

“A New Greatest Generation?”

Robert D. Putnam

April 17, 2009

Wow! I am now an alum of Ithaca College. That’s terrific! Thank you all.

That’s the first reason I came today. The second reason I came was as a character witness for your new president. Tom Rochon was a student of mine almost 40 years ago when I was a newly minted PhD and he was an undergraduate at the University of Michigan. If I may now speak to my faculty colleagues here for a moment, Tom was the kind of student that we all dream, someday, of having. He was smart. He was creative. He was really hard working. And he was a really decent, nice guy. Those are factors that don’t always come together.

All parts of this community are incredibly fortunate to have Tom Rochon as your leader and as your colleague. And I am very honored to be able to take part in this celebration.

My third reason for coming here is to talk to you a little about some work I have been doing in the past, and am doing right now. We’ve just passed a season of religious celebrations – Easter and Passover. As part of the Passover celebration, Jews traditionally eat what is called a Hillel sandwich, consisting of a sweet kind of fruit salad between two hard baked, unleavened pieces of bread, or Matzohs as they are called. I offer today a Hillel sandwich of a talk: it contains two challenges wrapped around some good news. There will be some bad news first and then some good news, and finally a challenge.

The extremely generous citation that accompanied my honorary degree summarized the first bit of bad news that I want to mention. It is what I have labeled the “Bowling Alone” problem – that is, the fact that by many measures over the course of the last thirty or forty years in America, our sense of connection with one another and our actual connections with one another have declined by about 30 to 40 percent. Membership in organizations is down by 30, 40 or in many cases as much as 50 percent over this period. Public meetings are off by about 30%. Dinner parties are off by about 50% over the last 30 years. Do you know what a dinner party is? That was actually comforting to my wife, Rosemary, and me because we’ve not been invited to a dinner party for the last 20 years, and it’s nice to know that none of you are going to dinner parties either.

Trust in other people has also declined quite sharply. When I was growing up, just about the time Tom and I met in the early ‘70’s, if you asked Americans “Would you say that most people can be trusted?,” almost two-thirds said “Yes, most people can be trusted.” Last month, in response to the same question, less than one-third of Americans said most people can be trusted. Trust has declined steadily for decades now.

There has been a similar decline in a sense of generalized reciprocity. That’s a highfalutin’ term that just means “I’ll do this for you now, without expecting something back from you, because down the road she’ll do something for me, and you’ll do something for her. Or you’ll do something for him and then he’ll do something for her, and anyhow, we’ll all see each other at choir practice on Thursday.”

Generalized reciprocity, I recognize, is an academic term. It was best defined by a philosopher from New York City, one whom some of you will have heard of, named Yogi Berra. Yogi said, “if you don’t go

to someone's funeral, they won't come to yours." It's a deep thought actually – the longer you think about it, the deeper that thought becomes. Yogi captured the idea of generalized reciprocity, and that's what's been disappearing, along with all these other forms of connection between people in our society.

Now, it is a really interesting problem to figure out why this has happened. The decline began in the early 1970's. So, ever since Tom Rochon began to vote, America has been going to hell in a hand-basket. That is what we in the social sciences call a hypothesis.

But there are other possible interpretations, and those are supported by elaborate analysis. We have firm evidence that television is a big part of the problem. Two-career families are a significant part of the problem. Urban sprawl is a part of the problem. But the most important factor is what I will call "generational change" and "generational arithmetic." The World War II generation has been civically engaged to an amazing degree throughout their lives. They are what Tom Brokaw calls "the Greatest Generation," what I have called the "long civic generation." They are my parents, and the parents of many people in the room. They are the grandparents of others in the room. Sadly, there are not that many of them left with us anymore. But even though they are in their 80's and 90's, they still vote more often than anybody else. They may use a walker but they are still getting to the polls more than any younger generation.

Unfortunately, the long civic generation did not pass those traits on to their children and grandchildren. And therefore, the inevitable force of generational arithmetic – who's leaving the population and who's arriving in the population – has meant that every year for the last 30 or 40 years the overall average of civic engagement in America has declined.

This is seen very clearly, for example, in successive classes of college students. There is a survey that has asked college students about their values and priorities every year since the late 1960s. Students are asked, for example, whether or not it is a priority for them to keep up with public affairs. And they are asked whether it is a priority for them to earn a lot of money. In the 1960's and early 1970's, about 60% of all young people said keeping up with politics was a priority, and about 40% said that making a lot of money was a priority. That ratio steadily declined for the next 30 or 40 years, so that by the year 2000 the ratio had flipped from 60-40 to 20-80. At the turn of the century, twenty percent of college students said that keeping up with public affairs was a priority and 80% said that making a lot of money was a priority.

