



BOOK REVIEWS

Rebuilding the American 'We'

There's more to history than the results of the last election, and Robert Putnam reminds us that some hope reposes there.

BY JAMES T. KLOPPENBERG FROM WINTER, NO. 59 - 15 MIN READ

TAGGED CIVIL SOCIETY ECONOMICS GILDED AGE GOVERNMENT HISTORY

The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again by Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett • Simon & Schuster • 2020 • 480 pages • \$32.50

Robert Putnam has done it again. In *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*, he and co-author Shaylyn Romney Garrett offer an ambitious and arresting interpretation of American life since the late nineteenth century. As the subtitle announces, Putnam and Garrett contend that Americans from the 1890s through the 1960s repudiated the individualistic excesses of the Gilded Age and created a nation that was more economically equal, more politically cooperative, more civically engaged, and more altruistic. Since the late 1960s, all those trends have been reversed. We have returned to the dog-eat-dog, intensely polarized, atomized, me-first culture of the Robber Barons. Those who justify the domination of the wealthiest, now as then, invoke the so-called logics of market capitalism and evolutionary biology: The fittest not only survive but thrive, and the metric for fitness is money.

The Upswing harvests Putnam's decades of plowing and planting the terrain of American society, politics, economics, and culture. Every chapter draws on sources from different academic disciplines, including but hardly limited to those Putnam used in his earlier work. The result is a multi-dimensional portrait of America, this time since

the 1880s instead of the 1950s. Of course, Putnam's arguments will spark debate. I will forego a detailed summary of the book, in part because I think every reader of *Democracy*—and every person who cares about democracy—should read this book. Instead I will highlight its principal findings, then engage Putnam's concluding remarks about how we can reverse a half century of increasing selfishness.

Putnam opens the book with a deftly executed magic trick. He paints a vivid portrait of a society riven by deep economic, political, social, and cultural conflicts. Inequality is rising. Greed reigns. Women, racial and ethnic minorities, and recent immigrants are oppressed and excluded. The rich defend their wealth as justified and taunt the poor for their laziness. Just when readers are lamenting the sorry state of America in 2020, Putnam reveals that all the evidence comes from the late nineteenth-century Gilded Age. Awful as things were, in the first two decades of the twentieth century progressive reformers addressed these injustices, and during the years from 1900 through 1968, the nation became more egalitarian, cooperative, cohesive, and altruistic. But since then, Putnam writes, “we have been experiencing *declining* economic equality, the *deterioration* of compromise in the public square, a *fraying* social fabric, and a *descent* into cultural narcissism.” Because so many scholars, including Putnam himself, have focused attention on the last 50 years, fewer have noticed the contrast between our time and the preceding seven decades. *The Upswing* widens the frame of analysis to demonstrate that Americans reversed course before—and to suggest that we can do it again.

Chapters concentrating on the economy, politics, society, and culture present variations on Putnam's principal theme, what he calls the inverted U-curve, which shows how the nation shifted from selfishness to generosity and back. Although overall measures of economic performance and health show steady growth, they mask the “sharp inequality in the distribution of income, wealth, and well-being among Americans.” Peter Lindert and Jeffrey Williamson have shown how a “great convergence from 1913 through 1970 gave way to a great divergence” since then, a trend demonstrated by Emmanuel Saez's data on the breathtaking increase, since 1973, in the share of wealth held by America's richest households. What David Card calls “the golden age of upward mobility” was followed by a steady decline. “Children's prospects of earning more than their parents in the United States,” Raj Chetty has argued, “have fallen from 90 percent to 50 percent over the past half century.” Inter-generational mobility in other nations now outstrips our own.

