

A Conversation with ROBERT PUTNAM

A best-selling author and professor at the Harvard Kennedy School, Robert Putnam is one of America's leading political scientists. In recent years, he has written widely on the decline in America's civic life, and, with it, our capacity for self-government. In this conversation, Putnam discusses his research on declining levels of civic participation in America and presents his interpretation of the reasons for it. Putnam also recalls how actual political developments awakened his interest in political science, and explains how social science might help us address public policy problems.

On our declining sense of civic responsibility, Putnam says: Over the last 30 or 40 years the meaning of “our kids,” the meaning of what our obligations are to one another, has shriveled. Now, when people talk about “our kids,” they mean our own *biological* kids. If you go back to my home town and talk about poor kids there now, they say about the poor kids, “Well, they're not my kids, they're somebody else's kids, let them worry about them.” [There's] a sense that other people's kids don't really belong to me. We ought to have some regard—as Americans historically have had—for *all* the kids in town.

On the consequences of declining civic participation, Putnam says: Almost 200 years ago now, Tocqueville wrote about about Americans constantly joining [civic associations]. We've been able to run a different kind of society [because of that]. A less statist society, a more free-market society, because we had real strength in the area of social capital and we had relatively high levels of social trust. We sort of did trust one another. Not perfectly, but we did. And all that is declining. And I worry... “Isn't [this] a problem? Our system is built for one kind of people and one kind of community, and now we have a different one. Maybe our system is not going to work so well.”

On the impact of broken communities on the poor, Putnam says: When one of our kids, that is the upper class kids, does a dumb thing, instantly airbags inflate to protect the kid from the consequences of the bad decision... If a poor kid, of any race, does exactly the same dumb thing, [there are] no airbags because they don't have the same density of caring adults in their lives. Often it's a single mom and often she's doing everything she can to try and hold her family together and earn a living. I'm not trying to demonize the mothers of poor kids. I am sometimes trying to demonize the dads of poor kids. But the fact of the matter is these kids are [bereft of social support] in a way that poor kids in America in the 1950s were not. This is what it's like to live in a “bowling alone” society if you're at that bottom of the heap.

Chapters in ROBERT PUTNAM Conversation

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