

## PRESS NOTES — *Join or Die*



*A film about why you should join a club...and why the fate of America depends on it.*

Directed by Rebecca Davis & Pete Davis

99 minutes // English // 2023

**trailer:** [trailer.joinordie.film](https://trailer.joinordie.film) | **web:** [joinordie.film](https://joinordie.film) | **ig:** [@joinordiefilm](https://www.instagram.com/joinordiefilm) | **tw:** [@joinordiefilm](https://twitter.com/joinordiefilm)

**Film Contact:** Rebecca Davis / 917.312.2568 / [RebeccaAnneDavis@gmail.com](mailto:RebeccaAnneDavis@gmail.com)

**Press Materials:** [EPK](https://www.epk.com)

**Past Festivals:** SXSW | Cleveland | Capital City | Milwaukee | IFFBoston

**Upcoming Festivals:** SF DocFest | deadCenter | Bentonville

## **LOG LINE**

*Join or Die* is a film about why you should join a club—and why the fate of America depends on it. Follow the story of America's civic unraveling through the journey of Robert Putnam, whose legendary "Bowling Alone" research into American community decline may hold the answers to our democracy's present crisis.

## **SYNOPSIS**

*Join or Die* is a film about why you should join a club — and why the fate of America depends on it. In this feature documentary, follow the half-century story of America's civic unraveling through the journey of legendary social scientist Robert Putnam, whose groundbreaking "Bowling Alone" research into America's decades-long decline in community connections could hold the answers to our democracy's present crisis. Flanked by influential fans and scholars — from Hillary Clinton, Pete Buttigieg, and Surgeon General Vivek Murthy to Eddie Glaude Jr., Raj Chetty, and Priya Parker — as well as inspiring groups building community in neighborhoods across the country, join Bob as he explores three urgent civic questions: *What makes democracy work? Why is American democracy in crisis? And, most importantly... What can we do about it?*

## EARLY PRAISE

*Join or Die* premiered at the SXSW Film & TV Festival in March 2023 and is currently on a film festival tour. Early praise from screenings so far below:

"Our democracy needs us to be joiners! ...[an] urgent message." – [Hillary Clinton](#)

"The seeming irreparable divisions in our country have been a hot topic of this year's SXSW entries, but one documentary is preoccupied with finding solutions." -[Austin Monthly, The Films We Loved Most at SXSW](#)

"The film, like Putnam's work, is engrossing and, ultimately, convincing. It's hard to watch without feeling the personal impact of Putnam's ideas in your own life – the social disconnection, the apathy, the cynicism – and as the credits roll you might just find yourself wanting to join a bowling league." [Archer Parquette, Milwaukee Magazine](#)

"Join or Die, a documentary, did justice to the incredulity of its premise, treating the concept of social capital and the power of joining groups with a necessary seriousness, but keeping the tone approachable." -[Culture Map Austin, Our 12 favorite films, parties, and moments from SXSW 2023](#)

"Join or Die made me feel more motivated to do something than perhaps any movie I've ever seen." – [Ryan Scott, Slash Film](#) (Full review [here](#))

"Most inspiring movie I've seen so far at SXSW...I want to join all the clubs now" -[Dan Gentile, SFGATE](#)

"Striking Visual Bombshell About Decline of Membership Clubs Delivers Wake-Up Call" -[David McDonald, FilmBook](#)

"Join or Die proves itself vital and relevant, a necessary documentary that promises the conversation will continue long after the credits have rolled." -[Stephanie Archer, Film Inquiry](#)

"[Putnam's] an affable, sensitive person and a wonderful camera subject who never seems calculated, withholding, or insincere." -[Matt Zoller Seitz, RogerEbert.com](#)

"[A] sense of humor, bolstered by a plucky voiceover, cute animations, and clever editing quick with a punch line, is all over Join or Die." -[Brianna Caleria, CultureMap Austin](#)