Many scholars have blamed the Reagan Revolution for such changes, but Putnam's evidence shows that the trends began a decade and a half earlier, making Reagan less the cause than the consequence of changes already underway. The reforms instituted by Progressives and New Dealers, including the graduated income tax, estate taxes, the minimum wage, and corporate income taxes helped reduce inequality in the first two thirds of the century. Tax cuts and the eroding buying power of a declining real wages since the early 1970s have erased those gains. As he does at the end of every chapter, Putnam includes a chart aggregating the multiple measures of decreasing, then increasing, inequality, the inverted U-curve, to nail down his argument concerning economic changes.

Putnam's chapters on politics and society show the same pattern. Both participation and bipartisan cooperation marked the Progressive era, the New Deal, and the Great Society. During the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson, many Republicans voted for progressive measures (Medicare and Medicaid) and many Democrats supported Republican initiatives (the interstate highway system). Such bipartisan alliances made possible landmark reforms until increasing polarization in the 1960s split the nation apart. Not only did volatile issues such as abortion, affirmative action, and the role of government dominate national debates, but they also seeped into state and local politics and even our private lives, to the extent that many Americans now cannot imagine living peacefully alongside, let alone marrying into, the other tribe. Because polarization has paralyzed politics, nothing gets done to address urgent problems, which feeds both mistrust and cynicism about public life. In his chapter on society, Putnam updates his evidence and analysis from *Bowling Alone*, but the argument will be familiar for readers of his earlier work. Civic engagement in religious congregations, labor unions, and organizations of all sorts rose from the 1890s through the 1960s (with a brief pause in the 1920s and early 1930s), then "virtually all our measures show a steady, unrelenting decline in social connectedness over the last half century."

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Putnam's chapter on culture departs from social scientists' work to probe *Americans' beliefs, values, and norms about fundamental aspects of American society*. Putnam relies on Google Ngrams, which record word usage in publications, for what he calls "a new and more rigorous way exploring and quantifying cultural change." As an intellectual historian, I found that claim overstated when Putnam first described it to me. But the chapter offers many examples, including uses of "survival of the fittest," "social gospel," "rugged individualism," "common man," "American dream," "vital center," "conformity," "consensus," "individualism," "responsibility," and "rights," that make his case. The chapter's concluding chart, which aggregates uses of these words and data concerning other social practices, confirms one of his most arresting arguments: The ratio of uses of "we" to "I" declined from 1880 to 1900, rose to its peak in the mid-1960s, then declined after the "me decade" of the 1970s to its low point today. Whether Putnam's method is more rigorous than others', his conclusions fit neatly into the overall trajectory of my own courses in post-Civil-War U.S. intellectual history.

Readers following Putnam to this point will be asking the same question: What about race and gender? Putnam shows that in both domains, steady progress during the first two-thirds of the century was followed, after the late 1960s, by a flattening as Americans "took their foot off the gas." For African Americans, income, wealth, and home ownership improved for several reasons: migration to Northern cities and, in response to that exodus, slightly improved conditions in the South; access to industrial jobs; the efforts of reformers and philanthropists; social service programs; the post-WWII economic boom; and above all relentless Black pressure for change. Although familiar landmarks, from the 1954 *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision through the 1965 Voting Rights Act, have attracted a lot of attention, Putnam follows more recent scholars in emphasizing the work of earlier Black activists in the long civil rights movement.

Although survey data suggest that whites harbored less racial resentment as the '50s and '60s proceeded, Putnam wisely discounts that evidence as hypocrisy and points toward increasing resistance in the late 1960s. By 1968, when the Kerner Commission found that justifiable rage triggered urban unrest, the Johnson Administration buried the report as a political liability. When segregationist George Wallace won 13.5 percent of the vote that year, Republicans saw their opening. Nixon's 1972 "Southern strategy," which used calls for "law and order" to mobilize the mounting white backlash, succeeded in flipping the states of the former Confederacy. Controversies over busing

and residential segregation propelled many white working-class voters away from the FDR coalition, built on the premise of shared suffering and sacrifice, throughout the decade. Those changes put Reagan in the White House.

