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.”
In northern Italy, where citizens participate actively in sports clubs, literary guilds, service groups and choral societies, regional governments are "efficient in their internal operation, creative in their policy initiatives and effective in implementing those initiatives 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. 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." A remarkable study of civic traditions.” — Steven Lukes, The Times Literary Supplement.

"It is rare that one comes across a classic in political science, yet in Robert D. Putnam's Making Democracy Work we undoubtedly have one. . . . Mr. Putnam's seminal work addresses in a rigorously empirical way the central question of democratic theory: What makes democratic institutions stable and effective? . . . One crucial implication of Making Democracy Work is that feeble and corrupt government, operating against the background of a weak and uncivic society, tends not to foster the creation of wealth, but rather to renew poverty. Overmighty government may stifle economic initiative. Collective life in the less civic regions of Italy has been blighted for a thousand years and more. Why? It can hardly be that the inhabitants prefer solitary and submissive squalor. Foreign oppression might once have been part of the explanation for their plight, but the regional experiment suggests that self-government is no panacea. One is tempted to ask in exasperation: Have people in these troubled regions learned nothing at all from their melancholy experience? Surely they must see that they would all be better off if only everyone would cooperate for the common good. — David Hume, eighteenth-century