

How to end human fracking: Some lessons from history

ROBERT D. PUTNAM

Friends of Attention

January 2, 2026

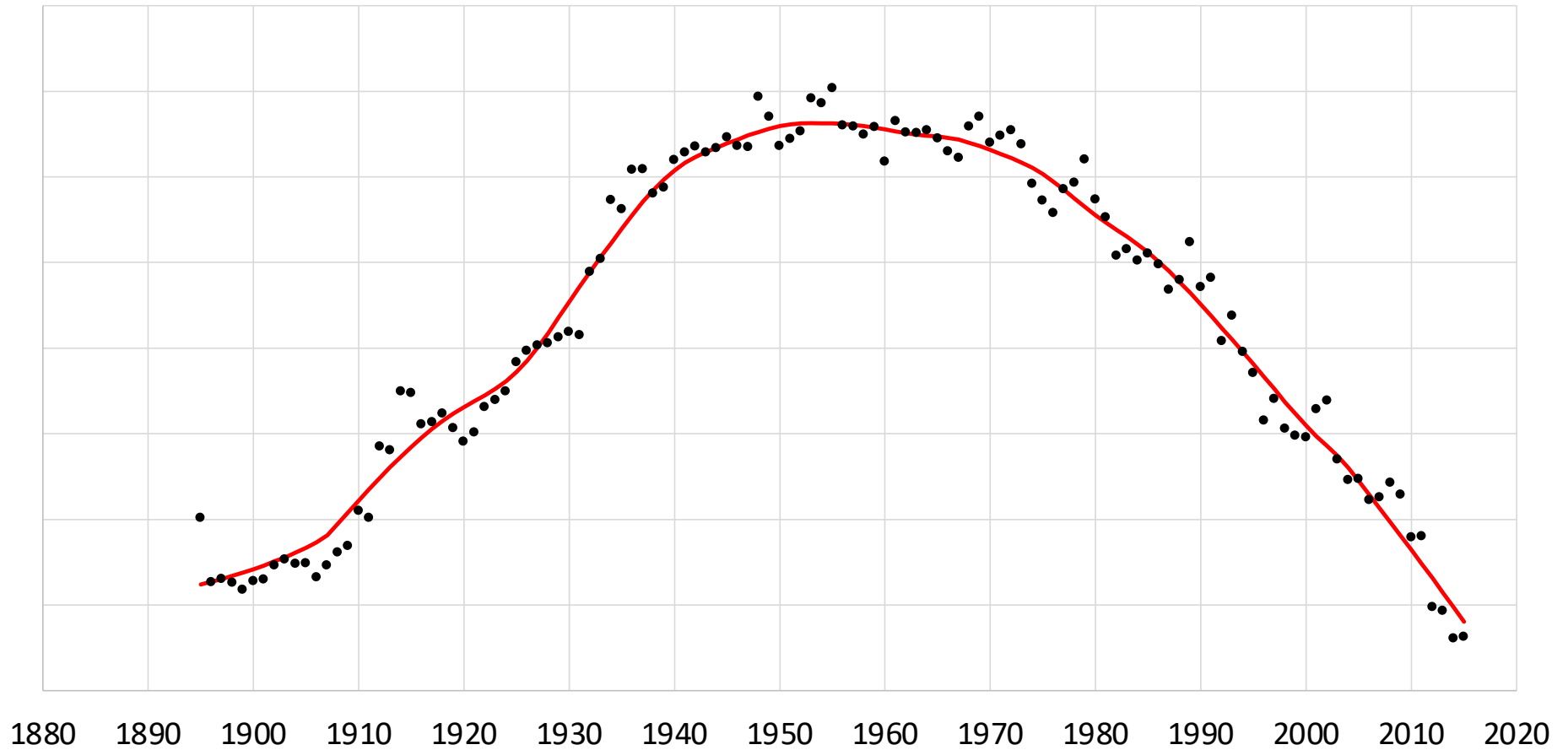


America today has reached historic levels of

