These two articles capture one of the major recent controversies within political science. Robert Putnam, a professor at Harvard, published a book in 2000 called *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. This book received wide popular and professional acclaim, touching on a theme that resonated intuitively with a number of academics and non-academics: why have bonds of social trust in America declined? His book is a very long and an interesting read. I am having you read a much shorter article that summarizes the main points of his argument in the book.

The excerpts from the Steven Durlauf article are a critique of Putnam’s book. Although Putnam’s book received much popular attention and sparked lots of new research in political science, it also received quite a bit of criticism. Durlauf is an economist at the Univ. of Wisconsin in Madison who wrote a cogent critique of the book. He uses a lot of economic jargon throughout his article, so I tried to excerpt the pieces that were the most accessible.

There are two main goals you should have in reading these articles:

1. **Learn to tell an empirical story:** One of the things that Putnam does quite well in his article is tell an interesting and persuasive story. We’ve all heard and read good stories and many of us probably know some very good storytellers. But writing a good story—especially one that uses empirical data—is very difficult. Putnam does a nice job of setting up his study like a mystery: he has a puzzle that he is trying to solve, and just like a detective, he systematically goes through each potential culprit to find clues. As you read his article, pay particular attention to the following:
   a. How he blends elements of research design that we discussed in class—his question, his theory, testable hypotheses, empirical data—into a story. This will be your task when you write your research papers at the end of the semester. Pay attention to how Putnam does it.
   b. The logic behind his use of evidence: Putnam is very transparent about what his expectations for the data are, and why each piece of empirical evidence supports or disproves his point. Pay attention to the logic.

2. **Begin to see the boundaries of what you can and cannot do as you interpret data:** Durlauf stridently criticizes Putnam for his use of information. Everything that we do in this class basically falls into the category of learning to find, use, and interpret information well. We have been focusing on quantitative information, but the principles apply to all kinds of information. Durlauf takes Putnam to task for his misuse of information in a number of different ways. Many of his critiques are about the *inferences* Putnam makes from the data he has. Many people think inference is nothing more than seeing if something is statistically significant. That is only part of it. Inference is a tricky thing to learn, and reading lots and lots of examples is the best way to see the fuzzy boundaries that define what you can and cannot do.

---
