Two decades ago, Robert Putnam published a book that provoked a small cottage industry’s worth of responses from pundits and scholars alike. *Bowling Alone*, based on an essay of the same title Putnam had written for the *Journal of Democracy* five years earlier, made a claim that cut to the quick of American identity: Americans just aren’t doing things together anymore. By choosing to engage in activities individually rather than communally, he asserted, we were putting at risk America’s capacity to build social capital and undermining our national character.

It is difficult to overstate the influence of Putnam’s thesis. His argument and evidence understandably caused much concern. A subgenre of books followed in Putnam’s footsteps, decrying America’s civic decline as well as its social fragmentation. Charles Murray’s *Coming Apart*, J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*, Ben Sasse’s *Them*, and Tim Carney’s *Alienated America* are among the most recent and best known of this genre, but they represent just a few of the many civil society “declinists” that are so vocal today.

During the two decades following *Bowling Alone*’s publication, America has witnessed major changes that have fundamentally altered our social and communal lives. This makes revisiting Putnam’s original investigation into American civic health a worthy exercise.

Today, the evidence on the health of civil society is in many ways just as distressing as it was 20 years ago. Not everything has gone as Putnam expected, however; some trends that have emerged since 2000 suggest forms of trouble he did not anticipate. And even in *Bowling
Alone, Putnam recognized a few trends that ran counter to his declinist thesis—some of which are still gravitating that way today.

Two decades on, the condition of American civil society is more complex than a modern reader of Bowling Alone might imagine. Yet the book’s core insights remain essential for understanding our society’s prospects. American civic life—as measured by a variety of metrics at earlier points in American history, at the time of Putnam’s writing, and today—has endured ebbs and flows, dissipation and re-invention, offering reason to have faith in the resilience of America’s civic tradition. In short, we have always been, and in our own way still are, the “nation of joiners” that historian Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and Alexis de Tocqueville before him, praised. For all its troubles, our civic life is still full of the potential for renewal.

**POLITICAL AND CIVIC LIFE**

The first touchstone of civic health that Putnam took up in Bowling Alone was political participation—particularly voting rates. For Putnam, voter participation was important because it demonstrated the political interest and knowledge that served as a necessary precondition for other forms of civic involvement. The data he assessed showed voting to be in decline, and Putnam assumed that decline would continue. Surprisingly, though, it hasn’t.

Putnam relayed that while 62.8% of the voting-age population turned out to vote in the 1960 presidential election, only 48.9% had done so in 1996. But the trend Putnam identified had begun to reverse even before Bowling Alone went to press. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, turnout in the 1996 election had sunk to a three-decade low and has since recovered about half the ground lost over those years. In 2000, turnout reached 54.7%. In 2004, the voting rate rose to 58.3%. And in 2008, it was 58.2%. Turnout has declined a bit since then, though it is still above 1996 levels: In 2012, 56.5% of the voting-age population cast votes, and in 2016, turnout was 56.0%.

The unexpected increase in voter participation in the 21st century is at least in part a function of increasing political polarization and a growing sense that a great deal hangs on each election. These are not necessarily indicators of civic health. But if voter engagement is a mark of civic energy, then turnout trends suggest that not all indicators continue to point in one direction.

Of course, though political participation is an important indicator of the civic health of any citizen-oriented political arrangement, it does not
represent the totality of it. In the 1830s, Tocqueville noted that American involvement in politics is far from America’s most distinctive feature:

In the United States, political associations are only one small part of the immense number of different types of associations found there. Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types — religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute…. Nothing, in my view, more deserves attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.

In line with this observation, Putnam examined a second touchstone of civic health: American associational life. This, he lamented, was rapidly collapsing.

In drawing this conclusion, Putnam looked at data on non-profits, which he viewed as essential building blocks of associational life. At first glance, the situation did not appear so dire. According to data from the Encyclopedia of Associations, between 1968 and 1997, the number of national non-profits in America roughly doubled — from 10,299 to 22,901. That rapid growth has only accelerated: From 2005 to 2015, the number of non-profits registered with the Internal Revenue Service increased by 10.4%, from 1.41 million to 1.56 million. If anything, these numbers actually understate the size and growth of the non-profit sector, since not all civic organizations are required to register with the government.

