



## The Upswing

How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again

Robert Putnam | From THE UPSWING: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again by Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett. Copyright © 2020 by Robert D. Putnam. Reprinted by permission of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

With exhaustive data, illustrative charts and fascinating insight into America's shifting popular attitudes, Robert Putnam – a sociologist and the author of the seminal social analysis, *Bowling Alone* – shows that US society, culture, politics and economics followed a remarkably similar arc over the past 125 years or so. From the extreme inequalities and divisiveness of the Gilded Age to the equalizing reforms of the Progressive Era and back again, Putnam – writing with social entrepreneur Shaylyn Romney Garrett – reminds Americans of the times when their country works best. It happens when society lifts all boats and balances between its core ideals of rugged individualism and opportunity for all.

### Take-Aways

- The United States has lost its enviable balance between self-interest and concern for others.
- America tends to swing from divided to united to divided again.
- For US democracy to survive, the pendulum must swing back toward equality, trust and collaboration.
- Political polarization began its resurgence in the early 1960s.
- To achieve a balanced society, Americans must renew their commitment to community.
- Reversing the long trend to individualism requires understanding how that trend began in the Progressive Era.
- The public drives social change – not politicians, business leaders or interest groups.

## Summary

### **The United States has lost its enviable balance between self-interest and concern for others.**

When French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the 1830s, he witnessed a new nation that managed to balance respect for the individual with strong community values. Tocqueville admired Americans' commitment to self-reliance without selfishness – their understanding that all boats rise together. He called it “self-interest, rightly understood.”

*Individualism “rightly understood” is perfectly compatible with community and equality.*

If Tocqueville arrived in America today, he would see a more prosperous, better educated nation where even the poor live better than they did in the 1830s. But he also would bemoan America's “rigged system”: a society rife with inequality and inequities, that stacks the odds against those without accumulated wealth. He would witness a near-plutocracy that secures the fortunes of those at the very top, regardless of their merit, effort or talents. He would mourn for a nation in which corporations and their profits matter more than the future of the country, a country that literally burns as it grows warmer and less hospitable to life.

### **America tends to swing from divided to united to divided again.**

Today, powerful people seek to divide Americans by restricting the votes of those who oppose them and stoking a divisive mind-set. Citizens' faith in the media has diminished. Divisiveness has consequences: Quality of life and even life expectancy have fallen for many young Americans.

In a divided nation, the only thing a lot of people agree on is that “this is the worst of times.” But it isn't. America's Gilded Age in the late 1800s fits the description equally well. From the 1870s through the first years of the 1900s, America grew wealthier, but politics were combative and partisan. Selfishness reigned, and though the rich got richer, the poor grew poorer.

*“In the 1890s hard times had produced intense party polarization, but in the 1930s even harder times coincided with an almost unprecedented degree of cross-party collaboration.”*

Then it changed. For the next 60 years or so, a Progressive Era reigned, in which communitarian values gained continuous steam alongside compromises in politics and greater economic, gender and racial equality. By the 1950s and early 1960s America had reached an apex in inclusivity and prosperity.

However, given enduring intolerance, anticommunist fervor and the Korean War, the 1950s and early 1960s were not utopian for everyone. The progressives who drove the nation from selfishness to inclusiveness largely left nonwhites and other marginalized Americans behind. These and other

mistakes left the door open to reversals. By the mid-1960s, cracks began to appear, manifested in race riots, the women's movement, Watergate and other crises. By the 1970s, America started descending once again into selfishness, separateness and economic stagnation.

**For US democracy to survive, the pendulum must begin its swing back toward equality, trust and collaboration.**

The positive lessons of the Progressive Era offer a broad guide to change. Unlike a pendulum, though, the arc does not respond to the forces of physics. Correcting it will require a massive, bottom-up effort, just as it did a century ago.