On women's rights, Putnam contests the standard focus on first and second waves and argues instead that women made steady progress, measured in terms of political or workforce participation, throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Increasing numbers of women attended high school, college, and graduate and professional schools; now women constitute a majority of graduates at all levels. Although women still earn only 84 cents on the dollar compared with men, occupational segregation explains much of that discrepancy, and when the data are broken down by class and race, the picture of women's steady economic advance dissolves. Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1970 founding of the National Organization for Women, and Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments all helped pry open doors for women. But commitments to women's rights since the 1990s have flagged, and rising generations of men are now likelier to say that women belong in the home, where men should make the decisions, than they were in slightly earlier generations. In sum, as for African Americans, Putnam concludes, the nation "took its foot off the gas," and since the late 1960s women's economic, political, legal, and cultural progress has stalled.

What caused the upswing? How does Putnam explain these two reversals, first from the Gilded Age to the Progressive era, and then from the late 1960s to the present? Somewhat disappointingly, but from a historian's perspective sensibly, he concludes that no single factor can be isolated. Instead economic, political, social, and cultural factors all coalesced to shift Americans' orientation from individualism to community and back. The book reaches a crescendo when Putnam aggregates his mountain of data to show that all the inverted U-curves intersect with remarkable consistency. Older readers of *Democracy* will remember seeing, in the encyclopedias of our youth, a series of transparent overlays showing the skeletal, muscular, and nervous systems of the human body. The summary charts at the end of each chapter of *The Upswing* culminate in figure 8.1, which aggregates all the data from those earlier summary charts and has a similar effect. When Putnam presents his argument to live audiences, he projects on the screen the inverted U-curve of each domain separately and sequentially. There is an audible gasp when he puts them all together in his final illustration, and figure 8.1 in the book likewise neatly brings together his principal arguments.

If the book generates as much buzz as *Bowling Alone*, specialists will doubtless challenge some of the measures Putnam uses along the way. But when so many pieces fit together so well, they create an almost seamless picture.

What is to be done? How can Americans unhappy with the triumph of selfishness reverse the tide? Although the progressives' example cannot tell us *what* to do, Putnam argues, it can show us how we should proceed. We need a new coalition of reform movements, a sustained effort by ordinary citizens. Neither street protests, prompted by the latest outrage, nor campaign-focused organizing, facilitated by professional fundraisers and political operatives, will do the trick. In the 2018 elections, as Leah Gose, Lara Putnam, and Theda Skocpol showed in *Democracy*, middle-class, middle-aged, college-educated women showed how it can be done. Now the rising generation, which did not create this mess, must likewise resist cynicism and rebuild "a robust American 'we' through grassroots activism." To accomplish that goal, Putnam warns, today's progressives must appeal, as earlier Progressives did and populists and socialists did not, to the "full range of American values," including "private property, personal liberty, and economic growth."

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Putnam's second warning raises what I consider the most problematic part of his argument in *The Upswing*. Reformers now must not "take their foot off the gas," the mistake made at the end of the 1960s responsible for the abrupt halt in progress for Blacks and women. This time, Putnam writes, reformers must not compromise on "equality and inclusion." The challenge facing Americans now is to value inclusiveness as well as community, equality as well as liberty. Although those values have often been treated as separable by activists and by scholars, Putnam disagrees. All are integral to the American democratic project, as E. J. Dionne showed in *Our Divided Political Heart* (2012) and Danielle Allen did in *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (2014). I could not agree more. That has been the focus of my work as a scholar and teacher for four decades.

