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## Political Disengagement

It may seem unusual to be discussing a book at this time for the Democrats. However I think the 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, by American sociologist Robert Putnam, provides interesting insights into the social context that we're operating in, and indeed an insight into the recent history of the Democrats and possible future directions.

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam examines social and political disengagement in American society since 1950. This disengagement is evidenced in decreased voter turnout, decreased public meeting attendance, decreased numbers serving on committees, decreased political party membership and generally decreased numbers working with established political parties. It is possible to see this as merely a general disenchantment with politics, although Putnam suggests this is part of a wider social process.

For Putnam, ten-pin bowling is a powerful metaphor and example of this disengagement. Putnam suggests that, statistically, more Americans go ten-pin bowling now than ever before. However the number of Americans involved in socially organized forms of the past-time, notably through bowling leagues, has dramatically decreased. Americans are now bowling alone – and thus the title of book.

Robert Putnam does go through a range of reasons for the social and political disengagement. At a basic level there are more demands on people's time - or at least more perceived demands upon our time. These demands include longer working hours, demands in keeping up with information, longer commuting times. Moreover work itself has become more bureaucratized. In these circumstances it is little wonder people don't particularly like attending meetings and other organizational commitment outside of work.

There are other reasons for social and political disengagement. There are often feelings and despair and fatigue associated with political commitment, given the amount of the work that democratic engagement often demands. There's also a sense that the political process cannot change circumstances – therefore, why waste your effort? The mass media have contributed to this cynicism, with sensationalist and trivial reporting that refuses to engage issues, and television in particular making us viewers rather than participators in the political process.

There is particularly evident in the US political process. The structure of the process means that it is very difficult for the individual person to believe that he or she can make a difference. This soon becomes a self-fulfilling process. If people believe that they will not make a difference, then they will not bother acting to change processes. The continual representation of politics as a spectator sport re-enforces this.

Robert Putnam does have critics. Some suggest that the political disengagement has been taking place over a much longer time-frame that Putnam suggests. However, very few political scientists contest the suggestion that there is quite a dramatic political disengagement throughout representative democracies and an accompanying cynicism about the political process, and that this is reflected generally [12/13] in representative democracies around the world, and not just in the USA.

The news from Robert Putnam is not all negative. He sees a counter-trend towards revitalization of social and political engagement in a number of areas. I want to concentrate upon these areas of revitalization identified by Putnam – small groups, involvement in small groups and involvement in social movements.

Before doing so, an important initial observation is that political disengagement is common to all political parties, and not simply something which the Dems have experienced over the past decade. Political parties generally are confronted with declining membership – it is not something that the Dems alone have experienced. The emphasis of the Dems on participative decision-making has actually made more organizational demands, as it generally means more committees and more meetings. And it can lead to member burnout.

The attractiveness of small group involvement is perhaps the easiest to comprehend. Robert Putnam sees the growth of evangelical Christian churches in the USA as being linked to small group dynamics. We all like the feeling of belonging, and often this can best happen in small groups. Conversely we tend not to want to belong to groups where there is discord.

Obviously the history of the Dems has included times of often quite dramatic discord. Yet I think that is part of a political party committed to participative democracy. The other positive development is that I believe there is now a greater willingness to agree to disagree over specific issues, which is inevitable given the situation that political issues rarely are black and white in nature.

The second revitalization trend that Robert Putnam identifies is that growth of new communication technologies, with the Internet being the most important of these. One of the dramatic aspects of the events of 2003 was the seemingly spontaneous emergence of the most extensive international demonstrations in history – against the then planned invasion of Iraq. Yes, the invasion of Iraq proceeded anyway, but the organizing power of the Internet was still quite unprecedented.

The Internet poses opportunities for the Democrats. Normally, the recent election loss of 2007 would have meant that it would be impossible to continue a political party. However the Internet offers new possibilities of continuing a political movement without the resources that would have been necessary prior to the Internet.

The third (and I think the key) aspect of revitalization is the importance of individual identification with a social movement. Robert Putnam sees the peace movement and the environmental movement as key examples. Put simply, a social movement is something people can believe in. And people want to be identified with movements, whereas they are reluctant to be identified with organizations and parties.

One of the important aspects of a social movement is that leaders within a social movement articulate what the social movement is about. With the Dems (or whatever we may be called in the future) it is important to emphasize that we represent in a unique way a genuinely independent political movement, committed to environmental sustainability, peace with justice, an inclusive society and the importance of individual enterprise and conscience.

The ideals of the Dems were set forth in a systematic fashion by the 23 party objectives voted upon last decade. However the challenge is to articulate these ideals in a form with which individuals can readily identify. This is the battle of ideas. My own preference is to emphasize the Democrats as part of the wider liberal project, committed to the importance of individual conscience and freedom. This places the Dems as part of a wider historical movement, including, for instance, William Wilberforce and the anti-slavery movement.

Concentrating upon articulating ideals can also be enormously empowering. I think that all involved with the Dems in recent years would be tempted to feel a sense of exhaustion and even black despair that we have tried so hard - and yet the media and the electorate have seemingly turned against us so much. Yes, one can argue that some/much of this turning against us was due to our own fault, but I think there was much more to it than this.

What makes articulating ideals empowering is that the motivation for political activity becomes a matter of speaking the truth, or as the Quakers have it, speaking truth to power.

For those feeling a sense of immense disappointment at the situation of the Dems, I would recommend reading *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam. Perhaps also a reading of one of the many biographies of William Wilberforce, such as that by John Pollock, might also be timely and useful.

References.

Pollock, John. (1977) *Wilberforce*. London: Constable.

Putnam, Robert D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.