

# Social Isolation is Dangerous to Democracy

How many times have you attended a city council meeting? A school board meeting? Participated in a regional commission to address a social problem? Run for public office? Some of us are politically engaged. But most of us are not. Is a vibrant public life really worth living?

The majority of Americans prioritize the obligations and joys of a fulfilling private life (family, friends and work) over the civic duties and opportunities of a vibrant public life. According to a report by [Harvard University's Center for Research on Civic Learning & Engagement](#), less than half of young people vote, few can answer basic questions about their government and even fewer have engaged in political action beyond signing an online petition or posting a political comment on a social media site.

In the book [Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community](#), political scientist Robert Putnam of Harvard revealed that Americans are not joining civic groups and participating in community activities at the rate they were 50 years ago. He invites his readers to imagine the average citizen "bowling alone"—a metaphor for the social isolation that has descended upon American society. Putnam, a prescient commentator, warned that "[p]eople divorced from community, occupation, and association are first and foremost among the supporters of extremism."

If you're still not swayed by Putnam's argument, then what would convince you to live a more vibrant public life? The political theorist [Hannah Arendt \(1906-1975\)](#) also offered persuasive reasons for becoming more socially and politically engaged. She celebrated the ancient Greek ideal of active citizenship, whereby members of the *polis* (city-state in

Greek) regularly partake in political action and reclaim those traditional values and communal standards that tie them to their shared past (*ethos* or way of life in Greek).

In her book [\*The Human Condition\*](#), Arendt argued against the social isolation, political apathy and selfish consumerism that have become synonymous with modern life. Instead, she recommended that we embrace the “common world,” the “public realm” and “public life” as the ancient Greeks did before us:

*“The reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life, compared to which the richest and most satisfying family life can offer only the prolongation or multiplication of one’s position with its attending aspects and perspectives.”*

Arendt’s point is that enlarging one’s perspective on life means engaging in public sphere—deliberation, action and shared inquiry—as well as the private sphere—friendship, work and family time.

We live in a modern age where political participation is minimal and, for some, non-existent. What is the solution to the problem of social isolation or, as Putnam calls it, bowling alone? Is there one?

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