

Political Science 501, Baumgartner
Short paper topics/discussion points
Week 12: Civic engagement and what makes governments successful

Readings: Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*

Putnam's study revolves around an explanation of what makes governments successful. Therefore, as in all studies, the first trick is to measure the dependent variable. In chapter 3 he lays out his measures of institutional performance. Review this material in detail, and also refer to the appendices, especially Appendix A, which explains more about this. Are these good indicators? Do they all make sense? Are there better ways to do it? Do you believe he has a good indicator of his dependent variable?

Consider the setting of Putnam's study: selected regional governments in Italy. What would be another, more obviously generalizable, approach to the study of "what makes government successful?" Give an alternative design and discuss its feasibility. Would a longitudinal approach, a cross national approach, a sub-national approach, or some other approach be most convincing? Should it focus on entire governments or single programs or agencies? What are the trade-offs inherent in these questions?

Explain why this study of government performance has been so successful, or influential. Does it have to do with the measures, the research design, the topic, or what? Think seriously about why this book has had such a great impact. Don't simply say it's because of the topic. Explain the larger appeal.

Putnam's main explanation hinges on the concept of "civic engagement." Discuss his measures of this concept in some detail. Do you believe he has good indicators of it? What would be other ways of measuring the degree of civic engagement in a county or in a community? Be specific with some alternative measures or approaches to the question. Is the book "about" government performance, or civic engagement? Think carefully about this question; is a focus on an independent variable the right way to think about an issue such as this?

Review the research design. Note how complex it is. Go through the appendices in some detail. What do you make of all the research that was done? Were all parts of that research necessary? Could the book have been done with a more streamlined approach? What does the book gain from the complicated and long-lasting research design? How does it compare to other projects you've read about?