

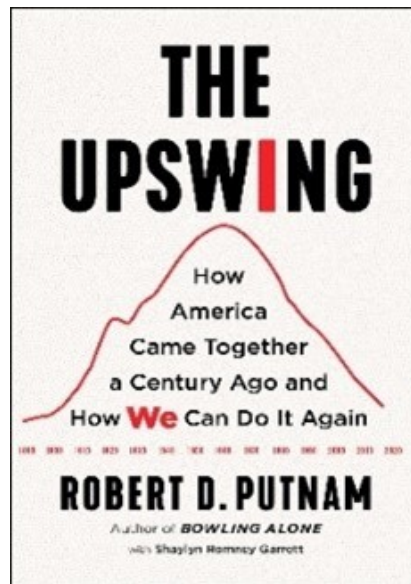
Book Notes:
Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Alone Together

Part One

Putnam, Robert with Shaylyn Romney Garrett. *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again.*



(New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

“The fundamental rule of our national life – the rule which underlies all others – is that, on the whole, and in the long run, we shall go up or down together.”
Theodore Roosevelt [1]

Occasionally one encounters a book whose explanatory power, at least at the macro level, clarifies and elucidates so many issues that it can only be called brilliant. Such a book is Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett’s *The Upswing*, in which their data rich work reconceptualizes the past 125 years of American history and the unraveling of America’s social fabric since the 1960s.

Putnam has been exploring how Americans have become increasingly disconnected from one another since at least 1995 when he published *“Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital”* in the *Journal of Democracy* [2] and in his 2000 book, **Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community**. [3] The revival of American community has been the special interest of co-author Shaylyn Romney Garrett, who is a founding contributor to *“Weave: the Social Fabric Project”* at the Aspen Institute, which can be found [here](#).

Their vision, as they say on their website is for “weavers -- folks working to build community in their home towns – to create a better future – a nation brimming with deep healthy connections, where mutual trust and affection is the standard, equity is implicit, and all people find joy and meaning in daily life”. [4]

While the Weave Project works at fostering and encouraging community and social engagement, frequent readers of these *Book Notes* will recognize the metaphoric similarity to my *The American Tapestry Project* on WQLN NPR1, which can be found [here](#). It seeks to reweave the fraying threads of America’s many stories into a holistic mosaic, collage – *tapestry* – of the American story. The unraveling of America’s social fabric post –the 1960s has been a special research project of mine since at least 2016. That year, in conversation with my colleague Phil Payne, a historian at St. Bonaventure University, anticipating **Smithsonian Magazine** saying in its January 2018 issue cover story, *“1968: The Year America Shattered,”* I began to ask, “What shattered?” [5]

To unmix the metaphor, what shattered, what unraveled, what frayed was the social consensus about what constituted the American story, which is another way of saying Americans no longer agreed about what it means to be an American. All of this has been examined in two Jefferson Educational Society series that I also presented at Chautauqua Institution, the Siegel Institute of Lifelong Learning of Case Western Reserve University, and elsewhere – *America in 1968* and the original *American Tapestry Project: We Tell Ourselves Stories*, both of which can be found [here](#).

With Americans no longer agreeing about the stories, the narratives, defining what it means to be an American, American culture and society began to unravel. For it is stories that create culture and not the other way around. Actually, stories and culture interweave in a helical fashion. Stories create culture more than culture impacts stories altering nuance and emphasis as both the culture and the stories creating it evolve in an ever more complex web of meaning.

Disagreements are good. If you will, they move the plot forward. They are that dramatic tension that propels all stories, but only if the characters continue to interact with one another; only if the characters continue to work together. When the disagreement boils over, when people are no longer telling each other the same stories and they can no longer work together, social capital – “the network of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively” [6] – diminishes. Sometimes it disappears entirely, as the characters not only do not work together, they turn against one another in something that looks dangerously like incipient civil war.

