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.”
Making Social Capital Work: A Review of Robert Putnam's Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy, how social cooperation at the level of the community translates into good performance at the level of political institutions. We identify the absence of political conflict as a peculiar feature of Putnam's account of Italian politics and history, and we explore the implications of its absence for the theoretical conclusions Putnam reaches and the generalizability of the findings he presents. 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. But enfeebled government and unrepresentative government kills it, or diverts it into corruption and criminality. . . .Â But this book compelled me because my family is from Southern Italy so I know there's truth to its core premise that civic trust is lacking there. This book focuses on the pressing issue of how to govern people who don't self-govern - people disposed to break the law when they think they can get away with it.