

## POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

### *Time for a Third Party?*

“Alternative Politics” by Michael Kazin, in *Dissent* (Winter 1996), 521 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

From TR in 1912 to Ross Perot 80 years later, there have been quite a few serious independent presidential candidates. But there has not been a national third party with sustained appeal since the populist People’s Party of the 1890s. On the Left today, there are “three notable efforts” being made to change that—but Kazin, a historian at American University, argues for a different way “to get us moving forward again.”

One group with third-party aspirations is the Green Politics Network of radical environmentalists, feminists, and others. At a national conference in Washington last June, some 100 delegates representing 40 tiny organizations issued what Kazin says “amounts to a dream list of the post-’60s Left.” Currently, Green parties exist in 17 states but have access to the ballot in only five. Kazin doubts they will get much further. Nor is the outlook more promising for Labor Party Advocates, founded by a band of left-wing unionists in 1990. “Half a decade later, only three small international unions . . . and a scattering of citywide labor councils have signed on.” The party’s first national conference is scheduled for June.

That leaves the four-year-old New Party, “a racially diverse, feminist, reform-mind-

ed, Green and unapologetically pro-working-people and pro-consumer party,” according to its organizers, who claim a membership of 6,000. “Its strategy,” Kazin notes, “is to build up from strong local chapters that keep their electoral options open,” running its own candidates in some cases, urging votes on its line for major-party candidates in others. To date, the party has run or endorsed candidates in about 115 races, mostly at the city or county level, and 77 have won.

“For all its practical planning, the New Party shares a familiar and critical flaw with its utopian left cousins,” Kazin writes. “All believe they have a natural base among millions of nonvoters” who supposedly would flock “to a third party that spoke to their needs.” This is “an old tune,” Kazin points out, and, unfortunately, there is no evidence to support it.

He urges pragmatic leftists to look instead to an institution that they may too quickly write off: the Democratic Party. “As Ralph Reed and his [Christian Coalition] troops have mobilized within the GOP,” Kazin says, “left activists and intellectuals could work within the other major party to develop and gather strength for a politics of class justice, racial tolerance, and cultural decency.”

### *‘Bowling Alone’: Frame II*

“The Strange Disappearance of Civic America” by Robert D. Putnam, in *The American Prospect* (Winter 1996), P.O. Box 383080, Cambridge, Mass. 02238; “Tuning in, Tuning Out:

The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America” by Robert D. Putnam, in *PS: Political Science & Politics* (Dec. 1995), American Political Science Assn., 1527 New Hampshire Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

If more Americans these days are “bowling alone,” then what is the cause? In a much-discussed article last year [see “The Periodical Observer,” *WQ*, Spring ‘95, p. 137], Putnam, the director of Harvard’s Center for International Affairs, mustered mounds of data to argue that American civil society has dangerously decayed. He captured the trend in one powerful image: even as that all-American communal institution, the bowling league, has been fast declining, Americans are bowling more than ever

before—alone.

“Americans today are significantly less engaged with their communities than was true a generation ago,” he maintains. There have been major declines in membership in groups such as the PTA and in “social trust” (as measured by poll respondents who agree that “most people can be trusted”). This civic decay has occurred despite a massive rise in educational levels; in general, “well-educated people are much more likely to be joiners and

trusters.”

To solve the mystery, Putnam first discounts some obvious suspects:

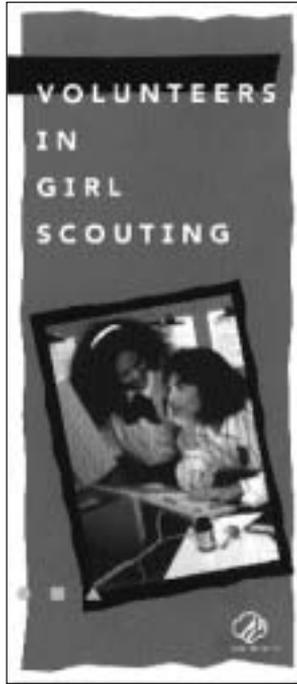
- *Mobility and consequent rootlessness.* Census data show “that rates of residential mobility have been remarkably constant over the last half century.”

- *“Overwork” by Americans.* While the proportion of those telling pollsters they feel “always rushed” has jumped in recent decades, studies indicate that average Americans have actually *gained* free time. In any event, workaholics seem *more* involved in the community than others, not less.

- *The movement of women into the paid labor force.* Working women belong to slightly *more* voluntary organizations than housewives do—albeit to different sorts (more professional associations, fewer PTAs). Moreover, housewives have reduced their civic engagement more than working women have. However, civic engagement has fallen far more steeply among women than men. Putnam’s interim verdict: not proven.

- *The decline of marriage.* True, married men and women are about a third more “trusting” and belong to as many as 25 percent more groups than comparable single folk. But the decline of marriage is probably only “an accessory to the crime . . . not the major villain,” Putnam says.

A very significant clue, he contends, is this: “Americans who came of age during the



*Not all the news about civic involvement is bad. One success story: the Girl Scouts, with 827,000 adult volunteers in 1993, up from 674,000 in 1970.*

Depression and World War II have been far more deeply engaged in the life of their communities than the generations that have followed them.” They belong to many more civic associations, are far more likely to trust people, vote at a higher rate, and read newspapers more often. “It is as though the postwar generations were exposed to some mysterious X-ray that permanently and increasingly rendered them less likely to con-

nect with the community,” he observes.

That mysterious force—and the main cause of America’s civic rot—is television, the social scientist–detective concludes. An analysis of data on people who are similar in virtually every other respect—education, income, age, sex, etc.—shows one factor to be strongly linked with lower levels of social trust and membership in groups: spending lots of time in front of the television. Heavy TV viewers (unlike omnivorous readers) tend to be loners, not joiners, and also to be “unusually skeptical about the benevolence of other people.” With the average American now watching the tube about four hours a day, it is perhaps not so surprising that so many are inclined to go bowling alone.

## *Finding Religion on the Left*

“Why We Need a Religious Left” by Amy Waldman, in *The Washington Monthly* (Dec. 1995), 1611 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

When liberals fought for civil rights or against the Vietnam War, religious figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Berrigan brothers were important leaders. What a difference a few decades make.

“As conservatives have successfully used religion to make political inroads, liberals have become increasingly antagonistic to mixing religion and politics,” notes Waldman, an editor at the *Washington Monthly*.

Many liberals think religious leaders should remain silent on political issues. They associate religion with intolerance and hypocritical evangelism, and resent the Catholic Church’s opposition to abortion (while ignoring Pope John Paul II’s “liberal” stands on the death penalty, materialism, and helping the poor).

But the estrangement from religion is not entirely the secular liberals’ fault.