Fortunately, America is not there yet – perilously close as we might be. Having in the early and middle of the 20th century, if not solved, essentially tamed the fundamental dilemmas at the core of the American experiment – the tension between liberty and equality and the tension between individualism and the

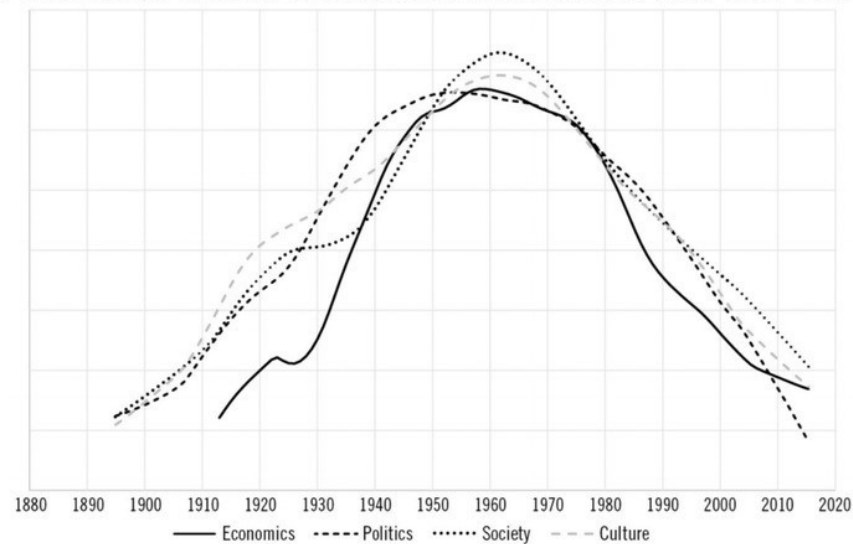
common good – it is clear that in the early 21st century, as Putnam and Garrett point out in their opening chapter, many Americans have forgotten what Teddy Roosevelt meant when he said, “*We shall go up or down together.*” They have forgotten, if they ever knew, what John Winthrop really meant when he said, “We shall be as a city on a hill” [7] and, have forgotten the lesson with which Tocqueville credited them in *Democracy in America* – “*How Americans Combat Individualism with the Doctrine of Self-Interest Properly Understood.*” [8] Having forgotten those lessons, Americans now ignore the common good as they exalt individualism and celebrate selfishness.

And here we are in 2021 snarling at one another.

How did that happen?

In answering that question, grounding their assertions in a rich trove of data, Putnam and Garrett assert and support their assertion with ample data an argument that I have also been making these past four to five years, that Americans have forgotten – perhaps willfully rejected – the lessons of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Putnam and Garrett frame the history of the last 125 years as being bookended by two Gilded Ages. The first Gilded Age – a term coined by Mark Twain – denoted the period of great economic inequality from roughly the 1870s to World War I. The second Gilded Age – our era – they date from the “greed is good” 1970s-80s until today. In between was a period, again roughly speaking, from 1900 or so to the mid-1960s which they characterize as a *consensus culture*. The Gilded Ages are characterized by an “*I*” culture exalting individualism at the expense of the commonwealth; the intervening consensus “*We*” culture recognized a shared destiny and promoted the common good.

In their memorable phrasing, the entire 125 years can be described as moving from an “*I*” culture to a “*We*” culture back to an “*I*” culture, or “*I-we-I.*” As they write, it “is a phenomenon we have come to call the “*I-we-I*” curve, a gradual climb into greater interdependence and cooperation, followed by a steep descent into a greater independence and egoism.” [9] They illustrate this in a chart combining their four key variables – economics, politics, social fabric, and culture – showing an increasing commitment in each sector to the common good from the late 19th century to an apex in the mid-1960s and a rapid descent back to extreme individualism in the early 21st century.



Before briefly reviewing each of the four vectors and their attendant complicating factors of race and gender, I want to make two observations. First, what is Putnam’s foundational premise? And, second, what were the lessons of the early 20th century that Americans seem, if they have not outright rejected, to have forgotten? Putnam’s foundational premise, like that of his hero Alexis de Tocqueville, is that for democracy to work, its citizens must reconcile democracy’s innate tension between liberty, which creates individualism – a term, by the way, Tocqueville originated – and equality, which, of course, levels and subsumes individualism into the larger society.