*“On average, by many important measures, life in America has gotten better and better for more than a century.”*

Americans' ascent in wealth, education and health has grown continuously over the past century and a half (except during the Great Depression). Unfortunately, distribution of these gains has, at times, proven grossly unequal. While free public schools, better medicine and improvements in technology lifted all boats, most gains went to the rich. The top 1% doubled its share of national wealth from 1870 to 1912, from 10% to 20%. It lost the same share from 1913 to 1976, from 20% back to 10%, but gained it all back by 2014.

The plot of a graph showing the share of national income that went to the 1% on the vertical axis (from 25% on the bottom to 5% on the top) and the years 1900 to 2020 on the horizontal axis forms an inverted U-shape. In 1910, the rich attracted about 20% of national income. From there, the line on the chart goes steadily up, peaking in the mid-1970s at about 10% of national income going to the rich. Then the line begins its abrupt descent, returning to about 20% by 2015.

When you plot national wealth on the same chart, a similar inverted U-shape appears. This time, the share of the 1% ebbs between 1910 when it stood at more than 45% to about 1980, when it falls to 25%. From there, the share of national wealth that goes to the rich increases sharply, to about 40% in 2015. Today, the ultra-rich – the top 0.1% – own about 20% of national wealth, roughly the same as at the apex of the Gilded Age. Since about 1970, the gains in equality earned during the Progressive Era have evaporated. Indeed, for the first time, the average American youth faces dimmer prospects than his or her parents did.

*“Children's prospects of earning more than their parents have fallen from 90% to 50% over the past half century.”*

The Progressives' gains included enormous advances in wealth and income distribution, starting during the period of the New Deal in the 1930s and 1940s, the rise of worker power through unions, higher minimum wages, and greater public spending on poorer Americans. General selflessness and a community-based concern for others drove this long altruistic wave.

## **Political polarization began its resurgence in the early 1960s.**

Even in politics, Republicans and Democrats were increasingly centrist in the mid-20th century. As often as not, they voted across party lines. About 40% to 60% of Republican voters approved of Democratic presidents and vice versa. Today, cross-party presidential approval has dropped to less than 10%.

Political divisiveness resurfaced in the early 1960s when the Republican Party nominated the very conservative Barry Goldwater for president. Though the centrist Democrat, Lyndon Johnson, defeated him handily, attitudes had begun to shift. People wanted real choice between the parties. As the decade progressed, differences over the size of government, abortion, the environment, education and race relations – with Republicans taking increasingly right-leaning positions – opened the divisions wider.

*“American voters increasingly see supporters of the other party as extreme ideologically and flawed personally.”*

Bipartisanship increasingly faded from American politics over the decades since 1970, as the Republican Party grew steadily more conservative. Voters became more entrenched – feeling more strongly that the candidate from the opposing party and his or her supporters possessed deep character flaws. People are much less likely to marry across political lines today than they were in 1960. This degree of polarization leads to political gridlock, and sharply lower confidence in Congress and in the government as a whole. This trend either modulates or ends with the collapse of democracy.

## **To achieve a balanced society, Americans must renew their commitment to community.**

Like the upswing and then decline of political compromise and bipartisanship, Americans' interest and participation in their communities rose steeply from about 1912 through 1960 and declined precipitously through 2016. In 1975, the average American adult attended 12 club meetings each year. By 2005, that number had fallen to four meetings. In 1890, only about 45% of Americans belonged to a church. By 1965, this had soared to more than 80%, with about half attending regularly. By 2018, only 50% claimed church affiliation, and only one-third attended regularly.

Even unions, which did so much to improve conditions for workers from the early 1900s through mid-century, follow the same curve. Union membership accelerated through 1960, when a full third of American workers belonged. By 2018, this number had fallen to 13%. Likewise, marriages and family formation, which grew from 1900 to 1960, have dropped steeply since. In 1960, 80% of 30-44 years-olds were married; today, that number has fallen to about 45%.

*“American history and myth have always contained elements of both individual and community – the cowboy and the wagon train.”*

The rise and fall of political cooperation, community participation and marriage match the ascendance and then decline of social trust and solidarity over precisely the same period. This suggests an important consequence of a society and culture that has moved from “I to we,” and back to “I” – from individualism to community and back again – during the roughly 100 years between 1912 and the present day.