Yet Putnam, drawing on the work of sociologist David Horton Smith, observed that over half of those non-profits did not have any individual members. In Putnam’s words, “[t]he organizational eruption between the 1960s and the 1990s represented a proliferation of letterheads, not a boom of grassroots participation.”

As in the case of voting, however, there is some evidence of an increase in civic engagement since Putnam wrote. According to the American Time Use Survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the amount of time Americans spent volunteering has remained remarkably steady over the past 17 years. Princeton social scientist Robert Wuthnow argues that new, more innovative forms of civic engagement are replacing more formal ones. Rather than declining, then,
American associational life may simply be transforming as people experiment with looser, more sporadic forms of volunteering.

When it comes to both political and civic engagement, it appears some of the trends that Putnam expected to continue declining have at least slowed, if not reversed, their fall.

**Church and Work**

Along with concerns about the trajectory of civil society, Putnam lamented the decline in church membership and attendance. Religious institutions of all faith backgrounds, he argued, are crucial to the health of civil society: They serve as incubators for civic skills, promote community norms and interests, and offer a means of civic recruitment. Indeed, high religiosity rivals high educational attainment as a powerful correlate to civic engagement. Church attendance and membership are key predictors of both volunteering and giving. Religious communities are also particularly central to the social capital and civic engagement of many African Americans; as one leading analyst cited in *Bowling Alone* noted, “[t]he Black church functioned as the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement.”

Putnam was rightfully concerned by trends indicating a decline in church attendance and religiosity in general. And those trends have largely persisted. When Putnam wrote *Bowling Alone*, American religious engagement had been declining for decades. The portion of Americans who said they ascribed to “no religion” in 1967 was just 2%. By 1990, that number had jumped to 11%. Today, there are so many religiously unaffiliated people that social scientists have coined a name for them: religious “nones.” Contemporary survey data indicate that the percentage of Americans who identify as nones is about the same as that of Americans who identify as evangelical or Catholic — about 23% of Americans in 2019, according to Ryan Burge of Eastern Illinois University.

Putnam wrote at the time that the decline in church participation and affiliation was largely explained by generational differences: Younger generations are generally less observant than their parents and grandparents are. This explanation still applies, as today’s older generations report religious affiliation at much higher rates than younger ones.

But those generational differences mask an underlying downward trend. It’s not simply the case that Americans are less religious in their youth and then become more religious as they grow older. Consider the Baby Boomer generation: In 1980, 13% of 16-34-year-old Boomers — those
 born between 1946 and 1964 — expressed no religious preference. When members of Generation X — those born between 1965 and 1980 — were the same age, they were markedly less religious: In 1998, 20% of 18-33-year-old Gen-Xers expressed no religious preference. In 2018, between 34% and 36% of 18-34-year-old Millennials — those born between 1981 and 1996 — said the same.

As Putnam wrote, “When they were in their twenties (in the 1960s and 1970s), boomers were more disaffected from religious institutions than their predecessors had been in their twenties…. Even now, in their forties and fifties… boomers remain less religiously involved than middle-aged people were a generation ago.” In short, Boomers disaffected by religion found church later and in fewer numbers than previous generations had, thus failing to close the gap as they aged. This suggests that members of today’s rising generations, who are even less attached to traditional religious institutions, will persist in that disaffiliation. As a result, the portion of the American public that identifies with traditional religion will continue to dwindle.

The rise of the religious nones does not necessarily mean that Americans are growing more secular. It does mean, however, that we are becoming less attached to religious communities. Americans, it seems, are praying alone. And while this may be better than not praying at all, it does bode poorly for our society.

