# Unit 1: FOUNDATIONS

Yesterday's Framer Meets Today's Political Scientist

## Elbridge Gerry meets Robert Putnam to discuss Federalist 51

## Elbridge Gerry

Elbridge Gerry, born in Massachusetts, was raised in a wealthy and politically active merchant family. His political activities during the American Revolution elevated his status as one of our Founding Fathers. In addition to being an original signer of the Declaration of independence, Gerry served in numerous Continental Congresses and provided his expertise in shipping and finance to help win American independence. But he made few friends in the process. Gerry was often suspicious of motives and obsessively fearful of tyranny. While serving as a delegate from Massachusetts at the constitutional convention in Philadelphia in 1787, Gerry often was the most vocal critic. He worried that the new constitution would fail due to: no clear Bill of Rights; little guarantee of maintaining a true republican government; inadequate representation; ambiguous legislative powers; and an oppressive judiciary.

In the end, Gerry could not place his name on the new constitution. His objections were too many, his fears too real. His observations as relevant today, as they were back in 1787:

"…We were then told by him, in all the soft language of insinuation, that no form of government of human construction can be perfect—that we had nothing to fear— that we had no reason to complain—that we had only to acquiesce in their illegal claims, and to submit to the requisitions of parliament, and doubtless the lenient hand of government would redress all grievances, and remove the oppressions of the people:—Yet we soon saw armies of mercenaries encamped on our plains—our commerce ruined —our harbors blockaded—and our cities burnt. It may be replied, that this was in consequence of an obstinate defense of our privileges; this may be true, and when the "*ultima ratio*" is called to aid, the weakest must fall. But let the best-informed historian produce an instance, when bodies of men were entrusted with power, and the proper checks relinquished, if they were ever found destitute of ingenuity sufficient to furnish pretenses to abuse it. And the people at large are already sensible, that the liberties which America has claimed, which reason has justified, and which have been so gloriously defended by the sword of the brave, are not about to fall before the tyranny of foreign conquest; it is native usurpation that is shaking the foundations of peace, and spreading the sable curtain of despotism over the United States. The banners of freedom were erected in the wilds of America by our ancestors, while the wolf prowled for his prey on the one hand, and more savage man on the other; they have been since rescued from the invading hand of foreign power, by the valor and blood of their posterity; and there was reason to hope they would continue for ages to illumine a

quarter of the globe, by nature kindly separated from the proud monarchies of Europe, and the infernal darkness of Asiatic slavery.

And it is to be feared, we shall soon see this country rushing into the extremes of confusion and violence, in consequence of the proceedings of a set of gentlemen, who, disregarding the purposes of their appointment, have assumed powers unauthorized by any commission, have unnecessarily rejected the consideration of the United States, and annihilated the sovereignty and independence of the individual governments. The causes which have inspired a few men, assembled for very different purposes, with such a degree of temerity as to break with a single stroke the union of America, and disseminate the seeds of discord through the land, may be easily investigated, when we survey the partisans of monarchy in the State Conventions, urging the adoption of a mode of government that militates with the former professions and exertions of this country, and with all ideas of republicanism, and the equal rights of men.

Passion, prejudice, and error are characteristics of human nature; and as it cannot be accounted for on any principles of philosophy, religion, or good policy, to these shades in the human character must be attributed the mad zeal of some to precipitate to a blind adoption of the measures of the late federal convention, without giving opportunity for better information to those who are misled by influence or ignorance into erroneous opinions. Literary talents may be prostituted, and the powers of genius debased to subserve the purposes of ambition or avarice; but the feelings of the heart will dictate the language of truth, and the simplicity of her accents will proclaim the infamy of those who betray the rights of the people, under the specious and popular pretense of *justice, consolidation*, and *dignity*…"

Excerpted from Elbridge Gerry, "Observations on the New Constitution, and on the Federal and State Conventions. By a Columbian Patriot."

## Robert Putnam

A National Humanities Medal award winner, Robert Putnam is one of the most cited political scientists in our day. He currently serves as the Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Putnam's career research has focused on declining social capital, conflict theory and the perils of economic inequality.

In "**Bowling Alone**" Putnam identified social capital, the norms and networks of civic engagement, as imperative to a healthy democracy.

Putnam's primary objective can be best summarized in his own words:

When Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, it was the Americans' propensity for civic association that most impressed him as the key to their unprecedented ability to make democracy work. "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition," he observed, "are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types--religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute…Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America."