"A resonant tale of how community...benefits individuals and our democracy at large. Nicely told...balanced by an affable tone." –[Jon Partridge, Cinapse News](#)

"So interesting and engaging. Highly recommend." –[Rachel's Reviews](#)

*"Join or Die makes a compelling argument and does so with style...Davis & Davis...establish themselves as an upbeat documentary duo that can communicate important, complex ideas in easy-to-digest packaging." –Alan French, [Sunshine State Cineplex](#)*

*"Join or Die places a magnifying glass on a simple, yet surprisingly crucial topic: clubs...This one is not to be missed!" –Josh Batchelder, [Josh at the Movies](#)*

## **FILMMAKERS**

Directors Rebecca Davis  
Pete Davis  
Producers Rebecca Davis  
Pete Davis  
Director of Photography Ronan Killeen  
Editor Chad Ervin  
Animation Director Mark Lopez  
Composer Chad Cannon  
Archival Producer Rebecca Kent  
Additional Editors Inaya Graciana Yusuf  
Eric Gulliver  
Assistant Editor Christian Oliveira  
Associate Producer Engy Adham

## **FEATURING**

Robert Putnam  
Hillary Clinton  
Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg  
Surgeon General Vivek Murthy  
Senator Mike Lee  
Eddie S. Glaude Jr.  
Raj Chetty  
Priya Parker  
Jane McAlevey  
Glenn Loury  
Hahrie Han  
David Brooks

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## DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

Henry David Thoreau once said: “There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.” It is important to tell stories about the various “branches of evil,” but occasionally, it is also useful to help orient the public to the roots of our various social problems. As the unraveling of our social fabric has accelerated in the COVID era, the public is searching for fundamental explanations of our civic decline: *Why don't our politics or government work? Why can't we see eye-to-eye with our neighbors? What accounts for the gap between the empowered few and the disempowered many?*

The answers to these questions are complex—and no single scholar can definitively answer any of them. But Harvard professor and *Bowling Alone* author Robert Putnam has, perhaps more than anyone else living today, made great strides at clarifying our understanding of the roots of our civic unraveling. Even better, he is a master at translating his trailblazing social science research into engaging stories. For decades, he has explained to rapt audiences around the country—from VFW halls to the Oval Office—his illuminating findings, but the entirety of his work has never been featured in a documentary film with the potential to reach a much wider audience.

With *Join or Die*, we aim to introduce Putnam's research on the importance of community to democracy and the decline in American community engagement over the past decades to millions more Americans—and especially to young Americans who were not alive to experience *Bowling Alone* going viral decades ago.

To bring Putnam's message up to date, we have paired his story with figures from various sectors—from politics and economics to public health and urban design—who have been influenced by his ideas. And to bring Putnam's message down to earth, we have weaved throughout the film historic home videos and contemporary community profiles featuring the types of civic organizations that Putnam has found to be foundational to a healthy democracy. We hope that they not only help promote the public understanding of an important field in social science—but that they also shed light on what Americans across the country can do with this newfound understanding.

With the death knell of our national unity tolling from every corner of our public life, we hope that revisiting Putnam's groundbreaking civic findings—and spotlighting the creative local groups acting in the spirit of them—can serve to inspire viewers to do what needs to be done to save our democracy: ***Join up!***

## ABOUT ROBERT PUTNAM

Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam is America's preeminent political scientist — and one of the most widely read and cited social scientists living today. Author of fourteen books, translated into twenty languages, his work focuses on asking big questions about American society and deploying immense, creative studies and analyses to unlock answers.



His groundbreaking “**Bowling Alone**” research — which demonstrated that levels of American community connections were in decline over the past half-century — rocketed Putnam to national fame in the late 1990s, earning him the moniker “the poet laureate of civil society” and the ear of presidents, religious leaders, and tech founders over the coming decades. In 2012, President Obama awarded Putnam the National Humanities Medal, the nation's highest honor for contributions to the humanities. As more Americans turn on to the reality of our social isolation crisis, a consistent drumbeat of media interest in revisiting Putnam's work has grown (See recent mentions in: *New Yorker*, *New York Times*, *Atlantic*, *The Ringer*, *Jacobin*, *Christianity Today*, and *NPR*.)

