

Tocquevillian Associations and Democracy: A Critique

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Introduction

“In no country in the world has greater advantage been derived from association.” (Tocqueville 220)

Alexis de Tocqueville’s notion of political and civic association is a recurrent theme in his work *Democracy in America*. There he argues that associations are a necessary correlational feature of democratization that should be promoted “at the same speed as the spread of the equality of social conditions” (600). This is because they correct the natural defects of democracy in that they (i) protect against the systemic risk of tyranny of the majority, (ii) counteract the rising tendency to favor individualism and isolationism, and (iii) channel the energy of democracy. However, in the face of a decline in contemporary civil society, the question arises whether political and civic associations still ought to become more prevalent.¹

¹ Robert Putnam discusses this explicitly in his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community*.

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In this essay, I evaluate whether Tocquevillian associations remain valuable instruments useful for responding to the inherent defects of democracy in our contemporary world. To do this, I distinguish between the Tocquevillian conception of associations (traditional associations), evolutions of traditional associations (top-down affiliations), and new grassroots associations (bottom-up affiliations). I argue that top-down affiliations should be abandoned because they not only fail to correct the natural defects of democracy, but exacerbate them as a result of their professionalization.

Professionalization affects internal organizational structure and is marked by a shift toward centralized, businesslike enterprises. While professionalization initially began as an effort to increase an organization's legitimacy in order to advance the interests of its members, it has gone too far so as to produce existential crises—associations must now ask whether they exist to promote their own survival or to further the interests of their members. Furthermore, the “revolving door” phenomenon facilitates this centralization of power by enabling persons to inhabit multiple or all centers of power simultaneously. As a result, professionalization has infiltrated the very essence of associations and leads to a tendency to over-centralize power as experienced in the primary bodies of influence. This over-centralization of power within top-down affiliations has rendered them incapable of correcting the natural defects of democracy because those persons with authority in the primary bodies of influence are the same persons with authority in associations. The question of “who guards the guardians themselves?” has a lengthy lineage in political philosophy tracing back to the Roman author, Juvenal. While we are no closer to a definitive answer now, one answer has been emphatically offered: not the Guardians! Nevertheless, I will suggest that new bottom-up associations may avoid the problems of traditional associations and top-down affiliations, and that they offer a promising alternative to help preserve liberty against the threat of democratic excesses.

I. Defending against Tyranny of the Majority

“There are no countries where associations are more necessary to prevent tyranny of parties or the whims of princes than those whose social state is democratic.” (Tocqueville 224)

Tocqueville claims that democracies lack any inherent features to resist tyranny of the majority, unlike the aristocracies which preceded them. For Tocqueville, tyranny of the majority is the progeny of public opinion. This public opinion is so pervasive that it can, when left

unfettered, invade the legislative, executive, and judicial machinery of the state.² Thus, Tocqueville claims, a tyrant need not be any particular individual: “now, if you admit that an all-powerful man can abuse his power against his opponents, why not admit the same thing for a majority?” (293). Tocqueville argues that tyranny of the majority is created via both formal and informal means, such as legal and social coercion respectively.³ He alludes to two fundamental differences between democracies and aristocracies that increase the threat of despotism in the former. First, democracies encourage a spreading equality of conditions which replaces the vertical hierarchy of aristocracies with a more lateral popular sovereignty.⁴ Second, democracies considerably diminish the potential power and influence of an individual by diffusing power among the masses.

The first difference increases the risk of tyranny of the majority because the lack of a vertical hierarchy eliminates alternative centers of power. Unlike democracies, aristocracies benefit from natural associations, namely the estates. These estates act as secondary bodies to balance the distribution of power and to check abuses of power within the primary bodies (Tocqueville 293). For example, the presence of countervailing centers of power, such as the nobility and clergy, prevent a king from acting despotically because to do so would risk the rise of factitious movements. In contrast, the natural structure of society in democracy is constituted of independent persons who are largely disconnected from one another and who mostly lack resources rivaling those of the state. Thus, the voter, as sovereign, can act with immunity. Without some artificial mechanism, individuals will remain in a state of isolation as they have no preordained association by virtue of their social status. While one’s position in democracies is somewhat inherited because of the invisible “glass floor” and “glass ceiling,” this does not manifest itself in the form of homogenous class groups, as was the case in aristocracies.

