

Upfront

The Problem with Bowling Alone **Respect, local community involvement, and identity politics**

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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The Problem with Bowling Alone

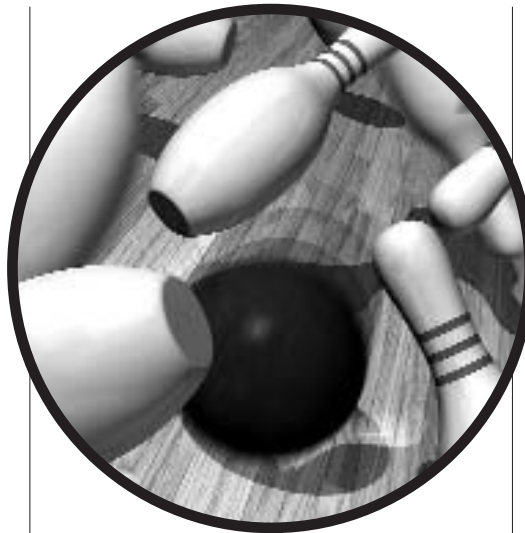
Respect, local community involvement, and identity politics

In his acclaimed 1995 book “Bowling Alone,” Robert D. Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard University, offered a simple but compelling explanation for low voter turnout in American elections: Too many Americans are keeping to themselves. Social bonds and community ties break down, Putnam argued, when people stop participating in local civic group activities – like bowling leagues, for example. This has huge implications for voter turnout, he wrote, because people who don’t interact with others in their local community are less likely to feel they can have an impact on how they’re governed.

Putnam argued his case by citing trends in statistics from the past several decades. His argument about the importance of social bonds was rooted in psychology, but was never tested empirically.

Enter Robert J. Boeckmann of the University of Alaska Anchorage and Thomas R. Tyler of New York University, who set out to test Putnam’s argument scientifically. Their research, published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* (2002), confirms that Putnam’s inferences were correct: When local social ties break down, so does trust – and that makes people less likely to vote.

The researchers conducted a random telephone survey of 234 adults from the Oakland, Calif., area. Participants were asked to characterize how often they socialized with their neighbors and attended local community meetings, and to assess their level of trust in their communities (did they



believe others would look out for them if they didn’t look out for themselves, for instance). Participants were also asked if they were registered voters, and if they had voted in the most recent presidential election.

The authors then conducted multiple regression analysis, and found that civic engagement – that is, social interaction with community members – went hand in hand with general feelings of trust. But, the study found no direct link between civic engagement and voting behavior. Rather, it was the feelings of trust engendered by community involvement that made people more likely to vote.

“When a person engages in social activities with members of his or her community, it leads to a sense of trust that transcends the immediate encounter,” the authors wrote. “That generalized trust in others then leads to political participation.”

The researchers took it a step further, asking what drives people to become involved in their communities in the first place. To gauge this, they looked at how survey participants answered questions about self-esteem and feelings of respect. They found that people with high self-esteem were more likely to feel respected, and people who feel respected by their communities are more likely to actively participate.

“People act on behalf of communities when they feel that they are respected members of those communities,” the authors wrote.

This helps explain why people who could benefit the most from political activism – people in poor and minority communities, for example – are usually the least likely to vote. People who feel respected by their communities are more likely to share ideas and concerns about the community.

The study’s results thus pose an alternative to appealing to ethnic interests and forming groups along ethnic lines to engage voters in minority communities. Promoting ethnic pride does not result in more political engagement, according to previous studies. Such campaigns, in fact, may create divisiveness among different groups. The authors of this study suggest that instead of appealing to identity politics in minority communities, the key to successfully mobilizing these communities is to foster people’s sense of being respected and included in their local communities.

–Vinay Jain