Recently, American social scientists of a neo-Tocquevillean bent have unearthed a wide range of empirical evidence that the quality of public life and the performance of social institutions (and not only in America) are indeed powerfully influenced by norms and networks of civic engagement. Researchers in such fields as education, urban poverty, unemployment, the control of crime and drug abuse, and even health have discovered that successful outcomes are more likely in civically engaged communities. Similarly, research on the varying economic attainments of different ethnic groups in the United States has demonstrated the importance of social bonds within each group. These results are consistent with research in a wide range of settings that demonstrates the vital importance of social networks for job placement and many other economic outcomes.

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As we have seen, something has happened in America in the last two or three decades to diminish civic engagement and social connectedness. What could that "something" be?

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The most whimsical yet discomfiting bit of evidence of social disengagement in contemporary America that I have discovered is this: more Americans are bowling today than ever before, but bowling in organized leagues has plummeted in the last decade or so. Between 1980 and 1993 the total number of bowlers in America increased by 10 percent, while league bowling decreased by 40 percent. (Lest this be thought a wholly trivial example, I should note that nearly 80 million Americans went bowling at least once during 1993, nearly a third more than voted in the 1994 congressional elections and roughly the same number as claim to attend church regularly. Even after the 1980s' plunge in league bowling, nearly percent of American adults regularly bowl in leagues.) The rise of solo bowling threatens the livelihood of bowling-lane proprietors because those who bowl as members of leagues consume three times as much beer and pizza as solo bowlers, and the money in bowling is in the beer and pizza, not the balls and shoes. The broader social significance, however, lies in the social interaction and even occasionally civic conversations over beer and pizza that solo bowlers forgo. Whether or not bowling beats balloting in the eyes of most Americans, bowling teams illustrate yet another vanishing form of social capital.

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Another set of important issues involves macro-sociological crosscurrents that might intersect with the trends described here. What will be the impact, for example, of electronic networks on social capital? My hunch is that meeting in an electronic forum is not the equivalent of meeting in a bowling alley--or even in a saloon--but hard empirical research is needed. What about the development of social capital in the workplace?

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Finally, and perhaps most urgently, we need to explore creatively how public policy impinges on (or might impinge on) social-capital formation. In some well-known instances, public policy has destroyed highly effective social networks and norms. American slum-clearance policy of the 1950s and 1960s, for example, renovated physical capital, but at a very high cost to existing social capital. The consolidation of country post offices and small school districts has promised administrative and financial efficiencies, but full-cost accounting for the effects of these policies on social capital might produce a more negative verdict. On the other hand, such past initiatives as the county agricultural-agent system, community colleges, and tax deductions for charitable contributions illustrate that government can encourage social-capital formation. Even a recent proposal in San Luis Obispo, California, to require that all new houses have front porches illustrates the power of government to influence where and how networks are formed.

The concept of "civil society" has played a central role in the recent global debate about the preconditions for democracy and democratization. In the newer democracies this phrase has properly focused attention on the need to foster a vibrant civic life in soils traditionally inhospitable to self-government. In the established democracies, ironically, growing numbers of citizens are questioning the effectiveness of their public institutions at the very moment when liberal democracy has swept the battlefield, both ideologically and geopolitically. In America, at least, there is reason to suspect that this democratic disarray may be linked to a broad and continuing erosion of civic engagement that began a quarter-century ago. High on our scholarly agenda should be the question of whether a comparable erosion of social capital may be under way in other advanced democracies, perhaps in different institutional and behavioral guises. High on America's agenda should be the question of how to reverse these adverse trends in social connectedness, thus restoring civic engagement and civic trust.

Excerpted from Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” *Journal of Democracy, 1995*

In “**Diversity and Community**” Putnam studied the implications of an increasingly diverse population on the development of positive social capital.

Putnam’s primary objective can be best summarized in his own words:

“Ethnic diversity is increasing in most advanced countries, driven mostly by sharp increases in immigration. In the long run immigration and diversity are likely to have important cultural, economic, fiscal, and developmental benefits. In the short run, however, immigration and ethnic diversity tend to reduce social solidarity and social capital. New evidence from the US suggests that in ethnically diverse neighborhoods residents of all races tend to ‘hunker down’. Trust (even of one’s own race) is lower, altruism and community cooperation rarer, friends fewer. In the long run, however, successful immigrant societies have overcome such fragmentation by creating new, cross-cutting forms of social solidarity and more encompassing identities. Illustrations of becoming comfortable with diversity are drawn from the US military, religious institutions, and earlier waves of American immigration.”