² Tocqueville’s claim is in contradistinction to the view of John Locke, who believes that institutional safeguards such as the separation of powers doctrine are sufficient to prevent forms of tyranny. See Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, especially chapters 12, 13, and 14. However, Tocqueville argues that such safeguards are insufficient to prevent tyranny of the majority.

³ Tocqueville believes that the latter is the more dangerous as it is so insurmountably powerful that it can make one’s life unworthy of living. Despite this, it would be uncharitable to charge Tocqueville with crying fire during Noah’s flood, since he acknowledges that tyranny of the majority was not characteristic of America in the nineteenth century. Instead, he is making a social forecast about the prospect of a tyranny of the majority being realized.

⁴ For Tocqueville, the notion of equality is not merely materialistic but includes the idea that no significance is awarded to any differences between persons e.g. status (583–39).

The multiplicity and heterogeneity of classes in democracies marks a very different experience from aristocracies; their multiplicity means that they are unable to act as significant centers of power. Moreover, their heterogeneity means that they do not bequeath natural associations in the form of class groups. Consequently, individuals and minority groups are powerless to exert significant influence, and the power of the primary body prevails unchecked.

The second difference also lends itself to tyranny of the majority because, while aristocratic societies contained powerful and wealthy citizens who could perform enterprises independently of the state, democracies do not contain persons with vastly greater wealth and power than their co-citizens; thus, persons who live in a democratic society are individually weak. Moreover, even if a select few do manage to accumulate considerable amounts of wealth, they are unable to affect change outside of some kind of association. Consequently, individuals can achieve little, if anything, single-handedly (Tocqueville 597). Therefore, according to Tocqueville, associations are necessary to provide a counter-force to the power of the state, which is at the mercy of the majority. Furthermore, associations are required because institutional safeguards, such as the separation of powers doctrine, offer insufficient protection against democratic excesses.

The importance of associations stems from the unification of persons to create alternative centers of power, but they have become corrupted as they have evolved. Associations began as and remain a democratic replacement for the nobility and clergy of the aristocratic age, and they form a counter-force to the democratic majority, a primary body that has a propensity to over-centralize power. However, the problem Tocqueville tasks associations to resolve is one by which they are themselves afflicted: tyranny. This tyranny is the product of the aforementioned process of professionalization. Tocqueville identified the potential for tyranny to afflict associations in his discussion of European associations, albeit not for reasons of professionalization *per se*. However, it illustrates a degree of foresight that Tocqueville recognized the potential for associations to become tyrannical. In Europe, Tocqueville found that associations tend to “centralize the management of their forces as much as they can and entrust the power of all the members to a small number of leaders. As a result, there often reigns at the heart of these associations a tyranny as unbearable as that exercised in society by the government they are attacking” (227).

Tocqueville highlights that European associations necessarily centralize their power because it is the most conducive means to fulfilling their aims as they establish themselves as the “legislative and executive

council of the nation” (227). A multiplicity of evidence gives credibility to the claim that associations can be tyrannical. For example, within the National Rifle Association (NRA), 74 percent of its members favor requiring extended background checks for gun purchases, yet its leaders intransigently oppose any move in this direction (Clement). This trend toward centralization of power would have troubled Tocqueville because centralized institutions pose a greater threat than localized institutions. This is because centralization results in a higher power-distance relationship, and as power-holders become more distanced from members, scrutiny of the power-holders becomes increasingly problematic. Consequently, tyranny is best fostered where power is concentrated (Hopgood 12). Furthermore, Amnesty International (AI) was subjected to internal criticism from “keepers of the flame,” the vanguard of the old AI. These members advocated for continuity as a research-driven human rights organization, while another group of reformers advocated that AI needed “professionalizing to survive in the more market-oriented world of globalization” (Hopgood 12). This process of professionalization is not unique to AI, but has become pervasive among associations that were initially traditional. Essentially, professionalization involves centralization, creating top-down affiliations. These affiliations, in turn, create risks that are analogous with those created by the democratic state.