As Tocqueville wrote, “Individualism ... disposes each citizen to cut himself off from the mass of his fellow men (*sic*) and withdraw into the circle of family and friends ... gladly leaving the larger society to take care of itself.” [11] But in his isolation, he becomes economically, socially, and politically weaker and more vulnerable so that to protect his liberty “he must learn the art of joining with his fellow men (*sic*) to defend it.” [12] Which realization gave rise to the American genius for joining together to create clubs, associations, and organizations to protect citizens’ rights and to promote the common good. As Tocqueville wrote, “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all minds are constantly joining together in groups ... there are associations of a thousand kinds ... wherever there is a new undertaking ... in the United States you are sure to find an association.” [13]

In his *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Putnam called these types of associations and arrangements “civic community.” [14] As Win McCormack notes, Putnam’s notion of “civic community was built on four outstanding qualities: citizen engagement ... political equality ... high levels of trust, solidarity, and tolerance among citizens; and *a rich associational life*, [my emphasis added] creating ... structures of cooperation.” [15] Much like the center we discussed in two earlier *Book Notes* on “*Heroic Centrism*,” which can be found [here](#), Putnam’s civic community is a democratic society’s inner-core embodying its central values. Just as William Weston noted in “*Heroic Centrism in a Time of Polarization*,” [16] leaders, organizations, and citizens do not have to agree on all ideological issues, but, as McCormack points out, they need to be “willing to compromise their ideological differences for the public good.” [17]

So, Putnam’s foundational premise argues that for democracy to flourish, its citizens need to be able to put aside their particular ideological or political differences in order to work together for the common good. Americans need to recognize, as I have said in *The American Tapestry Project*, that while they might

disagree on this or that particular issue, they must own their agreement on America's core values of liberty, freedom, equality and opportunity for all in order to become a thriving society of "We the People."

During the "I"-dominated Gilded Ages, that lesson was disregarded or willfully neglected. During the "We" period of the 20th century's first 60 years, Americans increasingly embraced their common destiny and the need to enhance the common good until they didn't in the mid-1960s.

According to Putnam, Americans reeling from gross economic, political, social and cultural inequality during the first Gilded Age's celebration of "I" began to come together to challenge the established power and to reassert the needs of the common people and the common good. They did this through the flourishing of the Progressive Movement, that late 19th, early 20th century movement first led by William Jennings Bryan, then Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, culminating in Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" and the great civil rights accomplishments of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Lyndon Johnson.

That sentence makes it seem too simple, for progressivism at the turn of the 20th century also grew out of the Christian movement known as the *Social Gospel*, which did not focus on individual piety but rather the social message of the Beatitudes exhorting us to care for one another. It benefited from the work of muckraking journalists like Julius Chambers, Nellie Bly, Ray Stannard Baker, Erie County's own Ida Tarbell, Ida B. Wells, and numerous others. Progressivism aimed to reform American life by working for the common good through government reform, growth of labor unions, women's suffrage and minority rights, municipal reform, proliferating associations, and increased philanthropy.

Based on the accomplishments of the progressive movement, American society in the early and middle 20th century progressed from an egocentric "I" culture to a more pluralistic "We" culture characterized by the highest level of prosperity and economic equality in American history.

How did they do that and, by inference, what lessons have we forgotten?

Well, the Progressive Movement's [18] accomplishments are many, but they begin with three important constitutional amendments, two of which opened up American democracy to more people: the 17th and 19th. The former created the direct election of U.S. senators and the latter enfranchised women voters. The 16th Amendment made a progressive income tax constitutional and enabled the government to secure funds to carry out its duties. Admittedly, the 18th, which created Prohibition, smacked of more than a little overreach, but after a riotous decade – "the Roaring '20s" – it was repealed.

Other progressive era reforms barred corporations from contributing to federal elections (overturned by 2010's *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision), adopted the secret ballot, and, at the state level, instituted the initiative, referendum, and recall systems. Progressives also engaged in civil service reform, protective labor laws, minimum wage, workers' compensation, anti-trust laws, creation of national parks, the beginning of the regulatory state, in particular food and drug laws. Their greatest achievement, however, as Win McCormack notes, was in education, in which they "invented the institution of kindergarten in America, succeeded in making high school education universal and free, increased college enrollment, championed the German model of the research university, and sponsored the first serious vocational education programs in

schools in the United States.” [19] The cumulative impact of all of these initiatives, combined with the necessity for social solidarity during the Great Depression and World War II, created the American economic boom of the late 1940s and 1950s – arguably the most egalitarian period in American history.

