

# AMERICAN SURVEY

## The solitary bowler

WASHINGTON, DC

“AMERICANS of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in 1840, seeing in this the underpinning of American democracy. These associations came in all shapes and sizes, he noted, “religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive . . . Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.”

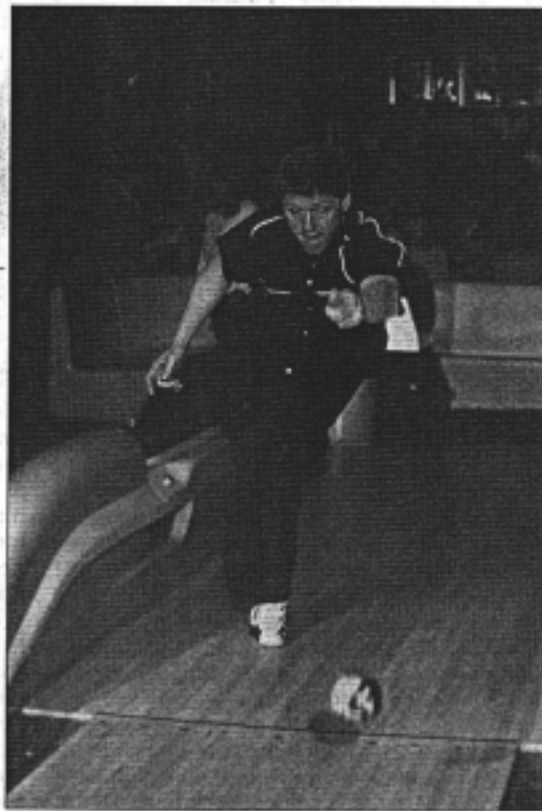
Of late, however, some high-level hand-wringing has been going on in America. The association-forming habit, the stuff of “civil society”, is said to be eroding. If so, Americans are right to worry. But is it true?

“Like fish floating on the surface of a polluted river, the network of voluntary associations in America seems to be dying,” the ever-thoughtful Senator Bill Bradley told an audience in Washington last week. His speech followed hard on the publication of “The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy” by Christopher Lasch (published by Norton), a historian at Rochester University until his death last year. Mr Lasch bemoans the decline in the ethic of civic responsibility and blames it on the restlessness of the new, mobile elites.

Most attention-grabbing of all has been the work of Robert Putnam, a Harvard University professor who has the ear of the president. Mr Putnam’s essay, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital”, published in the *Journal of Democracy* last month, has become required reading in the White House. The title comes from what Mr Putnam calls the most whimsical yet discomfiting bit of evidence of diminishing social capital: the number of bowlers increased by 10% between 1980 and 1993, but league bowling—the scene of “social interaction and even occasionally civic conversations over beer and pizza”—has shrunk by 40%. People are going bowling by themselves.

Mr Putnam’s case rests on an impressive collection of more conven-

tional measures as well. Voter turnout dropped by nearly a quarter between the early 1960s and 1990. Participation in religious services and church-related groups has declined by about a sixth since the 1960s. Trade-union membership has dwindled from 35% of the non-agricultural workforce in 1954 to 16% now. More than 12m people belonged to parent-teacher associations (PTAs) in the early 1960s, compared with fewer than 7m in the early 1990s. Far fewer people are volunteering to help with organisations such as the Boy Scouts and the Red Cross, or wanting to join worthy fraternal clubs such as the Lions and the Elks. The list goes on. And Mr Putnam, entering the perilous territory of extrapolation, gives warning that another generation of deterioration at the same rate would make America merely a middling country in the civil-society league.



Disproving de Tocqueville?

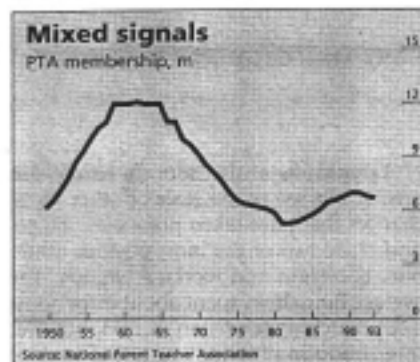
Large shifts of this sort are hardly surprising in view of the scale of other social changes that have taken place over the period. Take two of the most obvious examples, television and working women. The average household spent about three hours a day watching television in 1954, but over seven hours in 1994. In 1960, 19% of married women with children under six had jobs outside the home; by 1993 60% did. The Clinton administration has just reported that at the end of last year the manufacturing working week (42.2 hours in December) was at a postwar high and that manufacturing overtime (4.8 hours) was at an all-time high. Under such circumstances, who has time for the associating business?

Actually, astonishing numbers of people do. In 1993, 89.2m American grown-ups, nearly half the adult population, engaged in some sort of volunteer activity, for 4.2 hours a week on average, according to the Independent Sector, a Washington-based organisation that promotes volunteer work. More importantly, there are strong signs that Americans’ social engagement, far from sinking on down, is already rebounding.

The “bowling alone” image is neat but flawed. Hardly anyone actually bowls solo; bowling remains an extremely social activity, even if it is less often performed in leagues. The rise in the numbers of bowlers could be taken, in Putnam’s speak, as a gain in social capital.