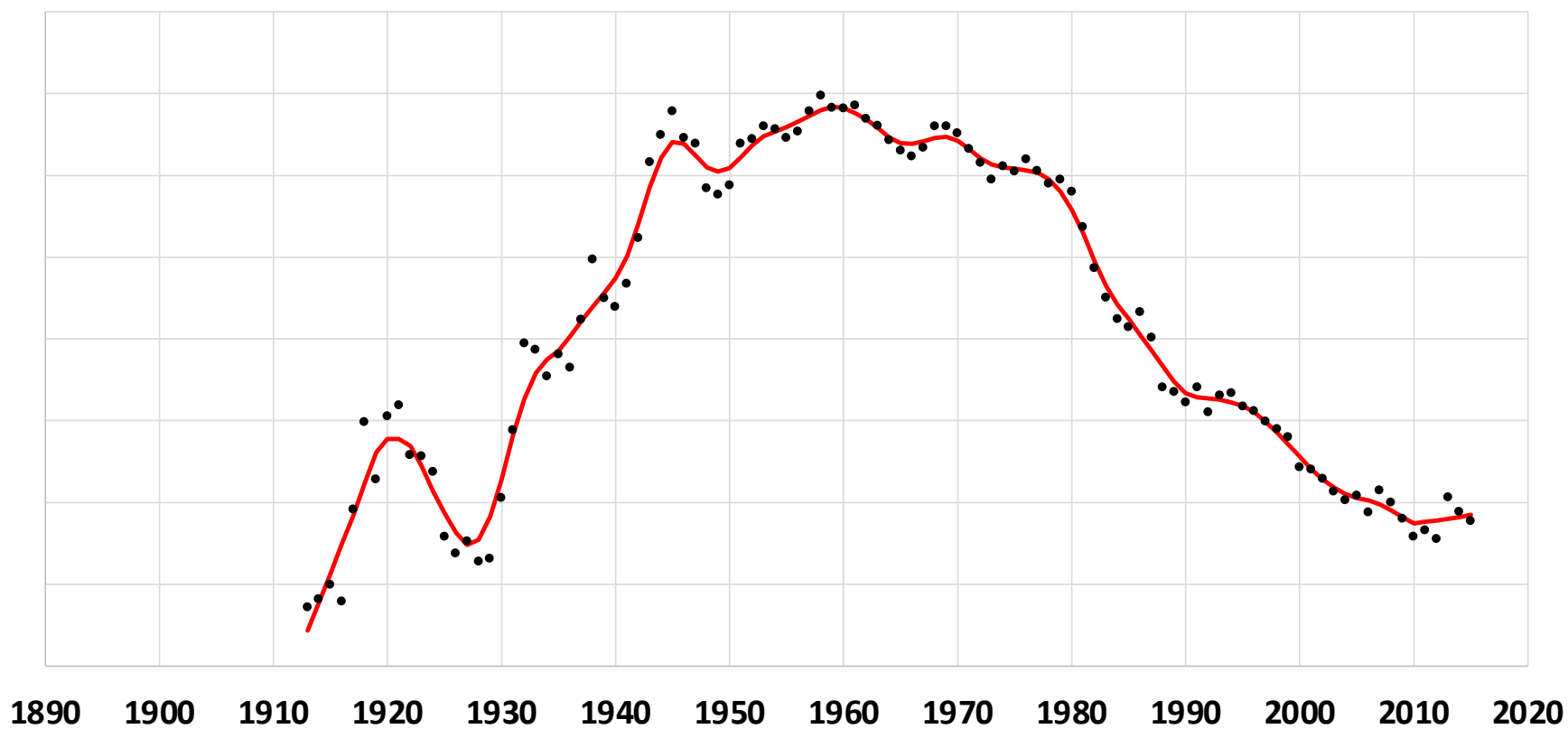
- Political polarization
- Economic inequality
- Social isolation
- Cultural self-centeredness

How did we get here?