Was it nirvana? No, there were still multiple issues, primarily involving the suspicion that all of this increasing social solidarity only included white males at the expense of women and minorities, but America was making serious progress towards a more inclusive “We the People,” towards becoming a “We” culture and not an “I” culture. Putnam and Garrett trace the arc of that progress in four chapters analyzing economics, politics, society and culture.



In their chapter on economics, “The Rise and Fall of Equality,” they trace first what they call “The Great Convergence” of American incomes from its low point in 1910 to its peak in 1960 and then “The Great Divergence” as inequality made a return after the mid-1960s.

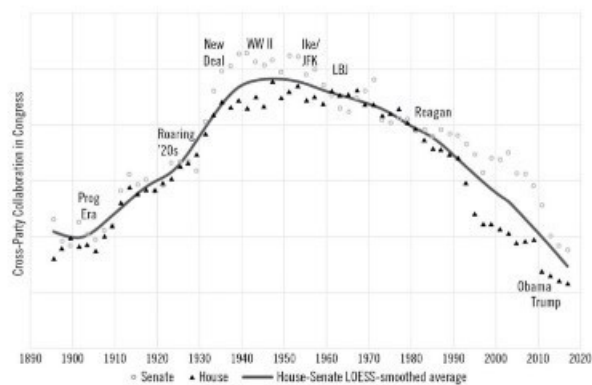
“The Great Convergence” was the increasing economic equality in American life resulting from technological innovation, the Progressive Era’s reforms, in particular labor laws, minimum wage, Social Security and the progressive income tax. [20]

The post-1960s “Great Divergence” resulted from reversing many of those initiatives, for example, deregulation of the economy, in particular the financial sector, and a lessening of the government’s role in social welfare programming.

They chart the arc of that increasing equality and subsequent reversal by noting that in 1910, the Top 1 percent of the population garnered approximately 19 percent of national income, but that by 1965 their share had declined to approximately 11 percent – almost a 50 percent drop. In their analysis, 1965 marks the apex of economic equality in American life, for over the course of the next 50-plus years the Top 1 percent’s share of national income increased to approximately 21 percent. Not quite doubling, it still exceeded the Top 1 percent’s share in the first Gilded Age! [21]

Putnam and Garrett analyze America’s growing political polarization in a chapter they entitle “Politics: From Tribalism to Comity and Back Again”. Once again they trace the path of the inverted “U” graph by analyzing Cross-party collaboration in Congress showing increasing political synergy and comity from approximately 1910 to the mid-1960s and then decreasing compromise and increasing partisanship leading to polarization. [22] What caused that

Cross-party collaboration in Congress, 1895-2017



reversal? We'll look at that later when we examine the impact of the 1960s, but a chief cause was the increasing ideological purity of the Republican and Democratic parties.

As I noted in my *America in 1968* series, prior to 1980, to somewhat arbitrarily pick a year, it could be said that America had four political parties. There were northern liberal Democrats and southern conservative Democrats; there were eastern liberal Republicans and western conservative Republicans. Such a combination necessitated political bargaining and compromise to accomplish almost anything.

To oversimplify a bit, beginning with Barry Goldwater and *Movement Conservatism* in the late-1950s and 1964, then Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy" in 1968 and the unintended consequence of instituting direct primaries in the early 1970s, there was a political realignment with southern conservative Democrats joining with western conservative Republicans and northern liberal Democrats joining with eastern liberal Republicans to form two parties that were more or less ideologically pure – a conservative party and a liberal party.

There were at least two driving forces behind this realignment. One was the old guard conservative Republican opposition to both Progressive reforms and Roosevelt's New Deal and, second, race. Old guard southern conservative Democrats did not oppose Progressive reforms as long as they did not include Black peoples, but northern liberal Democrats embrace of the Civil Rights movement motivated them to join with western conservative Republicans. Lyndon Johnson saw it coming when he reportedly commented after passage of 1964's Civil Rights Act and 1965's Voting Rights Act "we've lost the south for a generation." The age of party purity made it more difficult to arrive at compromise and instead sowed the seeds of 2021's bitter polarization and partisanship.

