the sport’s present condition as bans against smoking or too much smoking, too much fiddling with rules and equipment, the Internet (for a wide and irreconcilable variety of reasons), the unreasonable length of league seasons, failure of prizes to keep up with inflation, old-fashioned and unattractive bowling alleys, and increased fees.

Television has been blamed, but not because people are watching instead of bowling, but because networks have dropped bowling shows which contributed to interest in the sport, or because the production standard of remaining bowling programs is low compared with other sports. If only there was a greater spotlight fixed on bowling by television, moan some enthusiasts, the sport would attract more people. It would be an interesting twist to the Bowling Alone controversy if television effected bowling by not having glamorous enough programs hosts or not giving enough time and publicity to the game. Bowling exposure on television does appear to induce some people to take up the game, just as golf on television allegedly increases interest in going golfing, or tennis competitions increase interest in taking up tennis. As for
voluntary spirit among bowlers, the new Bowl for Kids´ Sake organization aiding the Big Brother and Big Sister mentoring programs has produced so far more than $125 million, growing from ground zero to now involve more than two million bowlers a year.14 (The argument could be made that BKS members don´t share pizzas and beers as readily as do members of company teams, but proving that would be a challenge.) The Big Brother and Big Sister organizations have been joined in these bowling initiatives by new groups such as Concerned Black Men, One Hundred Black Men, Foster Grandparents, and Friends of the Children.

What does seem clear, and few members of the Scottish Rite would dispute the fact, is that voluntary organizations are not exempt from social change. Froty years ago in Social Mobility in Industrial Society (1967), Professors Lipset and Bendix raised questions about the changes brought about by upward mobility and the mechanisms by which people adjust to such changes.15 Work done by Margaret Conway, Alfonso Damico, and Sandra Damico using a large data set (22,652 initial interviews in 1972 with follow-up surveys in 1974, 1976, 1979, and 1986) suggested that baby boomers in the high school graduating classes of 1972 who were traced across the early adult years showed “a pattern of increasing community engagement”. They concluded that “Putnam´s data overlooks a variety of other types of civic
activity”. It would be most peculiar if the reconstruction of American society over the last thirty years had not impacted voluntarism, but what may be happening is a change in the way in which people wish to serve as volunteers rather than a decline in voluntarism.

Dr. Everret Ladd remarks, “Unless one is prepared to argue that a particular organization is uniquely valuable in civic terms, what is one to make of its losing ground? Why should we care that the Benevolent Protective Order of Elks (BPOE) has fewer members now than in the 1950s? Putnam offered no evidence — nor have other civic-decline-thesis proponents — that the loss of Elks and Jaycees has not been matched, or even surpassed, by increases in other groups equally attractive in their social/civic reach.” The fact is that: “The best educated people are still participating in more groups overall, but not in the same groups as their less well-educated fellow citizens.”

So it is easy to mistake change for decline. Besides television, a higher divorce rate, decrease in family size, increased percentage of women in the labor force, and the geographic mobility of Americans, have been blamed for a supposed dip in associational life: “Large internal population shifts have taken place since the 1960s: to the Sunbelt and, within metropolitan areas, to the suburbs. Birth rates dropped substantially and then rose again. Most mothers now work. All these changes could have resulted in atrophied forms of
association that are culturally connected to older cities and to old-fashioned
gender roles (bowling leagues are a good example), while other forms more
oriented to open space and to weekends (like youth soccer) have grown.” 21

In retrospect, the Bowling Alone excitement was not the discovery of an
alarming fatal illness but simply a rediscovery of the basic fact that the health of
voluntary organizations waxes and wanes, and depends on the efforts of the
members. One would never suggest complacency about the health of American
democracy. However, the present situation is not one created by unchangeable
laws of nature but by factors which we can control if we have the will. 22
America leads the world when it comes to its richness of organizational life and
in inventing new forms of volunteerism. So it did in the past -- and fortunately
for democracy, it still does. 23

NOTES


5. It can be argued that computers are a solitary pursuit, but chat groups on the Internet are highly participatory, and the members arrange face-to-face meetings.