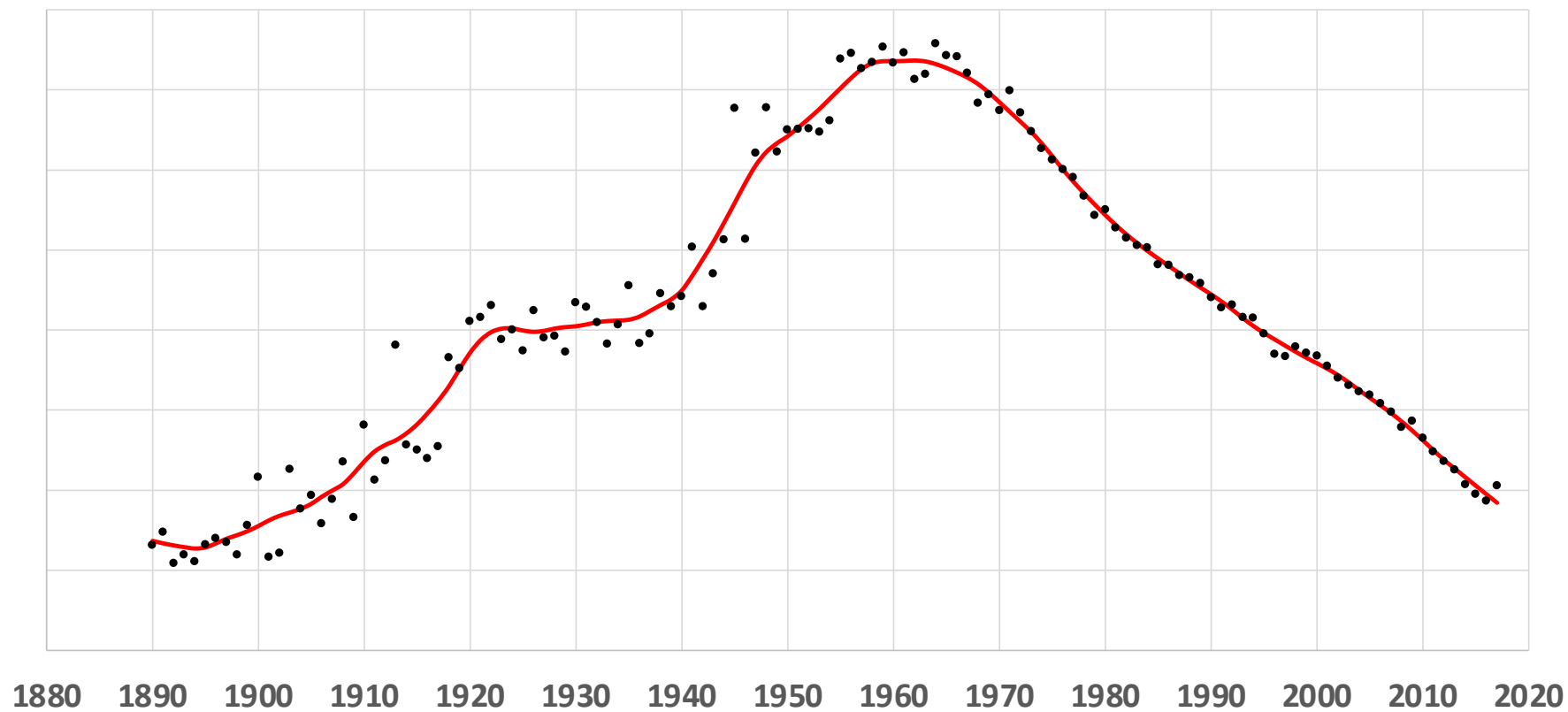
Political Comity (vs. polarization), 1895-2015



