

Voting Alone

The national bard of community long warned about what isolation would do to us. Now our democracy is in the midst of an experiment no one asked for.



By Marc Tracy

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From his back deck in southwestern New Hampshire, Robert D. Putnam sees his yard slope past a few hardwood trees and an overturned canoe down to a pond, beyond which looms Mount Monadnock, one of Henry David Thoreau's favorite peaks to hike.

What he does not see, here or anywhere else, are many other people.

"We see, on average, one human being every week up here," said Mr. Putnam, referring to himself and his wife, Rosemary.

There is poetic injustice in Mr. Putnam's forced solitude, for he is something like the national bard of community. In 2000, he published "Bowling Alone," which documented Americans' dwindling social engagement (including their declining participation in bowling leagues), and for decades the Harvard University professor has studied the costs of isolation: the loneliness, the diminished trust, the dissolution of "social capital" — those people-to-people connections that grease the wheels of civic life.

Six months into the coronavirus, most Americans are in the same boat as Mr. Putnam, 79, their entire worlds shrunk into neighborhoods, households, computer screens. Yet they are also preparing to undertake that most communal of obligations, a national election, during an extraordinarily polarizing presidency that has only grown more so during a pandemic that has killed nearly 200,000 Americans and a widespread movement protesting police violence and systemic racism.

As there is no precedent for this state of affairs, Mr. Putnam, whose forthcoming book, "The Upswing," traces American individualism and its opposite, could only pose the all-important question. "If you're lonely and feel isolated," he said, "does that make you more likely not to engage with politics at all?"

While the logistical act of voting has been bent in the form of increased vote-by-mail, it is unknown how campaigns will execute their sprints to the finish line without large rallies and other typical tactics.

More profoundly, it is not clear how social distancing will affect voters' choices. Before the coronavirus, according to Mr. Putnam, even the most prolific online networker, with his four-hour-a-day Facebook habit, still likely had one foot in the physical world, where he discovered and tended to his relationships.

"Studies confirm that people tend to interact with the same individuals both offline and online," write Mr. Putnam and Jonah Hahn in a new "Bowling Alone" afterword. "Few Americans have an offline life and an entirely separate online life."



Whether and how the people closest to you vote plays a huge role in your own decisions. Lauren Justice for The New York Times

Conversations with nearly a dozen thinkers from the worlds of political science, political psychology, technology, organizing and campaigning suggest that we are ill-designed for the pandemic election. The internet, many said, is centrifugal, driving people away from each other and toward only close friends, immediate family and themselves — the opposite of the centripetal force that elections and their aftermaths demand, and that physical interactions often provide.

Yet these thinkers have not abandoned all hope. Like the pandemic itself, the next several weeks, they said, will constitute an acid test for a frightened and divided country.

“The virus turns on this,” said Mr. Putnam. “Are we a we, or are we an I?”

Decades of political science research instruct that whether and how the people closest to you vote plays a huge role in your own decisions.

“Anyone who survived junior high knows social pressure is real,” said Betsy Sinclair, a professor of political science at Washington University in St. Louis.

Spouses, parents and close friends — those with whom one enjoys “strong ties,” in the jargon — exert the most powerful pull on voters’ behavior. Ms. Sinclair pointed to a study based around the 2010 midterm elections that found most of a person’s Facebook friends had no impact on his voting behavior. Only his closest 10 friends, out of 150, did. In fact, he was only likely to be influenced by someone who had tagged him in a photo.

But the “weak ties” that connect people to co-workers, neighbors and friends of friends are like the vermouth in the Martini of social discourse. Because your closest friends and family probably have similar politics as you, more casual acquaintances are likelier to upend your assumptions. If people’s strong ties polarize them further, their weak ties undo some of that. Sever weak ties, as the pandemic partially has, and what is left is something more distilled and severe.

“If you’re a Democrat, you’re probably not going to talk to a lot of Republicans in your family or among your friends — there will probably be a lot of agreeing,” said Samara M. Klar, a professor at the University of Arizona School of Government and Public Policy.



Joseph R. Biden Jr., the Democratic presidential nominee, has conducted many events virtually since the virus struck. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

“But you are often subject to crosscutting pressures, as we call it, by surprise,” she continued. “You’re at the grocery store, your kids’ soccer games. These are important ways people are exposed to ideas with which they disagree.”

These past few months, Ms. Klar has found herself going out of her way to talk to passers-by as she walks her hound and her terrier in her Tucson, Ariz., neighborhood. But she knows that for most Americans, happenstance physical encounters have been crimped.

“I wish there were something good that could come of this pandemic, but I have not found anything,” Ms. Klar said.

In theory, the internet could step in and supply these spontaneous conversations. In practice, the internet does not always work that way, argued Mark Granovetter, a professor of sociology at Stanford University.

“Are people online more? Probably,” he said. “Spending more time interacting? Probably.

“Are they still consigned to echo chambers, or are they reaching out?” he asked. The answer is not easy to know.

For Mr. Putnam, the internet has been a salve. Rosemary Putnam stays in touch with her friends via Facebook and the Words with Friends game. In April, 25 members of the Putnam family gathered over Zoom for a Passover Seder.

But Mr. Putnam believes the internet can supplement, not replace, connections initiated and tended to “IRL — in real life,” as he put it.

There has been one arguable exception in this summer of social distancing: thousands of protesters galvanized by the police killings of Black people took to the streets of many cities.