Similar caveats apply to much of Mr Putnam’s other evidence. Some of the organisations he mentions (such as the Lions and Elks) may simply be *dépassé*. Others are showing renewed vigour. PTA membership, for example, is up by 28% from its low in 1981-82; more fathers are getting involved, it seems, and there are more children at school. Demographics also explain why the numbers of boy scouts are on the rise. Union membership rose in 1993 for the first time since the surveying method changed in 1983. Voter turnout in both 1992 and 1994, though distressingly low by the standards of most democracies, was nevertheless higher than it has been for 20 years in comparable elections. Part of the reason for Ross Perot’s appeal was that he gave people an avenue for involvement many felt had been lost.

Then there are the religious organisations—probably the most powerful forums for voluntary association in the country, but showing the weak-



est evidence of decline. The number of people saying they attended a church or a synagogue in the past week jumped up between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s, but has otherwise hovered around 40% ever since 1939. As Mr Putnam notes (and Mr Clinton repeats), America has more houses of worship per head than any other country. Now they have a new market, as the baby-boomers have children and yearn for spiritually anchored communities.

A renewed interest in "community" is a response to America's all-too-obvious social decay—homelessness, inner-city blight, gang violence (a Tocquevillian form of criminal arrangement if ever there was one). Americans may well be responding much as they always have, by busily forming associations, but not the same sorts of associations as of old. Could it be that, like so much else, the association business is undergoing change, downsizing, becoming less corporate and more local?

Joel Kotkin of the Centre for the New West thinks that is exactly what is happening in Los Angeles. It has few civic leaders, but enormous vitality at the grass roots, where people are busily "building institutions that can survive in chaos." Churches and synagogues are founding new schools, mothers are networking in "mommy-and-me" groups, fathers are taking their children to soccer leagues.

Fear of crime is a great motivator. The number of neighbourhood crimewatch groups has doubled over the past ten years to some 20,000, involving 17m or so people, according to estimates from the National Association of Town Watch. The rise in various forms of community associations—different forms of housing developments involving a set of local rules with fees levied to run them—has been even more dramatic. Their number has grown from 10,000 in 1970 to an estimated 150,000 housing more than 30m people in 1992, according to the Community Associations Institute. Some deplore the repressive rules that such "shadow local governments" can have, and see their rise as depressing evidence of the growing class separation in America. But they do attest to the continuing strength of the associating instinct.

## In the front line of the politeness war

BASS HARBOR, MAINE

**I**N AMERICA'S north-east, at any rate, some people have set out to disprove Georges Clemenceau's crack that America is "the only nation in history which has miraculously gone directly from barbarism to degeneration without the usual interval of civilisation."

In Raritan, New Jersey, a town law now prohibits the public use of rude language. Nobody has been arrested, perhaps because the law's wording is vague. Law-and-order people meet slip-ups with a friendly: "Hey, watch it. You're in Raritan." But it has worked well enough for some other towns to express their admiration. The American Civil Liberties Union has predictably complained about a restriction of free speech. Raritan's mayor, Anthony DeCicco, wonders whose rights most need protection, the swearers or the sworn-at.

Up in Maine, the state's public-broadcasting corporation has carved out an island of civility in its television talk-show. After a panellist had flung an on-

air insult at Tabatha King (a trustee of the corporation, alas for him), it was agreed that everybody on the programme would exercise "fairness, accuracy and civility". It is also in Maine that a newly elected state legislator, Pat Lane, has submitted a bill setting up a hot-line for people who think they have been insulted by state employees. She has 25 co-sponsors. Courtesy, she says, is the "front line of defence against barbarism".

Why should laws be needed to hold the line? Rushworth Kidder, president of the Institute for Global Ethics in Camden, Maine, says that 30 or 40 years ago it would not have been necessary to legislate for politeness. What makes rules and regulations necessary today, he argues, is a lack of shared values. Too much tolerance has left people looking for a foundation on which to base such values. "Society is finally saying, in small ways, that tolerance without standards isn't the answer."

But efforts to restore civility will meet tough competition. There are few signs that commercial TV or radio will encourage its talk-show hosts to temper their pugnacity—or that anyone wants them to. Although some TV stations have set aside half-hour periods for "family-sensitive" news, Jeffery Marks, a journalism-watcher, thinks these may be little more than a gimmick to push up ratings. He does not think they have been effective, anyway. Even Ms Lane's proposal for a citizens' hot-line to protest against rudeness is not universally popular. Some state employees are insulted by the mere suggestion that they can be rude.



And some of the new community-mindedness does cut across class and ethnic lines. Heather McLeod of "Who Cares", which reports on voluntary work, detects "a real resurgence of community service among the younger generation, the twenty-some-things." "Generation at the Crossroads", a book by Paul Loeb published by Rutgers University Press last year, reports that activism on campuses is on the rise again. "Bubbling up in every region are citizens who have decided to take responsibility," echoes Chris Gates, the vice-president of the National Civic League in Denver, which seeks to nurture America's social capital. Such activists typically talk of a trend away from bureaucratised associations towards more

entrepreneurial approaches to local problems, with partnerships between the private, nonprofit and public sectors.

Being largely outside traditional avenues, the extent of such activism is hard to measure. There is only the anecdotal evidence from the likes of Bob Woodson of the National Centre for Neighbourhood Enterprises in Washington. "The level of activity has dramatically increased in proportion to the severity of the problem," he says. "A moral brushfire is burning in this country just below the surface." Those are words that de Tocqueville would have found quintessentially and encouragingly American.