8. Ibid., passim. The Odd Fellows started to disappear in the 1920s, and the decline from 1920 to 1935 exceeded all its growth from 1900 to 1920. In 1920 the Odd Fellows had 1, 736,000 members. In 1940 they had 666,000 members. Morris documents how other, now nearly vanished organizations such as the Patriarchs Militant, Rebekah, and Knights of Pythias also peaked around 1920 and then began to disappear. ibid.

9. There was an increase in fraternal membership immediately after World War II, partly attributed to the fact that those who served in the war had not been able to join and now were “making up for lost time”. The death of many who joined at that time is another reason for the present sharp membership decline.


11. “And yet, there are some who still look down on bowling, as if it were somehow beneath them. These are the people of which we must be aware! In a world of fascist, bourgeoisie golfers, bowling is the game of the proletariat --
THE PEOPLE'S GAME! So embrace it! Cast off the shackles of the class struggle, and unite in the spirit of fun and fair play! From ancient Egypt to the German monks to "Another Fine Brunswick Family Recreation Center", the legacy of the world's oldest sport lives on in all of us! Grab your ball! Put on those funky shoes! And BOWL! BOWL LIKE THE WIND!” Scott Berk, “An Introduction to Bowling” at http://www.cardhouse.com/x06/intro.html


14. E.g. “The Bowl for Kids' Sake provides funding to support to continued operation of The Jewish Big Brother Big Sister Association. Last year's sponsors helped us raise over $60,000 from our one day event. Please think about what you are able to do to help many local kids.” 8th Annual (Bedford) Bowl for Kids’Sake at http://www.dynamicsonline.com/bowlforkids/


17. “Putnam's measures may, in fact, overlook several types of civic activity. First, people may have left the middling commitment of the League of Women Voters or the PTA for organized activity both much less and much more involving. .. An individual who reports only one associational membership--say, a church or synagogue--may be more involved in it and more "civic" through it than someone else who reports two or three memberships.Second, people may have left traditional civic organizations that they used for personal and utilitarian ends for commercial organizations. If people who formerly joined the YMCA to use the gym now go to the local fitness center, Putnam's measures will show a decrease in civic participation when real civic activity is unchanged.Third, people may be more episodically involved in political and
civic activity as issue-oriented politics grows. For instance, in California, motorcycle riders have become influential political activists since the 1992 passage of a law requiring bikers to wear helmets. According to the *San Diego Union*, of 800,000 licensed motorcyclists, 10,000 are now members of the American Brotherhood Aimed Toward Education (ABATE), which has been credited as decisive in several races for the state legislature. Members do not meet on a regular basis, but they do periodically mobilize in local political contests to advance their one legislative purpose. Would Putnam's data pick up on this group? What about the intense but brief house-building activity for Habitat for Humanity? Fourth, Putnam notes but leaves to the side the vast increase in Washington-based mailing list organizations over the past 30 years. He ignores them because they do not require members to do more than send in a check. This is not Tocquevillian democracy, but these organizations may be a highly efficient use of civic energy. The citizen who joins them may get the same civic payoff for less personal hassle.” Michael Schudson, “What If Civic Life Didn't Die?,” *The American Prospect* 25 (March-April 1996) at http://epn.org/prospect/25/25-cnt1).


20. It is also easy to seize on the wrong reason: “Unfortunately, Putnam has too eagerly dismissed the complex impacts of social and economic transformation in his determination to link the decline of social capital in America to the causal ‘smoking gun’ of television.’ “ C. H. Heying, “Civic Elites and Corporate Delocalization: An Alternative Explanation for Declining Civic Engagement,” at http://www.upa.pdx.edu/Faculty/Heying/civelite.htm


22. “While the evidence now available does not permit firm conclusions about the overall condition of associational life in America, it appears that voluntary
activities are on balance healthier than are formal political institutions and processes. Indeed, many citizens -- particularly the youngest -- seem to be shifting their preferred civic involvement from official politics to the voluntary sector.” Final Report of the National Commission on Civic Renewal, 24 June 1998 available at http://www.puaf.umd.edu/civicrenewal/finalreport/table_of_contentsfinal_report.htm