Putnam's evidence, I think, suggests a problem with his proposed solution. Progressives and New Dealers did not address the problems of race and gender because it would have jeopardized the limited progress they made. It was no accident that Jim Crow survived the Progressive era; few white reformers considered racial equality a high priority. When the 19th Amendment secured women's suffrage, many thought women's rights were won. The New Deal's signature program, Social Security, deliberately excluded agricultural and domestic workers, not coincidentally the jobs most Blacks held. Despite the achievements of Frances Perkins, the first female Cabinet member, and the wartime heroics of Rosie the Riveter, cultural prescriptions about women's obligations as mothers have persisted until today, when most Americans assume that women rather than men should sacrifice to care for and educate children kept home from school by COVID-19. Defenders of white male supremacy insured that the goal of "equality and inclusion" across the lines of race and gender was never achieved, even at the height of the "we" decades, as Putnam readily concedes. Even more to the point, it was the limited achievements of the civil rights movement and the women's movement that sparked the backlash of the 1970s, the backlash that made possible the Reagan Revolution and has continued to shape American politics ever since.

Perhaps Americans after the late 1960s did not take their foot off the gas, to use Putnam's preferred image. Perhaps instead they slammed on the brakes, with a powerful assist by forces gathering strength ever since the Progressive era. Intellectual currents justifying selfishness and greed as inherent, inevitable human drives—rather than the vices they have always been—have emerged from conservative economists, political scientists, and evolutionary psychologists. Strident opposition to using government, whether through taxes or regulations, to address rampaging inequality is older than the New Deal. By the mid-1960s, Barry Goldwater, Reagan, and other libertarian-leaning Republicans began seizing control of a party that veered ever rightward, through the slash-and-burn tactics of Newt Gingrich in the 1990s, until today, when almost all Republican officeholders blithely support the most corrupt and incompetent President in U.S. history. After radio stations funded by wealthy right-wingers appeared on the AM dial, Reagan's 1984 dismantling of the Fairness Doctrine opened the way for Fox News. Billions of dollars poured into conservative think tanks and funded political campaigns, driving state as well as federal legislatures rightward. Tax cuts siphoned money away from social programs and education, including higher education, and into the pockets of the wealthy. Aided by that concerted, multi-pronged assault on moderate progressive reform, demonized as communism or socialism,

millions of Americans during the 1970s decided against further progress toward racial equality, gender equality, and economic equality. They decided against a more inclusive society, more tolerant of nonwhites, immigrants, gays, or anybody else who thought or acted outside what conservatives defined as authentic American values. Finally, many 1960s insurgents who fought against the restraints of 1950s American society proved unwilling to join together in a new progressive movement. Instead of continuing to struggle for equality and inclusion, they decided that as long as they were left alone, to live their lives as they wished, they would retreat from community into self-satisfied isolation.

Putnam argues passionately in his final chapter that Americans who want a renewed commitment to progressive reform must join together, forge coalitions, and renounce the increasingly common demand that moderate potential allies embrace the most ambitious programs of reform. But individuals since the 1960s have become convinced that they possess an innate “right” to think and act however they want regardless of the consequences for others. That inflation of individualism on the left as well as the right also militates against effective, incremental collective action of the sort that made possible slow but steady progress during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. The cultural dynamic that progressive muckrakers rode to prominence, outrage over the latest sensational scandal, remains in place. But democracy requires more than fury. Single-issue voters’ passions drive both parties into cul de sacs, where gestures stand in for problem solving, dogmatism replaces inquiry, and all-or-nothing purity tests obstruct compromises and experimentation. Does the quest for justice, which gave rise to the social gospel, progressive taxation, the minimum wage, economic regulation, the long civil rights movement, the struggle to redefine women’s roles, and environmentalism, remain sufficiently strong to propel the nation toward a renewed commitment to equality and inclusion? Joseph R. Biden’s election is surely a relief after four excruciating years of Donald Trump. Yet Democrats’ disappointing losses in congressional and state elections, coupled with the defeat of many progressive ballot measures from coast to coast, shows the depth of partisan polarization. Conservative Americans’ longstanding commitments to traditional values such as rootedness, stability, hard work, and desert, as well as the persistence of more problematic inclinations toward atomistic individualism and hierarchies of race, ethnicity, and gender, will continue to obstruct a twenty-first century progressive “upswing.” The struggle must continue.

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