In their chapter on "Society: Between Isolation and Solidarity," Putnam and Garrett revisit Putnam's work in *Bowling Alone*, in which he explored Americans' increasing disconnectedness through the shriveling of their communal associations both secular and religious with the resultant loss in social trust. Quoting political scientists Wendy M. Rahn and John E. Transue, they define social trust "as a 'standing decision' to give most people – even those whom one does not know from direct experience – the benefit of the doubt." [23] It is the glue that holds society together; it is the assumption you make walking into the local grocery store that one of your fellow shoppers will not shoot you.

Beginning in the early 20th century, moving from the "I" dominated first Gilded Age, Americans created for themselves a Tocquevillian cornucopia of clubs and associations to meet their personal and societal needs. As Putnam and Garrett note, it is "hard to name a major civic institution in American life at the close of the 20th century that was not invented ... at the opening of the 20th century." [24] The list is dazzling. From the Teamsters Union to Campfire Girls, from Big Brothers to the League of Women Voters, from the PTA to the Sierra Club, from the Red Cross to the NAACP, from the Knights of Columbus to Hadassah, from the Boy Scouts to the Rotary Club, from the American Bar Association to the Farm Bureau Federation, Americans created a network of civic associations to meet their needs and to build a cohesive society. [25]

But then in the mid-1960s and for the remainder of the century membership and participation declined in clubs, in civic, fraternal, ethnic and sororal associations, in labor unions (which were not only bargaining units but whose union halls were also sites of social cohesion through their local activities sponsoring sports teams and other self-help activities). And, perhaps most significantly, church attendance began to plummet. Church attendance, in particular, provides a sharp insight into Americans' declining communal activity.

Although obviously essential, setting aside the spiritual and theological and only examining religion's social dimension, "communal" is an apt word, for "communion," coming together, is at the heart of the religious experience. From a high in 1960 of approximately 80 percent of the adult population identifying themselves as members of a religious congregation by 2019 that number had dropped to 50 percent, a 37 percent decrease. [26] More telling, however, is church attendance. From a high in 1950 of approximately 47 percent of adults saying they attended church in the last seven days by 2019 church attendance had declined by a bit less than a third to 32 percent. [27] Today's political clamor from the religious right obscures this, but regular churchgoers have become an American minority within a minority with the attendant damage to the social fabric. While yoga classes and explorations into individual spirituality have their merits, they do not provide the social support networks and social cohesion of a vibrant parish, temple, mosque, or congregational life.

Similarly, as Putnam and Garrett demonstrate, although many of America's civic associations were supplanted by large scale national membership organizations, these new entities do not provide the social cohesion of their predecessors. Such groups as the National Wildlife Federation and AARP have enormous mailing lists, but their members almost never meet in person. The result has been a fraying of the social fabric as people retreat into their individual worlds, as "We" is supplanted by an enveloping "I" and, in Putnam's memorable phrase, people are *bowling alone*.

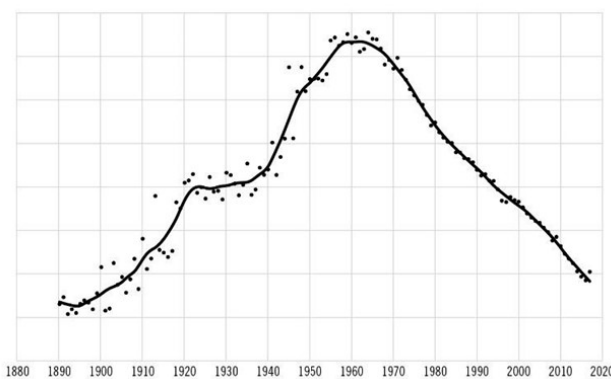


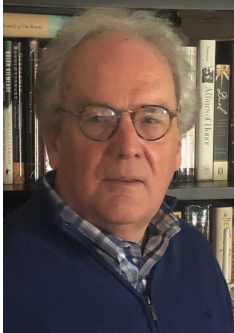
FIGURE 4.15: SOCIAL SOLIDARITY, 1880–2017