President Trump has continued to hold larger, more traditional campaign events. Mask use is rare and social distancing non-existent. Anna Moneymaker for The New York Times



Much of the protests' power lay in their occupation of physical space — shutting down traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge, for example. This made them un-ignorable to observers they hoped to win to their side, said Aaron Schutz, a community studies professor at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

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“There is something about the ability to get masses of people together to make a statement that just can’t be done in the same way online,” he said.

By contrast, when Mr. Schutz volunteered last month as an American Civil Liberties Union legal observer of protests during the Democratic National Convention — or what was left of the D.N.C., after the pandemic had reduced the Milwaukee gathering to a small, pro forma ritual totally eclipsed by the eight-hour infomercial produced for television — “there were tumbleweeds,” he said. The pandemic had offed a once-promising opportunity for disruptive protest.

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Few have thought more about the implications of a life lived digitally than the thinker and author Jaron Lanier, who coined the term “virtual reality.” These days, from his home in Berkeley, Calif., Mr. Lanier frets about quarantine’s effect on discourse, even as he welcomes the proliferation of video chats, because they are things people plan online rather than passively accept.

As the homebound spend more time online, where algorithms prioritize giving us what we want, like so many hamster-food pellets, rather than responsibly reflecting reality, will the common ground necessary for meaningful debate persist?

“If everyone thinks the same thing, the conversations aren’t substantial, and if they think completely different things, they aren’t, either,” Mr. Lanier said.

It is not just society that is built for person-to-person interactions, according to Mr. Lanier. People are, too. Humans subconsciously register interlocutors’ eye direction, head pose and posture when they face each other in the flesh. Being unable to do it inhibits communication.

Mr. Lanier helped develop the new “Together mode” of Microsoft Teams, the videoconferencing service. Its interface places all members of a video chat in a common audience. Participants see themselves seated among everyone else and they detect nonverbal cues, and, Mr. Lanier said, their primate brains’ panic responses are not activated.

“With everyone being really stressed out,” he said, “it feeds into the fear and aggression, the fight-or-flight-driven style, that both the algorithms and propaganda gravitate towards.”

A small group of protesters outside of the Wisconsin Center, which hosted the largely virtual Democratic National Convention last month. Gabriela Bhaskar for The New York Times

Still, the show must go on. Despite the pandemic and the president’s own stated wishes, the election will culminate on Nov. 3.

David Kochel, a veteran Republican operative, said a client, Senator Joni Ernst, is going ahead with a traditional tour of all 99 Iowa counties as she seeks re-election in one of this fall's more competitive races. She is adding extra conference calls, tele-town halls, Zoom meetings.

"Candidates who have a natural ability to communicate via social media probably benefit," he said. "The lack of in-person campaigning probably makes financial resources more important, because more of the messaging work has to be done via paid media."

Jorge Gonzalez, an organizer at the Environmental Health Coalition, based in the San Diego area, is targeting low-propensity voters. But the coronavirus foreclosed what he knows is the most effective tactic, which is showing up at front doors and speaking face-to-face.

Mr. Gonzalez is still sending canvassers to front doors. But they are leaving literature (in English, Spanish and Vietnamese) designed by local graphic artists. They are calling voters and, along with asking them to pledge to vote, offering periodic texts with logistical voting information.

Mr. Gonzalez's initiative, United to Vote, is encouraging vote-by-mail. "It's really about making it easy for folks who are just doing it for the first time," he said.

But will they choose to vote? Tasha S. Philpot, a professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin, said that much depends on whether potential voters, living in a crisis, feel their votes can lead to change.

"One of the things we talk about in public opinion is this sense of efficacy," Ms. Philpot said. "The idea that you can make a difference fuels your willingness to try to make a difference."

Of course, the same thing that can spur one to action can drain one's desire to act. Ms. Philpot has experienced this dichotomy in her own life. The killing of George Floyd in May, coming during a time she had largely spent isolated at home, "wore on my psyche," she said. But her voice perked up when describing the Black Lives Matter video her 11-year-old daughter, Natalie, made over the summer.

"A lot of Black politics is fueled by wanting to dismantle oppression, racism and discrimination," said Ms. Philpot, an editor of the book "African-American Political Psychology." "It's almost as if that anger fuels activism."

It is unknown how campaigns will execute their sprints to the finish line without large rallies and other typical tactics. Mark Makela for The New York Times

Similarly, the volume of emails between Mr. Putnam and a friend of his has increased during the pandemic. The two have an agreement: If one determines a political candidate is worthy of a donation, the other will contribute as well.

“There’s reciprocity,” Mr. Putnam said. “But I’m not doing it face-to-face. I’m doing it through the medium of the internet.”

Ms. Sinclair, of Washington University, was prompted by her interest in social contexts to develop an app, Magnify, that facilitates collective action around governmental issues.

A Magnify user can post a civic complaint — say, a photo of a pothole — and share it with her neighbors, who can publicly agree on the app to write letters to their city councilperson. (Peer pressure strikes again.) So far in her town of Clayton, Mo., Ms. Sinclair said, Magnify users have persuaded a pizzeria to install a changing table in its men’s room and the authorities to save a tree at a park and place a digital speed sign at a crosswalk.

“If you can get a small group, you are much more likely to be heard, and these ties build social capital — you’re not bowling alone anymore,” she said.

She was suggesting that the way out — of the pandemic, of the polarization, of everything — could be a physical path paved by a digital one, proceeding one crosswalk at a time.

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