A similar trend can be perceived in the world of work. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam observed that work associations and unions — which were an important venue for developing sustained social ties — peaked in the 1950s, when 32.5% of American workers were union members. This percentage plateaued and then endured a sharp, sustained decline during the last third of the century, ultimately cratering at 14.1%. The downward trend in membership was evident not just in traditional labor unions, but in all professional associations, from the American Bar Association and the American Medical Association to the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants and more. From 1977 to 1998, the number of registered nurses doubled (from 1 million to 2 million), yet the American Nurses Association membership fell so steeply that its “market share” of nurses fell by half, from 18% to just 9%.

Putnam suggested several reasons for the sharp decline in work-association membership. One possible explanation was the excessive dues and stale programs of traditional work associations, coupled with
competing local and more specialized associations entering the mix. The more general rise of the “cult of the individual,” with its diminished interest in solidarity and the collective good, may have also played a role.

Still another account of what caused these trends involves the rise of work insecurity. Even during economic booms, the business cycles of the 1980s and 1990s led to mass layoffs; one study found that nearly half of firms in America laid off workers—on average up to 10% of each company’s workforce—between 1993 and 1994. What’s more, technological advances made virtually all jobs contingent and susceptible to automation and displacement—a pattern we are all too familiar with today. Putnam surmised that these developments had led to a shift in how people viewed work and damaged workplace social ties. In short, people stopped expecting to make a lifelong commitment to a vocation.

Work associations have not recovered from the declines Putnam identified two decades ago, and additional changes in workplace dynamics that have occurred in the intervening years have only made matters worse. The rise of the “gig” economy, along with significant growth in the number of non-standard jobs—part-time employees, temp workers, independent contractors, and more—during the first two decades of the 21st century have only doubled down on the trends Putnam observed. In fact, 94% of net jobs created from 2005 to 2015 were these sorts of impermanent jobs. When focusing on both primary and secondary employment using a separate Federal Reserve survey conducted in 2015 and 2016, economists Anat Bracha and Mary Burke found much higher rates of informal work—estimating that a third of adults are engaged in some form of non-standard work today. Similarly, a 2018 Federal Reserve study found that roughly 30% of Americans perform gig work outside of their traditional job, and a recent examination of income-tax data found that “approximately 11 percent of the working adult population in the U.S. are working primarily as full-time independent contractors in the gig economy.”

What do modern trends in the workplace reveal about connectedness and social capital in America today? Perhaps the most obvious is the fact that, as in other areas of modern life, Americans have become further atomized in the workplace. For many, this has led to a decline in social ties and increased economic anxiety.

But the news here may not be all bad. Some observers suggest that Americans are simply finding professional satisfaction in different ways now than they did when Putnam wrote *Bowling Alone*. As such, it is
worth noting the upsides to the evolution of workplace dynamics in recent decades—among them greater independence, flatter hierarchies, and more reward for merit and productivity.

Though the primary reason Americans give for taking on a non-standard job is to supplement income, a recent report from the *Harvard Business Review* explored the motivations of a growing number of what the authors call “harmonic careerists.” These are typically younger people who have opted out of taking on a single, monolithic career because they find it draining or unfulfilling. Instead, they construct their working lives by combining multiple non-standard jobs. While they may earn less money and have less stability than their peers who adopt a traditional career path, they gain greater flexibility and meaning. As one Gallup study concluded, “for this generation, a job is about more than a paycheck—it’s about a purpose.”

In this sense, then, straightforward social trends don’t tell a simple story. Putnam’s method, which might be summarized as assessing how America had changed since the early 1960s, tells a story of decline only if the American workplace of the 1960s was the ideal. But social changes involve tradeoffs, and in the world of work in particular, it is easy to overlook the advantages of newer arrangements.

**Volunteering and Socializing**

Charitable and social activities are crucial to building a strong civic backbone in any society. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam noted:

> When philosophers speak in exalted tones of “civic engagement” and “democratic deliberation,” we are inclined to think of community associations and public life as the higher form of social involvement, but in everyday life, friendship and other informal types of sociability provide crucial social support.