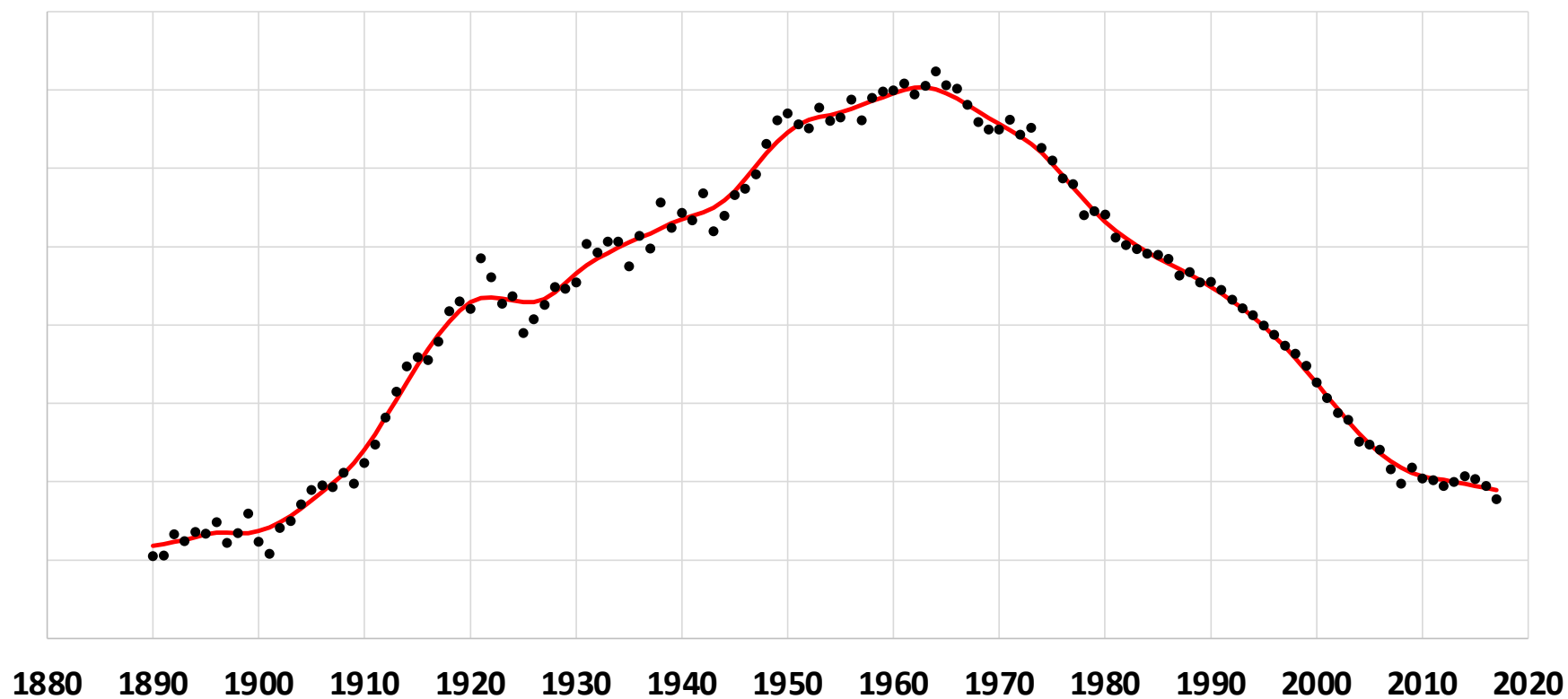
Economic Equality, 1913-2015



Social Cohesion, 1890-2017

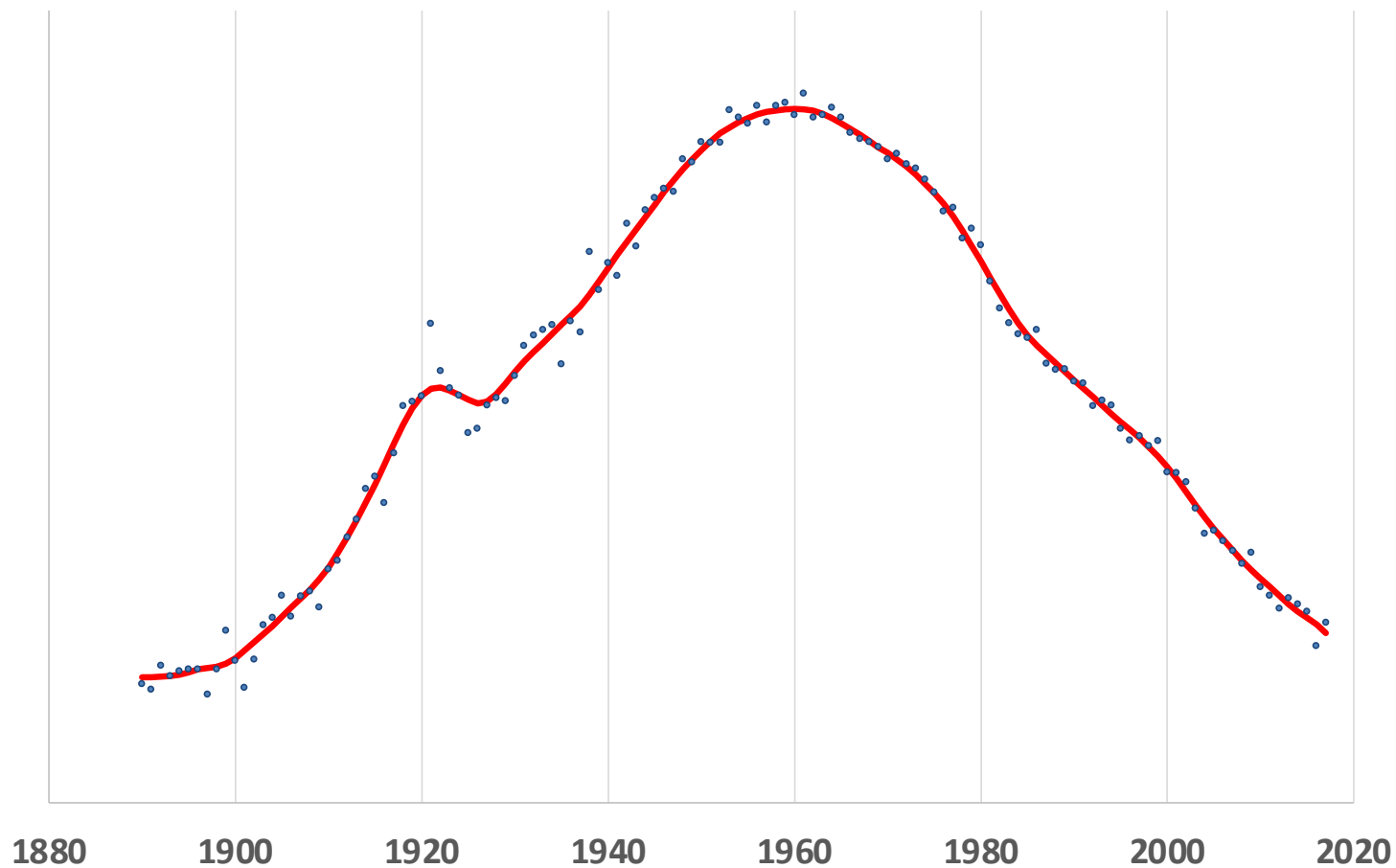


Cultural Solidarity, 1890-2017