That's the hard news – the first part of this Hillel sandwich. But then something happened, and we are now going to get to the sweeter part of the talk. In the fall of 2001, the priorities of college students radically shifted, as did the long decline of community-mindedness in America. There was a sharp break in a number of different data trends, which reversed course and began to go up in the fall of 2001.

There are a number of possible explanations for why these trends might have changed. The timing is not quite right with the internet because the internet came along earlier than that. Facebook didn't come online until 2 or 3 years later than that. I've looked very carefully at other factors that happened in the years 2000 and 2001, that might account for this sudden rebirth of civic life in America. If you looked at my biography printed in the program, it will not have escaped your notice that *Bowling Alone* was published in 2000. I therefore think there is some possibility that I personally am responsible for the salvation of American civilization.

But there were other things, more serious things, that happened in the fall of 2001. We keep track of the civic pulse of America and its level of community-mindedness, and all of our indices shot up immediately after September 11th of 2001. I'm sure if we had a national hug index, the hug index would

have gone through the roof. 9/11 was an amazing object lesson in how much we need to count on other people as well as how much we *can* count on other people.

For most Americans, however, the half life in the spurt in our sense of connection with one another after 9/11 was about six weeks. Six months after 9/11 the traces of that new feeling were essentially gone – except for kids in school. For them that spike never ended. Today, our tracking of community-mindedness over time shows very clearly that there is a 9/11 generation. Whether they were in college or in high school, or even in grade school, the 9/11 generation is much more attuned than their elders to our mutual responsibilities to one another, and much more attuned to their responsibilities as citizens. You can see this in polling data and in electoral turnout.

And then came Obama. Barack Obama is an important part of this story, but he is more the result of that change than the cause. I don't mean Obama himself is the result of the change, but the youthful interest in Obama is in part a consequence of what preexisted before Obama himself came on the scene. The young adult response to his presidential candidacy is one instance of the renewed sense of civic engagement that had been dying for 30 or 40 years.

I don't doubt that other factors have also contributed to the resurgence of community-mindedness among the 9/11 generation. The internet had something to do with it, and I'm certain that Obama himself has added to the feeling of connectedness. I'm sure that at Ithaca College, just as at Harvard and colleges all over the country, there is a feeling that is a lot like the early Kennedy years – a renewed desire to do good for other people. That's a fundamentally important change. As the 9/11 generation grows older, all of us are going to benefit from a new "greatest generation." I'm more optimistic about the future of civic life in America than I have been for many years because of this renewed sense of civic engagement and obligation to one another.

However there is a third part to this talk, another hard part of the sandwich. That increase in civic engagement, in the sense of connection with other people, in the sense of obligation to other people, and in the sense of involvement in this society, turns out to be heavily dependent upon social class. If you look at the trends over time in youthful civic engagement over the last thirty years, kids coming from upper middle class families are now more involved in the community than kids like them used to be. However, kids coming from working or lower class backgrounds are much less involved than kids like them used to be. Kids coming from middle class families are more likely to go to church than middle class kids used to, but working class kids are much less likely to go to church. Middle class kids spend more time with their parents than their predecessors thirty years ago, but working class kids spend much less time with their parents. Middle class kids are more likely to trust other people than kids like them previously did, but working class kids are much less likely to trust other people. You can see this same growing class divide in things like self esteem. One of the questions asked in these surveys is "How would you rate yourself against your peers?" Middle class kids used to rate themselves on average as A- students. Those same kinds of kids today, on average, rate themselves as A+ students. Think about that for a little bit! Conversely, working class kids used to rate themselves as B+ students, and they now rate themselves, on average, as C+ students. In area after area in the lives of these kids, we can see a growing gap between social classes.

There are also important racial gaps in America. We've talked a lot about those as a country-and well we should, because we have got to overcome those gaps. But what I am talking about is not another way of describing race issues. You can see exactly the same trends among white kids only of different social classes. So what we need to worry about is that just when we are enjoying this great new civic resurgence, the growth of a new "greatest generation," and just when we can hope that they will lead

the rest of us back into a firmer sense of responsibility for our brothers and sisters and neighbors, there is also a growing class cleavage in American society.

You all know that I am a college professor. And as you know, college professors give assignments. So I am going to give an assignment now to my former student, President Thomas Rochon, and to his new colleagues here at Ithaca College, and to the students here. The assignment is to begin working right now on how to use the resources of renewed civic consciousness so that we can reweave the fabric of American society, and overcome the deep and growing gulfs in American society. My assignment for you is: won't you be reweavers? Tom, it's up to you.