ON ALMOST ANY NIGHT OF THE WEEK, Churchill's Restaurant is hopping. The 10-year-old hot spot in Rockville Centre, Long Island, is packed with locals drinking beer and eating burgers, with some customers spilling over onto the street. "We have lots of regulars—people who are recognized when they come in," says co-owner Kevin Culhane. In fact, regulars make up more than 80 percent of the restaurant's customers. "People feel comfortable and safe here," Culhane says. "This is their place."

Thriving neighborhood restaurants are one small data point in a larger trend I call the new localism. The basic premise: the longer people stay in their homes and communities, the more they identify with those places, and the greater their commitment to helping local businesses and institutions thrive, even in a downturn. Several factors are driving this process, including an aging population, suburbanization, the Internet, and an increased focus on family life. And even as the recession has begun to yield to recovery, our commitment to our local roots is only going to grow more profound. Evident before the recession, the new localism will shape how we live and work in the coming decades, and may even influence the course of our future politics.

Perhaps nothing will be as surprising about 21st-century America as its settledness. For more than a generation Americans have believed that "spatial mobility" would increase, and, as it did, feed an inexorable trend toward rootlessness and anomie. This vision of social disintegration was perhaps best epitomized in Vance Packard's 1972 bestseller A Nation of Strangers, with its vision of America becoming "a society coming apart at the seams." In 2000, Harvard's Robert Putnam made a similar point, albeit less hyperbolically, in Bowling Alone, in which he wrote about the "civic malaise" he saw gripping the country. In Putnam's view, society was being undermined, largely due to suburbanization and what he called "the growth of mobility."

Yet in reality Americans actually are...
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houses and find new employment have dried up. In 2008, the total number of people changing residences was less than those who did so in 1962, when the country had 120 million fewer people. The stay-at-home trend appears particularly strong among aging boomers, who are largely eschewing Sunbelt retirement condos to stay tethered to their suburban homes—close to family, friends, clubs, churches, and familiar surroundings.

The trend will not bring back the corner grocery stores and the declining organizations—bowling leagues, Boy Scouts, and such—cited by Putnam and others as the traditional glue of American communities. Nor will our car-oriented suburbs replicate the close neighborhood feel so celebrated by romantic urbanists like the late Jane Jacobs. Instead, the we’re evolving in ways congruent with a postindustrial society. It will not spell the demise of Wal-Mart or Costco, but will express itself in scores of alternative institutions, such as thriving local weekly newspapers, a niche that has withstood the shift to the Internet far better than big-city dailies.

Our less mobile nature is already reshaping the corporate world. The kind of corporate nomadism described in Peter Kilborn’s recent book, Next Stop, Reloville: Life Inside America’s Rootless Professional Class, in which families relocate every couple of years so the breadwinner can reach the next rung on the managerial ladder, will become less common in years ahead. A smaller cadre of corporate executives may still move from place to place, but surveys reveal many executives are now unwilling to move even for a good promotion. Why? Family and technology are two key factors working against nomadism, in the workplace and elsewhere.

Family, as one Pew researcher notes, “trumps money when people make decisions about where to live.” Independence is replacing dependence. More parents are helping their children financially well into their 30s and 40s; the numbers of “boomerang kids” moving back home with their parents, has also been growing as job options and the ability to buy houses has decreased for the young. Recent surveys of the emerging millennial generation suggest this family-centric focus will last well into the coming decades.

Nothing allows for geographic choice more than the ability to work at home. By 2015, suggests demographer Wendell Cox, there will be more people working electronically at home full time than taking mass transit, making it the largest potential source of energy savings on transportation. In the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles, almost one in 10 workers is a part-time telecommuter. Some studies indicate that more than one quarter of the U.S. workforce could eventually participate in this new work pattern. Even IBM, whose initials were once jokingly said to stand for “I’ve Been Moved,” has changed its approach. Roughly 40 percent of the company’s workers now labor at home or remotely from a client’s location.

These home-based workers become critical to the localist economy. They will eat in local restaurants, attend fairs and festivals, take their kids to soccer practices, ballet lessons, or religious youth-group meetings. This is not merely a suburban phenomenon; localism also means a stronger sense of identity for urban neighborhoods as well as smaller towns.

Could the new localism also affect our future politics? Ever greater concentration of power in Washington may now be all the rage as the federal government intervenes, albeit often ineffectively, to revive the economy. But throughout our history, we have always preferred our politics more on the home-cooked side. On his visit to America in the early 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville was struck by the decentralized nature of the country. “The intelligence and the power are dispersed abroad,” he wrote, “and instead of radiating from a point, they cross each other in every direction.”

This is much the same today. The majority of Americans still live in a patchwork of smaller towns and cities, including many suburban towns within large metropolitan regions. There are well over 65,000 general-purpose governments, and with so many “small towns,” the average local jurisdiction population in the United States is 6,200, small enough to allow nonprofessional politicians to have a serious impact.

After decades of frantic mobility and homogenization, we are seeing a return to placeness, along with more choices for individuals, families, and communities. For entrepreneurs like Kevin Culhane and his workers at Churchill’s, it’s a phenomenon that may also offer a lease on years of new profits. “We’re holding our own in these times because we appeal to the people around here,” Culhane says. And as places like Long Island become less bedroom community and more round-the-clock locale for work and play, he’s likely to have plenty of hungry customers.

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