Furthermore, Putnam adds:

**[A “lean” definition of social capital]**: social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness. The core insight of this approach is extremely simple: like tools (physical capital) and training (human capital), social networks have value. Networks have value, first, to people who are in the networks. For example, economic sociologists have shown repeatedly that labor markets are thoroughly permeated by networks so that most of us are as likely to get our jobs through whom we know as through what we know. Indeed, it has been shown that our lifetime income is powerfully affected by the quality of our networks…

Social capital comes in many forms, not all fungible. Not all networks have exactly the same effects: friends may improve health, whereas civic groups strengthen democracy…Nevertheless, much evidence suggests that where levels of social capital are higher, children grow up healthier, safer and better educated, people live longer, happier lives, and democracy and the economy work better. So, it seems worthwhile to explore the implications of immigration and ethnic diversity for social capital.

I wish to make three broad points:

- Ethnic diversity will increase substantially in virtually all modern societies over the next several decades, in part because of immigration. Increased immigration and diversity are not only inevitable, but over the long run they are also desirable. Ethnic diversity is, on balance, an important social asset, as the history of my own country demonstrates.

- In the short to medium run, however, immigration and ethnic diversity challenge social solidarity and inhibit social capital. In support of this provocative claim I wish to adduce some new evidence, drawn primarily from the United States. In order to elaborate on the details of this new evidence, this portion of my article is longer and more technical than my discussion of the other two core claims, but all three are equally important.

- In the medium to long run, on the other hand, successful immigrant societies create new forms of social solidarity and dampen the negative effects of diversity by constructing new, more encompassing identities.

Thus, the central challenge for modern, diversifying societies is to create a new, broader sense of 'we'.

Excerpt: Putnam, Robert. "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century," *The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture.*

## Federalist 51

*In Federalist #51 Madison again proves to be the guiding light ready and willing to answer the opposition with unyielding wit. Federalist #51 was not just for the state of New York as they contemplated ratifying the new constitution. It continues to speak to us today. This essay one of Madison's most quoted. "If men were angels," Madison wrote, "no government would be necessary." Our constitution was not only a charter for a new government but an accurate reflection of nature itself. Years later Lord Acton would famously record that "all power corrupts." Our constitution continues to be a living testament to that natural tendency. Power here, at every turn, is diluted, checked and balanced against it. Madison also addressed the possibility of an oppressive class of people. Government is not the only possible villain. Segments of the population can tyrannize too. One part of society must be able to guard itself from another. Pluralism is the remedy. The best means to prevent this tyranny of the majority is to foster an independent will and welcome diversity. A world of difference does not just divide us but it actually strengthens our compact. The Federalist Papers not only helped to convince a young nation that their new constitution was a legitimate answer to their problems but a living source that informs us today about ourselves.*

**Lunch at Fanera**

**1**
**Gerry:** I find this menu an example of the type of tyranny I fought against.

**Putnam:** I suppose you find too much power in the hands of elitist chefs, who limit our options? But don't we have other restaurants to choose from? Checking this menu?

**2**
**Gerry:** MMM. Clearly, we are not working with angels, here. Our charter hoped to check and balance power at every level. I thought it was inadequate, and didn't sign the presumptuous letter.

**Putnam:** Words are always inadequate. I research groups, and social capital. Without associations of citizens our democracy is ineffective.

**3**

**Gerry:** But what if one association of elites gains too much power…like the men who wrote or constitution?

**Putnam:** Trust is the important appetizer for this meal. Without trust our subgroups refuse to cooperate and collaborate. They grow suspicious; and insulate from other groups.

**4**
**Gerry:** So, checks and balances are not enough? A Bill of Rights just words?

**Putnam:** Maybe you go too far here. But I will defend my research that suggests a healthy democracy requires healthy civic associations where citizens learn to trust each other.

**5**
**Gerry:** Sounds to me that you are not for diluting political power but for assuring that power is exercised better. That competing healthy associations spur better government.

**Putnam:** You guys wrote E Pluribus Unum. "From many, one." The consensus of good government can be realized, but only if we work together. And that requires practice.

**6**
**Gerry:** Can that be done in a diverse society?

**Putnam:** The central challenge for modern, diversifying societies is to create a new, broader sense of 'we'. This menu must include social connectedness, civic engagement and civic trust.

**7**
**Gerry:** Thoroughly enjoyed this tasty meal today. Next time, hold the pickle.

**Putnam:** Me? I always relish such conversations.