## COMMUNITY PROFILES

*Join or Die* spotlights six community groups working to revitalize American civic life.

### **Odd Fellows #80 — Waxahachie, TX | [@OddFellows80](#)**

*An old federated society chapter bucking decline trends*

### **Red Bike & Green — Atlanta, GA | [@RedBikeGreenATL](#)**

*A Black urban cycling collective*

### **Plainsong Farm & Ministry — Rockford, MI | [@PlainsongFarm](#)**

*An Episcopal church on a farm*

### **Bowl Portland — Portland, ME | [@BaysideBowl](#)**

*A thriving, modern bowling league*

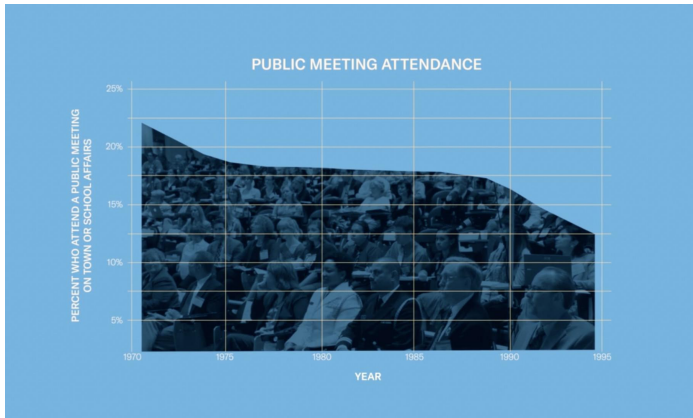
### **CIELO — Los Angeles, CA | [@MyCIELO\\_org](#)**

*An indigenous mutual aid and advocacy group*

### **Chicago Gig Alliance — Chicago, IL | [@Gig\\_Chicago](#)**

*Rideshare drives coming together to fight for better working conditions*

## SHOCKING SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA SPOTLIGHTED IN *JOIN OR DIE*



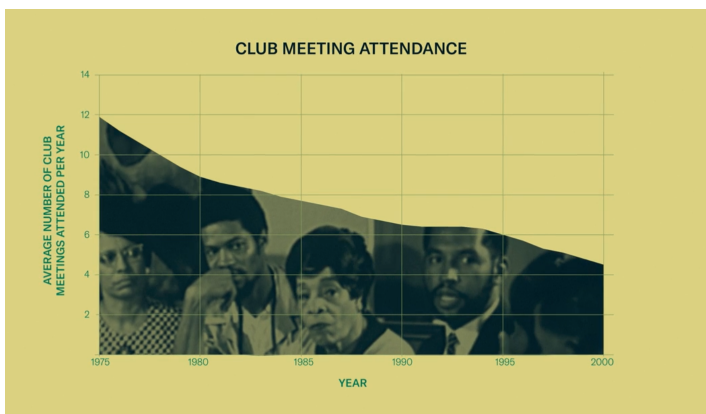
### 40% DECLINE

...from the 1970s to the 1990s in the number of Americans who attended even one public meeting on town or school affairs in the previous year



### 50% DECLINE

..from the 1970s to the 1990s in the number of Americans who took any leadership role in any local organization.



### 50% DECLINE

...from the 1970s to the 1990s in the number of times Americans attended a club meeting the previous year.

