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TV Tattered Nation's Social Fabric,

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CHICAGO, Sept. 2—As political scientists debated the future of liberalism and a besieged Democratic Party, the most striking suggestion was that television has profoundly undermined the nation's civic culture.

Robert D. Putnam, a Harvard professor whose essay "Bowling Alone" has already captured national attention, said new evidence indicates that the powerful introduction of television in the 1950s is a major factor in the subsequent decline in both social trust and group participation.

In a lecture at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Putnam examined possible causes for the weakening of trust and participation, two pillars underpinning what he called the nation's "social capital."

Putnam has documented a sharp decline over the past generation in the percentage of people joining groups of all kinds, political, choral, fraternal, church, hobby: even those who bowl now tend to bowl alone instead of joining leagues.

With that decline, there has been a sharp fall-off in Americans' readiness to trust one another, to assume that strangers, associates and even friends have beneficent motives, not hostile intentions. Trust and civic participation, Putnam argued, are crucial ingredients of democracy, and "America's stock of social capital has badly depleted over the last 30 years."

The image of the lone bowler touched a national nerve, drawing the attention of the news media and House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.).

"The social fabric is becoming visibly thinner, our connections among one another are becoming visibly thinner. We don't trust one another as much, and we don't know one another as much. And, of course, that is behind the deterioration of the political dialogue, the deterioration of the political debate," Putnam said in an interview.

Putnam said careful examination of the generational decline in trust and

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Political Scientist Contends

participation suggests that blame cannot be placed on a number of other changes in American society, including rising divorce rates, the entry of women into the work force, residential mobility, the expansion of the welfare state, the post-1973 economic stagnation and the growth of the suburbs.

Civic engagement declined for those born and raised between 1940 and 1960, before the rise in divorce, two-income families and the economic slowdown, he pointed out.

"I am inclined to indict" the sudden and extraordinarily comprehensive introduction of television in the 1950s, when the percentage of households with sets burgeoned from 10 percent in 1950 to 90 percent in 1958.

For every level of education, Putnam found a negative correlation between the number of hours an individual watches television and both the number of groups the individual joins and the level of social trust.

Among the well-educated, those who watch an hour or less television a day join an average of 2.7 groups, those who watch two hours a day join 2.5, those who watch three to four hours join 2.3 groups and those who watch five or more hours a day join 1.9 groups.

The correlation with newspaper reading, he said, is the opposite: "The more you read newspapers, the more trusting you are. The more you watch television, the less trusting you are."

In generational terms, measures of group membership and trust show that for those born before World War II, and who did not experience television in their childhood or adolescence, civic participation expanded, according to Putnam. For those born

after WW II, whose childhood and adolescences were marked by rapidly growing rates of television watching, civic participation has steadily declined.

Putnam's broad-brush analysis of the contemporary social condition was very different from most of the discussion here, much of which focused on such questions as whether the 1994 election marked the start of a Republican realignment.

The strongest case in support of

likely realignment was made by University of Texas professor Walter Dean Burnham. He said that by a host of statistical measures, the 1994 Republican victory ranked among the top two or three elections in the nation's history in terms of the shift from recent outcomes.

In addition, he said, the 1994 outcome has set the stage for the possibility of a more complete realignment by mobilizing key constituencies, especially white men, Southerners and whites generally, and by setting a new agenda in Washington of tax and spending cuts, in combination with tough welfare reform and regulatory retrenchment.

Burnham was disputed by a host of his colleagues, who generally took a more moderate view that two gener-

ations of Democratic advantage have now been replaced by rough parity between the parties, with perhaps a slight GOP tilt. Many political scientists said President Clinton has a good chance to win reelection and that the likelihood of continued conservative Republican control of Congress will increase voter willingness to support Clinton to counterbalance Congress, despite deep doubts about

the quality of his leadership.

James Stimson of the University of Minnesota contended that for a decade the two parties have been in rough equilibrium. What stood out in 1994, he said, was a major intensification of the media's barrage of criticism of government, which helped build the size of the GOP victories.

Byron Shafer, of Nuffield College

at Oxford, contended that it is no longer relevant to talk about partisan realignments, because voter allegiance, once a deeply felt element of personal identity, is now so fragile and impermanent that no party can be assured sustained majority support.

While there was substantial disagreement over the likelihood of continued Republican ascendancy, political scientists here were nearly unanimous in their view that the bottom has dropped off for the Democratic Party in the South.

In the deep South, the Democratic Party "will necessarily become more and more a party of blacks, and with an increasing proportion of African Americans among its diminishing number of elected officials. The Republican Party will be the party sup-

ported by most whites," wrote Bernard Groffman, of the University of California, Irvine, and two colleagues.

In Mississippi, which during the Great Depression was one of the nation's most Democratic states, Stephen D. Shaffer and Monica Johnson of Mississippi State University reported that the GOP now has almost a 2-1 advantage among white voters, 57 percent of whom identified in 1994 with Republicans while only 29 percent said they were Democrats.

The Democratic Party's problems were not, however, limited to the South. In a detailed analysis of 1994 voters in Ohio, Alfred J. Tuchfarber and three colleagues at the University of Cincinnati produced troubling findings for Democrats among the

one-third of the electorate made up of "swing" voters.

These voters, a plurality of whom voted for Clinton in 1992, were motivated in 1994 by anti-Clinton sentiment, along with clear tilts toward the GOP and conservatism, and against the Democratic Party and liberalism.

Alan I. Abramowitz and Suzie Ishikawa of Emory University argued that the GOP's nationwide gains in the House will be hard for Democrats to dislodge because of rising support for the GOP and for conservatism.

In House districts previously held by Democrats but won by Republicans in 1994, voters had moved decisively toward the GOP, with Republican partisan identification outweighing Democratic identification 52 percent to 38 percent. "These results are not good news for the Democratic Party," Abramowitz and Ishikawa wrote.