Not only are they 'bowling alone', but, semi-isolated in their increasingly homogeneous individual enclaves, they do not know one another. Not knowing one another, they increasingly do not trust one another. Although sensitive to generational differences, Americans' trust in one another, their belief that "most people can be trusted" has declined from a high of approximately 75% in 1941 to a new low of approximately 32% in 2019. [28] Which has resulted, in the now familiar inverted "U" graph, in a significant decrease in social solidarity. [29]

What are the cultural implications of this decreasing social solidarity and increasing individualism at the expense of the common good? How did it happen – what were the causes? How can they be identified and understood? And where, in the midst of all of this, do women and minorities fit since their apparent

progress in the 20th century would seem to weaken Putnam's conceptual framework undermining his central thesis? And, what can be done to reverse this decline and to once again help Americans understand the vital truth of Theodore Roosevelt's comment with which we began – *"The fundamental rule of our national life – the rule which underlies all others – is that, on the whole, and in the long run, we shall go up or down together."*

Next week in **Book Notes – Alone Together Part Two** – we'll examine all of that as we rediscover the crucial importance of leadership. Doesn't it seem that it always comes down to that – leaders count and we forget it at our peril?



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End Notes

1. Roosevelt, Theodore. *"December 3, 1901: First Annual Message"* quoted in Putnam, Robert and Shaylyn Romney Garret, **The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again.** (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), p. 341.
2. Putnam, Robert. *"Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital,"* in **Journal of Democracy** (1995) V. 6 No. 1, pp. 65-78 available at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/assoc/bowling.html> accessed February 22, 2021.
3. Putnam, Robert. **Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.** (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
4. "Vision Statement" at **Weave: The Social Fabric Project** available at <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/weave-the-social-fabric-initiative/> accessed February 22, 2021.
5. *"1968: The Year America Shattered,"* in **Smithsonian Magazine** (January/February, 2018) available at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/issue/januaryfebruary-2018/> accessed February 22, 2021.
6. *"Social capital,"* at **LEXICO.com** available at https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/social_capital accessed February 22, 2021.
7. Winthrop meant we would only be worthy of emulation if we were true to our core values and learned to care for one another; cf. John Winthrop, *"A Modell of Christian Charitie"* in **American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr.** Ed. Michael Warner (New York: The Library of America, 1999), pp. 41-42.
8. de Tocqueville, Alexis. *"How Americans Combat Individualism with the Doctrine of Self-Interest Properly Understood,"* in **Democracy in America**, V. 2, Part II, Chapter 8 Ed. Olivier Zuntz; Tr. Arthur Goldhammer. (New York: The Library of America, 2004), pp. 610-613.
9. Putnam, Robert and Shaylyn Romney Garret, **The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again.** (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), p.12.
10. *"Trends, 1895-2015"* from *"Preview – The Upswing by Robert Putnam"* in **Goodreads** available at <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/50124402-the-upswing> accessed February 23, 2021.
11. de Tocqueville, p. 585.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 595.
13. *Ibid.*
14. McCormack, Win. *"From I to We Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett's Vision for a new civic community."* **The New Republic** (September 17, 2020) available at <https://newrepublic.com/article/159276/the-upswing-book-review-robert-putnam-shaylyn-romney-garrett> accessed February 23, 2021.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Weston, William. *"Heroic Centrism in a Time of Polarization"* at **Niskanen Center** available at <https://www.niskanencenter.org/heroic-centrism-in-a-time-of-polarization/> accessed February 23, 2021.
17. McCormack cited above.
18. Rather than litter this essay with more **End Notes**, for a quick summary of the Progressive Era see *"Progressive Era,"* in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive_Era accessed February 23, 2021.
19. McCormack cited above; See also McCormack for a review of progressive era achievements.
20. Putnam and Garrett, **Upswing**, p. 68.
21. *Ibid.*, p.34.
22. *Ibid.* p. 88.

23. Ibid., p. 158
24. Ibid., p.113.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., p. 133.
27. Ibid., p. 134.
28. Ibid., p. 160.
29. Ibid., p. 162.

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