America's I/we/I century, 1890-2020

Economics, Politics, Society, Culture



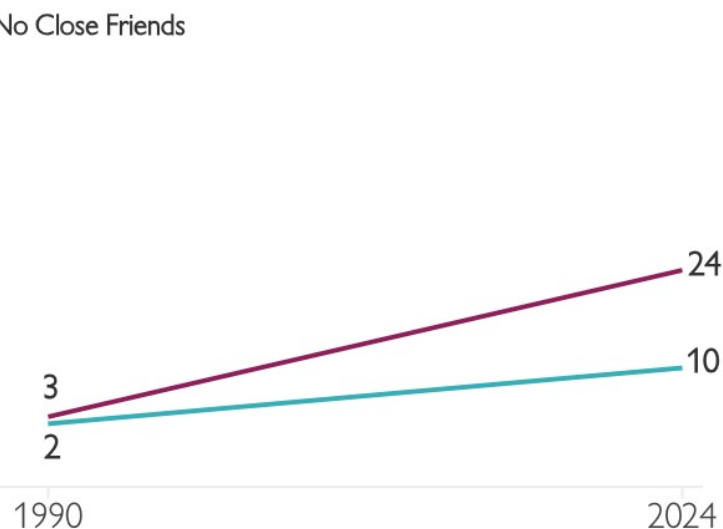
Increase in social isolation is concentrated among non-college-educated Americans

