Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy

Robert Putnam, with Robert Leonardi and Rafaella Y. Nanetti

Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam is well known for his contention, first presented in an article entitled “Bowling Alone,” that civic engagement in contemporary America is in decline. The intellectual foundation for his argument was this book, Making Democracy Work, based on research done by Putnam and his associates, not in the United States but in Italy, contrasting the social and political structures of the country’s northern and southern regions. An examination of the mechanics of successful democracy, the book has become in the twelve years since its publication a contemporary classic of political science.

Putnam argued that northern Italy had flourishing political institutions because of the complex web of informal and formal organizations that brought people together, fostered communications, and increased involvement in the community. He contrasted this with the comparative paucity of such social organizations in southern Italy, which had much weaker political institutions. Economic development did not explain the strength of political institutions; rather, it was the quality of civic life—voter turnout, newspaper readership, and membership in associations ranging from sports clubs to choral societies—that brought about the strength and efficacy of political institutions.

The book was hailed in the New York Times Book Review as a “rare classic in political science,” and in the Nation as the modern successor to Tocqueville’s classic Democracy in America. The Economist described it as a “great work of social science, worthy to rank alongside de Tocqueville, Pareto, and Weber.”
Making Democracy Work is such a book, one that will no doubt become a classic in the social science literature and should be read by all economists. In 1970, fifteen new regional governments were created in Italy and were given essentially the same powers and responsibilities.[1] By the 1990s these governments were spending nearly a tenth of Italy’s GDP, so that they were quite powerful structures. This creation of nearly identical governments offered Putnam the exceedingly rare opportunity to study something that resembles a controlled experiment in the natural sciences. What Putnam found was that the successful governments were located in areas where he also found a high degree of “civic tradition.” Why do some democratic governments succeed and others fail? In a book that has received attention from policymakers and civic activists in America and around the world, their focus is on a unique experiment begun in 1970 when Italy created new governments for each of its regions. After spending two decades analyzing the efficacy of these governments in such fields as agriculture, housing, and health services, they reveal patterns of associationism, trust, and cooperation that facilitate good governance and economic prosperity.