### **Reversing the long trend to individualism requires understanding how that trend began in the Progressive Era.**

In part, culture change and preference explain both the upswing toward communitarianism and the downswing toward individualism. As Tocqueville observed, the rugged individual and the communitarian exist in equal measure in American myth and culture. Beginning in the 1950s, as the momentum away from individualism was in full force, signs of cultural change had already appeared in film, books and music. From wildly popular works like *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* to the film *Rebel Without a Cause* in the 1950s, the popular mood was already turning.

Multiple markers of culture change from the 1950s through the 1970s reveal the shift from communitarianism to self-admiration and self-actualization, including the use of pronouns such as “I” and “we.” Using n-gram, a research tool that measures the use of words across literature and the media over time, the ratio of “we” to “I” ascended from a low in about 1900 to a peak in about 1964, only to fall well below the 1900 mark by 2010. Tellingly, the “I-we-I curve” captures the entire series of social curves discussed above. It exemplifies the cultural shift from individualism to communitarianism and back to individualism.

*“Any attempt to create an American ‘we’ that is not fully inclusive, fully egalitarian or genuinely accommodating of difference will sow the seeds of its own undoing.”*

These general trends disguise vast differences in experience depending on race. Gains that Black Americans made during the past 100 years or so – in health, education, political rights and economics – came mainly between about 1910 and 1970, mirroring the “I-we-I” curve. To be sure, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s led to improvements in these categories, but the improvements were marginal compared to earlier gains. Unfortunately, those gains led to a diminution of white support. Following the “I-we-I” curve almost to a tee, Americans began to “take their foot off the gas” when it came to equality.

*“We must undertake a re-evaluation of our shared values – asking ourselves what personal privileges and rights we might be willing to lay aside in service of the common good, and what role we will play in the shared project of shaping our nation’s future.”*

An inverted U – with the year 1900 at the bottom left leg, 1960 in the middle at the peak, and about 2015 at the end of the curve on the bottom right – very closely captures the economic, political, social and cultural trends of that roughly 125-year period. The ends of the curve – 1910 and 2015 – represent “inequality, polarization, social disarray and cultural self-centeredness.” These are the “I’s” in the “I-we-I” curve. Again, the American ethos values both self-reliance, the “I”, and helping thy neighbor, the “we.”

### **The public drives social change – not politicians, business leaders or interest groups.**

Popular distaste for the extremes of the Gilded Age gained steam through the early 1900s until a tipping point occurred, ushering in a mass “moral awakening.” This bottoms-up progressive movement generated political champions, including Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, JFK and even Republican presidents, including Theodore Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover and Dwight Eisenhower.

*“For solutions to be long-lasting and to hold widespread appeal, they must respect the full range of American ideals.”*

Similarly, in the 1960s, shifting attitudes changed the culture, a change reflected only later across society and politics. A groundswell of people drove the change, not politicians, business leaders or interest groups.

The American people reversed the excesses of individualism in the first half of the 20th century; as happened then, the people of the United States must now endeavor again to swing society back toward social justice, political collaboration, equality and sustainable economic prosperity. Though the pendulum now lies at the same extremes as during the Gilded Age, it won’t reverse until another bottom-up moral revolution occurs, one powerful and resilient enough to replace mutually reinforcing problems with mutually reinforcing solutions.

If America is to find a better balance between its ideals of rugged individualism and concern for others, it must not allow the pendulum to swing too fast and too far toward communitarianism. More importantly, for America to achieve a sustainable balance between “I” and “we,” the “we” must include everyone.

### **About the Author**

Political scientist **Robert D. Putnam**, a professor at Harvard University, earned the National Humanities Medal in 2012. He is the author of the seminal social study, *Bowling Alone*, and was one of the influential modern philosophers featured in BBC radio’s series, *Morality in the 21st Century*, moderated by the late Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.