In keeping with this observation, Putnam divided builders of social capital into two categories using the Yiddish terms *machers* and *schmoozers*. *Machers* are those involved in formal, institutional civic engagement: They follow current events, attend church and club gatherings, donate blood, give speeches, and frequent local meetings. By contrast, *schmoozers* are less structured in their social activity. The domain of the *schmoozer* lies in socializing and communicating—attending or hosting social events, visiting with friends or relatives, and sending greeting
cards. The presence of both machers and schmoozers is key to a well-functioning society. Unfortunately, Putnam noted that both were on the decline in America by the end of the 20th century.

In terms of macher activities, Putnam pointed to data on a key civic-health proxy measure: philanthropy. As with voting rates and the proliferation of non-profits, the evidence regarding rates of charitable activity among Americans appeared promising on paper. In 1977, Americans gave $142.4 billion to charity. That number reached $326.9 billion in 2000. By 2017, total private giving from individuals, foundations, and businesses totaled over $410 billion. Even in these inflation-adjusted terms, Americans appear to be more generous than ever.

Yet in Bowling Alone, Putnam drew an important distinction between two forms of charity: the “doing for” form and the “doing with” form. “Doing for” involves giving money or otherwise providing assistance at a distance, while “doing with” involves interpersonal engagement on behalf of people in need. Putnam noted a strong decline in rates of “doing with” in favor of “doing for”—a trend that has only intensified since 2000. In the late 1990s, nearly half of Americans undertook some volunteering behavior. Today, according to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, only an estimated 25.1% of American adults volunteer on a regular basis. Breaking this down along age cohorts, we find that Generation X had a volunteer rate of 28.9%, followed by Baby Boomers at 25.7%. Only 21.9% of Millennials regularly volunteer.

Even if Americans are giving more in terms of dollars, then, a decline in engagement with others has coincided with a decline in voluntary commitments of time for charitable causes. We may not be becoming a less generous nation, but we are becoming less social when engaging in charitable efforts.

And we have become less trusting of one another as well. Putnam relayed that from 1952 to 1998, the number of Americans who thought their fellow citizens led good and honest lives fell from 50% to less than 30%. Similarly, the number of people who agreed with the statement “most people can be trusted” declined from 55% in 1960 to around 35% in the 1980s and ’90s, with high-school students being the group with the lowest reported generalized trust at 25%.

More recent data on the measures Putnam used to support his conclusion of a decline in trust—survey data about public perception of general trustworthiness, rates of return for U.S. Census forms, civility
as measured by driving habits, and crime rates—are relatively mixed; some metrics have continued declining, while others have not. None, however, have indicated a dramatic reversal of the trends Putnam identified two decades ago. In fact, according to 2017 Gallup data, the decline in generalized trust has only grown more intense. Fully 81% of those polled say the state of moral values in America today is “only fair” or “poor.” Meanwhile, 77% say the state of moral values is getting worse.

The evidence Putnam compiled on macher activities told a troubling story of fragmentation and decline—a story that has persisted in the past two decades. However, the recent evidence on some schmoozing trends—including socializing and sending greeting cards—may signal reason for hope.

To be sure, more formal forms of schmoozing may be on the decline. According to the DDB Needham Life Style archive cited by Putnam, in the 1970s, the average American entertained friends at home 15 times a year. By the late 1990s, that number had fallen to eight times annually. More recent data suggest this trend has persisted: A 2017 study found that only “half of Americans entertain guests in their homes at least once a month.”

Meanwhile, results from the BLS American Time Use Survey show that the average American aged 15 years and older socialized for 0.72 hours per day in 2013. The 2019 survey found that Americans did so for 0.64 hours. Though these numbers represent a decline, the drop is not dramatic, especially when considering the margin of error. Moreover, these data do not capture all forms of entertaining in the home. The 2019 American Time Use Survey, for instance, indicates that informal, face-to-face socializing and communicating was the second-most common leisure activity for Americans. This suggests that while more formal forms of socializing have declined, looser schmoozing activity has remained at relatively constant levels since the time Putnam wrote.