The Growing Class Divide in American Friendship

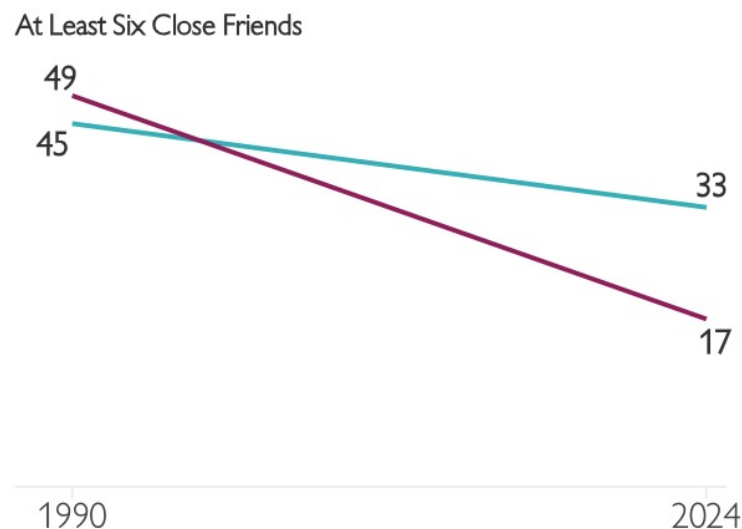
Percentage of Americans who report having the following number of close friends