### 60% DECLINE

....from the 1970s to the 1990s in the amount of picnics Americans attended annually

### 35% DECLINE

...from the 1960s to the 2020s in religious congregation membership

### 66% DECLINE

...from the 1960s to the 2010s in union membership



## FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

**Delevan Street Films** is a sister-brother team from Falls Church, Virginia.

### **REBECCA DAVIS | Director & Producer | [@RebeccaDavis](#)**

Rebecca Davis is a director and producer based in New York City. She was a senior producer with NBC News for a decade, where her work focused on social movements, environmental and economic justice, and community innovators. She has produced for HBO, VICE, and A&E — and was the supervising producer for Season 2 of Vox's hit Netflix show *Explained*.

### **PETE DAVIS | Director & Producer | [@PeteDDavis](#)**

Pete Davis is a writer and civic advocate — and a former student of Robert Putnam's. He is the author of *Dedicated: The Case for Commitment in An Age of Infinite Browsing*. He is the co-founder of the Democracy Policy Network, a policy organization focused on raising up ideas that deepen democracy.

### **RONAN KILLEEN | Director of Photography | [IMDB](#)**

Ronan Killeen is a New York-based director of photography who has collaborated with some of the leading voices in documentary film. His credits include *Bob Ross: Happy Accidents, Betrayal & Greed* (Netflix), *Sasquatch* (Hulu), *Lorena* (Amazon), *American Veteran* (PBS), *Get Me Roger Stone* (Netflix), *OJ: Made in America* (ESPN), and many more.

### **CHAD ERVIN | Editor | [IMDB](#)**

Chad is a producer and editor for documentary film and television who has crafted multiple Emmy-winning films. Born and raised in East Tennessee, he draws from the rich oral storytelling tradition of his youth to inform and infuse his work with compelling characters and rich storylines. With topics ranging from historical retellings to personal biography to exploring the physical and psychological ravages of war, he endeavors to approach complicated material with a human touch. He's edited over 20 episodes of PBS' *Frontline* and multiple *American Experience* documentaries.

**REBECCA KENT | Archival Producer | [IMDB](#)**

Rebecca is an investigative producer with expertise in archival research, rights, and clearances. Her credits include Hulu's six-part *1619 Project* series, the critically acclaimed documentary *Ailey, Aftershock*, winner of the Sundance Impact for Change Special Jury award, *Dear Mr. Brody*, Sony's *Julia*, *Rita Moreno: Just A Girl Who Decided to Go for It*, Netflix's *Knock Down The House*, The New York Time's Podcast *Nice White Parents*, PBS's *The Black Panthers: Vanguard Of The Revolution* and many others. She holds a masters degree in journalism from Northwestern University and bachelors degrees in political science and English Literature from Kenyon College.

**MARK LOPEZ | Animation Director | [@SilkwormStudio](#)**

Mark is an animator and designer based in Austin, Texas where he runs Silkworm Studios. His clients include Amazon music, Bloomberg, Columbia University, Google, IBM, Microsoft, National Geographic, and Spotify. His 2019 animated film, *Segregated by Design*, examined the forgotten history of state-sponsored housing segregation and was a "Best of the Year" nominee by Vimeo.

**CHAD CANNON | Composer | [IMDB](#)**

Chad is a composer based in Los Angeles working at the intersection of cultures, history, and human stories. He has composed the scores for various documentaries, including the Oscar-winning *American Factory*.

## **CREDITS**

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PETE DAVIS

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Score Recorded Under Contract With The American Federation Of Musicians (Afm),  
Local 47, Hollywood

Score Recorded At Allegro Recordings In Burbank, Ca, January 2023

Violin  
MARK ROBERTSON  
KATHLEEN SLOAN  
BEN JACOBSON  
NIV ASHKENAZ

Cello  
TIMOTHY LOO  
NIALL TARO FERGUSON

Flute  
CATHERINE BAKER

Viola  
ANDREW DUCKLES  
LUKE MAURER

Bass  
STEPHEN PFEIFER

Oboe  
CLAIRE BRAZEAU

Bassoon  
LEAH KOHN

Clarinet  
JONATHAN SACDALAN

Trumpet  
ADAM BHATIA

Trombone  
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Harp  
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Orchestra Contractor  
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