Rates of communal drinking and dining—the bread and butter of good schmoozers—were also falling when Bowling Alone was published. Putnam cited three independent studies showing that, from the mid-1970s to the 1990s, the frequency with which Americans, both married and single, went out to such venues as bars and taverns declined between 40% and 50%. This trend, too, has persisted: Americans are going out to eat and drink less often, and those who do are more likely to do so alone. In fact, Americans in general eat more than half of their meals by themselves.
Part of this trend can be explained by a cultural shift from a society that eats designated meals at designated times to one that eats on demand. Meal-delivery services like Uber Eats, Grubhub, and Seamless have made it easier for people to eat at their desks during the workday instead of going out to eat with co-workers. Similar services enable people to spend less time on home-cooked meals — in 2017, a quarter of American adults purchased meal-delivery kits like Blue Apron, Purple Carrot, and HelloFresh, which deliver apportioned ingredients with recipes and cooking instructions right to people’s homes. Theoretically, having to spend less time shopping for and preparing food could allow more time for togetherness. But for many people, these innovations appear to be enabling them to continue eating meals by themselves.

The coronavirus pandemic, however, may be starting to reverse that trend. Recent survey data suggest that, during the months of lockdowns and physical distancing, Americans have been eating at home — and families have been dining together — more often than they had before the virus. While it’s too early to tell whether these changes will be permanent, such evidence offers some reason for hope.

Putnam also looked at another key schmoozer activity — the practice of sending greeting cards — and found that card-writing among all generations was in decline by the turn of the century. The rise of social media in the years following Bowling Alone might lead one to assume this trend has become more pronounced. Yet surprisingly, the decline Putnam observed has slowed in recent years. Americans may be sending far less mail than they used to (according to the U.S. Postal Service, the volume of mail in the United States has dropped 43% since 2001), but revenue for greeting cards is slightly on the rise.

Experts say that the relative success of online greeting-card companies like Minted, Etsy, and Shutterfly suggests that Millennials are driving much of this growth. Data from Hallmark support this theory: Millennials’ spending on greeting cards is growing faster than that of any other generation. According to focus groups convened by the company, 72% of Millennials enjoy giving greeting cards, and a similar percentage save the cards they receive. Many cited social-media fatigue, the ephemeral nature of online communication, and the desire for interactions that had a personal touch as motivators for sending cards.

In some sense, then, Americans are becoming less social. Yet Americans’ social lives, like their vocational lives, have undergone
dramatic transformations in recent decades. The results of these transformations may suggest that, rather than withdrawing from society, Americans are simply exchanging more structured social activities for less structured ones. In other words, the balance may have simply tilted away from *machining* and in favor of *schmoozing*. Studies on one of the primary drivers of this trend — technological innovation — suggest that this may not be a wholly negative development.

**SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE INFORMATION AGE**

In addition to the evidence supporting his thesis of American civic decline, in *Bowling Alone*, Putnam looked at trends that ran counter to his argument, including advances in telecommunications that have led to the rise of social movements.

He claimed, for instance, that while the telephone reduced face-to-face socializing, it also reduced loneliness. The same can be said more recently of the internet. Both the telephone and the internet have liberated us from the constraints of physical space, thereby helping us foster a sense of psychological neighborliness. Indeed, Putnam found the telephone tended to reinforce, rather than replace, existing personal networks; after all, one cannot meet new friends via the telephone alone.

Today, and increasingly in the years since Putnam’s writing, people *do* meet new friends on the internet — through social media, chat rooms, online dating, and many other means. In fact the internet, far more than the telephone, has the potential to act as a substitute, and not just a supplement, for traditional socialization.

This new way of communicating does have its costs, as some aspects of online communication create barriers to building relationships. Molly Crockett, an assistant professor of psychology at Yale University who studies altruism and human decision-making, hypothesizes that social-media interactions depersonalize interlocutors, rendering us less likely to feel empathy for others and making it easier for us to shame opponents. She has also written about the relatively low transaction costs of expressing moral outrage online. As our very idea of what social engagement means comes to be shaped by a medium that emphasizes expression over time spent together in person, it is important to be wary of these drawbacks and to mitigate them where possible.

But internet-enabled communication does have its advantages, too. Some forms of organizing, activism, socializing, and mutual aid are
greatly enabled by online interaction. In fact, there are examples of digital communication building social capital and promoting democratic ideals in unprecedented ways.