■ Bachelor's Degree or Higher ■ High School or Less

No Close Friends



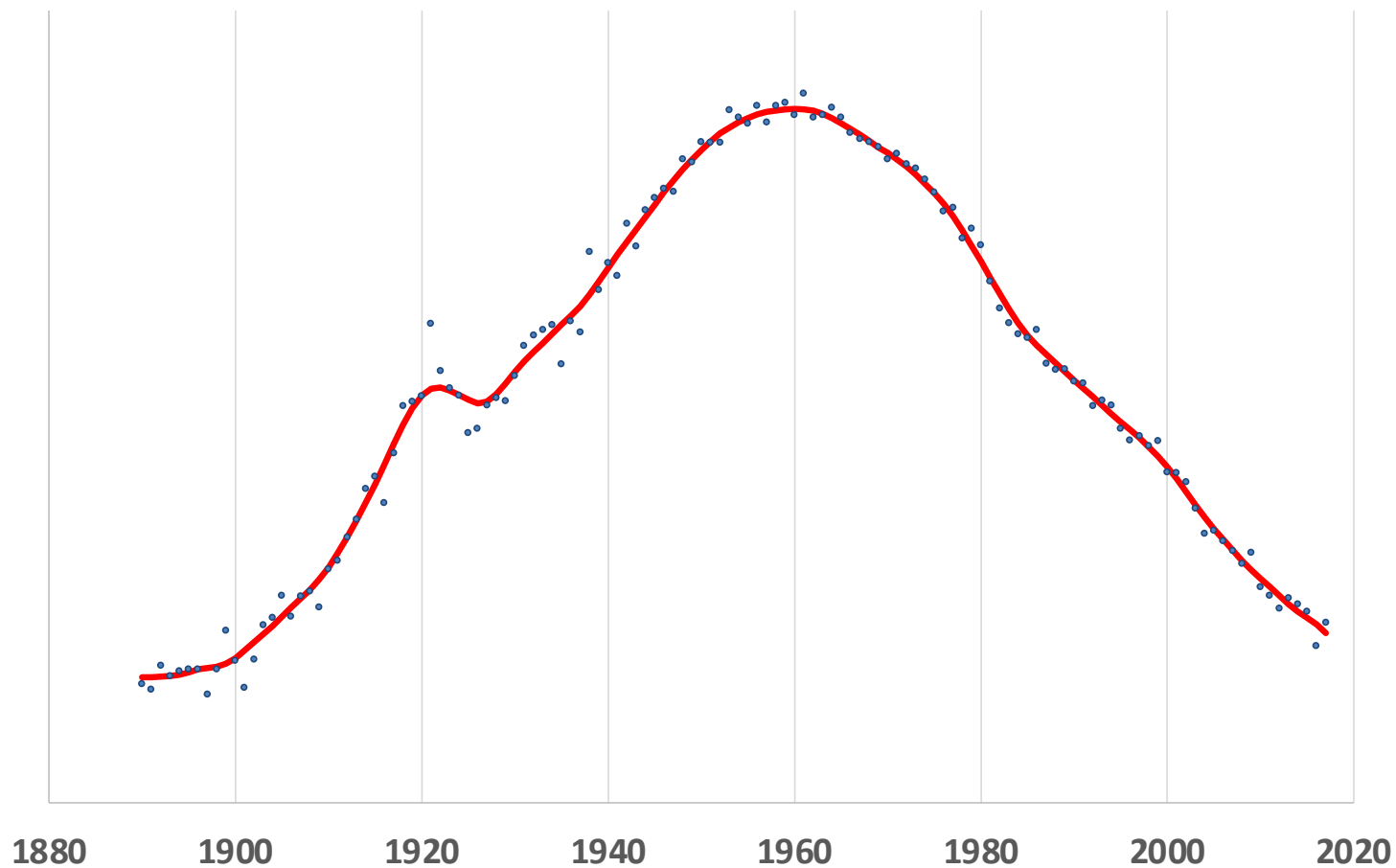
At Least Six Close Friends



Note: Survey of US adults ($N = 6,597$). Gallup survey conducted over the telephone.
Source: Gallup News Service Poll, 1990; American Social Capital Survey, 2024.

America's I/we/I century, 1890-2020

Economics, Politics, Society, Culture



THE BOTTOM LINE

The fundamental causes of our democratic crisis:

- **A shriveled sense of ‘we’**
- **Class-based social isolation**
- **Not just economics, but culture and
*recognition***

LESSONS FROM AMERICA'S LAST UPSWING (1)

- **History is not deterministic**
 - **We have agency**

LESSONS FROM AMERICA'S LAST UPSWING (2)

- **Go young**
- **Go local**
- **Go moral**

LESSONS FROM AMERICA'S LAST UPSWING (3)

Social renewal requires...

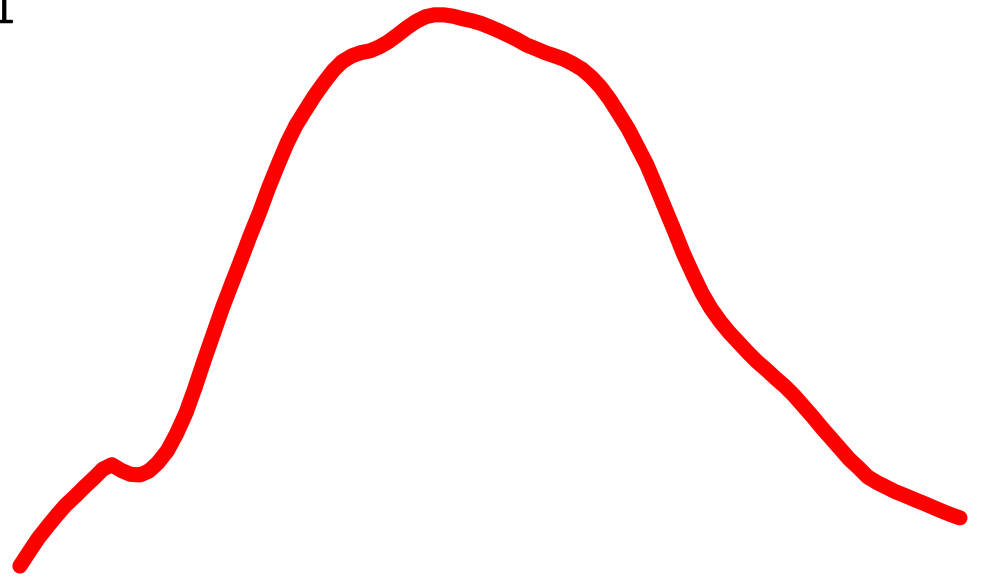
- **Social movements, like unions and suffragettes**
- **Must be fun, not civic broccoli**
- **Mentoring matters: coaches; clergy; Scouting**
- **Innovative spatial arrangements, like playgrounds and sports fields and public libraries**
- **Changed norms and moral renewal: We ≥ I**

“The fundamental weakness of
Western civilization is empathy.”

Elon Musk, February 28 2025

“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.”

President Theodore Roosevelt, 1901



Question 1 for discussion

Where in your life do you see high levels of SOCIAL COHESION and/or CULTURAL SOLIDARITY? What factors have contributed to this connectedness?

Question 2 for discussion

How can we incorporate these connective strengths into programs for ATTENTION ACTIVISM?