

## Research Assessment #6

**Date:** 10/13/2020

**Subject:** Robert Putnam on The Decline of Civic Life

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Keough, R. (2015, June 23). Robert Putnam on the decline of civic life. Retrieved from <https://commonwealthmagazine.org/uncategorized/robert-putnam-on-the-decline-of-civic-life/>

**Assessment:**

For this week's assessment, I took some advice from my political science professor, Dr. McKay at the University of North Texas, to look into some of the works of Robert Putnam. Robert Putnam "is an expert on international diplomacy and comparative politics" (Keough 2015). He produces several books and articles breaking down his different theories on socio-political phenomena and many other political science topics but his most notable is his book *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*. *Bowling Alone* expands on one of his earlier articles that discussed how recent developments and advances in technology have caused civic involvement and social contribution to decrease significantly. This original article was met with a large amount of controversy and backlash and the book was no different. He discussed his theories included in the book, in detail in an interview for *Commonwealth Magazine* with Robert Keough.

Putnam opens up the interview by describing some of the backlash he experienced from publishing his original article on declining civic engagement. Some of the backlash included angered readers informing him of new forms of engagement he did not articulate in his article. This drove him to acknowledge these critiques in a much more in depth and broader format, leading to him writing *Bowling Alone*. In the interview, Keough defines social capital as "the connections between individuals that create enhanced civic life" (Keough 2015). This differs from the original definition I had learned from Luke Keele's investigation into how social capital affects the public's support in the government because it broadens the scope of what can be considered an act of social capital. With this new definition anything from being a part of a neighborhood watch or a book club could be considered "enhancing civic life" therefore it contributes to social capital. Despite this broadened scope Putnam believes that civic contribution is in a dramatic decline. One of the examples Putnam uses that I found very interesting was the steep decline in frequency of playing cards in American households. He says that the decrease in games of cards played shows how the way we interact on a regular basis is fundamentally changing. We are no longer interacting on personal casual levels as we used to and because of this decline we are less likely to participate in community events that

more directly contribute to civic life. Putnam also expresses how he believes the constant occurrence of political scandal has been a large contributor to this decrease. Putnam says, "I'm upset with Watergate so I stopped taking part in politics" (Keough 2015). This connects with the last article by Luke Keele I read where Keele used presidential approval ratings following large scandals as an indicator of how the public's trust can change over time in an administration. Putnam also mentioned that a major contributor to the decrease in civic engagement was the invention of the television and other forms of media. With these new forms of entertainment people elected to spend more time alone in front of a screen instead of being out in the community volunteering or meeting with others.

With all of these negatives Putnam did recognize one glimmering piece of hope for civic life. He singles out generational trends as this sign of hope. Putnam noticed how after a large lull in civic engagement following the generations during World War II there was a sharp up swing with the newest and youngest generations. Young adults and teenagers were beginning to become more involved in their communities through different clubs, organizations or even volunteering projects. A cause for the increase in volunteerism in younger generations is most likely from many schools in the country now requiring a minimal number of service hours for graduation. Putnam believes that schools requiring volunteerism is the start to a large movement that will boost civic engagement and the betterment of different communities. He believes that by causing teens to begin this involvement at such a young age it will instill in them the urge and ability to continue volunteering and contributing to their community well into their adulthood. This directly aligns with my idea of how to boost political involvement of younger generations as mentioned in my original work proposal.