Take the story of Manal al-Sharif, a Saudi woman whose life changed dramatically after she posted a video of herself driving—in defiance of a de facto ban on female drivers in Saudi Arabia—on YouTube. Her video went viral immediately, but it wasn’t until she was released from jail as a result of her video that she realized its full impact. The free world lauded al-Sharif as the “Saudi Rosa Parks”; she was overwhelmed at the outpouring of support from strangers on Twitter and Facebook. Her act inspired other women to do the same, and drew attention to other human-rights abuses in Saudi Arabia. Al-Sharif is even credited with the ultimate end of the ban, which occurred six years after she posted her video.

As Putnam rightly noted in *Bowling Alone*, the most important question left to answer is not what the internet will do to us, but what we will do with it. How can we use the potential of computer-mediated communication to make our investments in social capital more productive? How can we harness this promising technology to thicken our community ties and relationships? How can we develop the technology to enhance social presence, social feedback, and social cues? These questions and others are among the most relevant in our hyper-connected digital era, and they remain unanswered; after all, we are still in the early years of the digital age.

**Open Questions**

*Bowling Alone* has made its way into the pantheon of modern social science for good reason: It sheds light on some crucial truths about modern American society. Its arguments have so thoroughly penetrated our self-understanding that we naturally assume they have grown more true over time.

But the reality of American social life is not quite so simple or so dark. The data reveal a much more nuanced picture of traditional means of building and deploying social capital today. If we avoid treating the America of the mid-20th century as the norm and instead look at both the condition of long-standing social and civic institutions and the emergence of new ones, we would find that American society never stops innovating and experimenting with new forms of common action.
This “civic churn”—a term that describes the creative destruction of American civic institutions and activity—is nothing new. When Tocqueville traversed America examining our norms, institutions, and culture, the national benevolent associations and temperance societies he encountered were relatively new developments. Responding to social and demographic changes related to the increasing integration of the country as a single nation, these groups replaced older civic assemblies like craft guilds and town meetings. Labor unions also began to emerge over the course of the following hundred years as the American economy became more industrialized. Urban missions and settlement houses, which began in England in the 1880s and gradually moved into America, were relatively unknown until the expansion of cities, and it was only at the end of the 19th century that they were seen as an obvious form of civic involvement.

Many areas of associational life remain under-studied or could use the kind of book-length treatment that Putnam devoted to the associations of the mid- to late-20th century. Book clubs are not new, but they appear to be playing a community-building role—perhaps particularly in the upper-middle class—that has yet to be studied. The role of coffee shops in urban areas may be taking on the role that bars and pubs once did, yet there is little formal data on such communal watering holes. Community libraries offer a similar story, as there is limited data on their role as a point of civic and social engagement. The role of youth sports is also an important and under-studied area. Unfortunately, as they have become politicized in the era of Title IX, social scientists have tended to avoid them, leaving crucial questions unanswered.

There is also far too little data on civic and social life among minority communities. Jack and Jill organizations, groups affiliated with churches, and black sororities and fraternity groups that engage in service activities all call for greater attention from scholars. Another under-studied area is the rise and endurance of “giving circles” among minorities and women that serve as a democratizing influence on philanthropy and provide a source of social capital and trust.

Some ebb and flow in American social and civic life is both inevitable and natural. As in Putnam’s time, the evidence of American civic health is often mixed. Social, demographic, and technological changes have all put stress on older forms of socializing, but they may also drive the evolution of new ones that are better suited to modern times.
Whatever challenges our social institutions may confront, mankind’s underlying hunger for engagement and community can never be eradicated. The fact that such hunger exists does not mean we will succeed in addressing it, but it does mean we are likely to keep trying. In fact, it may be that the alarmism following Putnam’s original proclamation of civic atrophy deserves some credit for subsequent bursts of civic renewal. Americans in recent decades may have taken it upon themselves to create new ways of being there for one another. All who are engaged in that effort today owe Putnam a debt of gratitude.