Today, top-down affiliations, in the form of professionalized interest groups, confer a new and more dangerous form of tyranny. This tyranny—unanticipated by Tocqueville—is the tyranny of a plutocratic minority. Rather than acting as a check on the general will, these new associations frustrate and distort it by capturing the state’s political machinery. Using economic means, they exert significant leverage on policy decisions, but the leverage exercised is reflective of vested interests, and their efficacy is a direct function of their wealth. Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, in “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” found that “in the United States . . . the majority does not rule” (576). Their research indicates that the general citizenry has a marginal impact on policy making, which is dominated by economic elites and business interest groups: “when the preferences of economic elites and the stands of organized interest groups are controlled for, the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy” (575).

A key element of what made associations effective against tyranny has been lost. Tocqueville observed that associations worked precisely because “Americans of all ages, conditions, and all dispositions constantly unite together” (596). That is, associations were conceived and joined by persons from all stations of life. Yet this admirable feature of political

associations is virtually absent today: political associations now are dominated by those in the upper quintiles of the income distribution. Even if those from “all stations of life” still join, their participation is qualitatively different—it is passive. Blind-obedience is the guiding principle of their participation, for they “respond to a word of command like soldiers on active service” (Tocqueville 227). These plutocrats are nearly impossible to dislodge because they maintain power by way of financial links and a revolving door such that they either glide between the political, corporate, and media worlds, or manage to inhabit them simultaneously (Jones). Thus, because modern associations are inhabited by people who are within the primary structure, they cannot independently check their own power. The efficacy of associations as a buffer to tyranny from the primary body relies on the premise of their separation and compartmentalization. When they are no longer compartmentalized, but are fluid structures, the independence of associations is no longer vouchsafed.

The coupling of organizational centralization and the existence of a revolving door both undermine the case for the continued prevalence of traditional and modern associations in democracies in the twenty-first century. Centralization and the revolving door afflict traditional associations and make them agents of tyranny rather than defenders against it. However, a new kind of association may present a solution. Bottom-up affiliations are not afflicted by the problem of tyranny inasmuch as they are decentralized organizations and the revolving door is not open for the underdog, i.e. the members. Because they are not professionalized, there is no centralization of power, for power is dispersed among its members. This equips bottom-up affiliations with a built-in buffer against the kind of tyranny found in their top-down counterparts.

II. Countering Rising Individualism and Isolationism

“Individualism is democratic in origin.” (Tocqueville 588)

In democratic America, Tocqueville observes that as the equality of conditions spreads, a dangerous disintegration of bonds between citizens occurs. This cutting of ties is the hallmark of individualism, a trait which Tocqueville describes as a “calm and considered feeling which persuades each citizen to cut himself off from his fellows and to withdraw into the circle of his family and friends” (587). As such, individualism strikes more rampantly in democracies in which persons noticeably withdraw from the domain of civil society to retreat to the domain of the individual. This

is problematic because while individualism is not equivalent to egoism, they merge in the long-run; thus, it no less dangerous, for both lead to an increasing and problematic state of individual isolationism (Tocqueville 588).

This isolationism marks a stark contrast to aristocratic societies. As Tocqueville notes: “aristocracy links everybody, from peasant to king, in one long chain. Democracy breaks the chain and frees each link” (Tocqueville 508). Thus when living in a democratic society, persons perceive no natural links to their ancestors, descendants, superiors, or inferiors. Furthermore, the relationships conceived in democracies are not as long-standing due to the absence of the power of natural links. As a result, while aristocratic societies connect their members and exude an aura of solidity and timelessness, democratic societies isolate and exude an aura of fragility and placelessness. This sense of placelessness, in turn, creates a sense of purposelessness. Whereas an aristocratic society pre-ordains one’s purpose by virtue of one’s class in an organic society, a democratic society, by nature, leaves one’s place and one’s purpose somewhat undetermined.

Tocqueville’s concern is that to be isolated in this way is fundamentally harmful; a person needs both connections and common pursuits. Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone*, expresses similar concerns, claiming that individualism and isolationism are dangerous because “social capital is essential for social movements” (153). Both Putnam and Tocqueville understand an important connection between positive social change and connectedness—if connectedness is lost, then change is disrupted. Moreover, the negative impact on society necessarily impacts individuals. Interestingly, Putnam implies that the relationship between social capital, i.e. connectedness, and social activism flows first from being connected and then to enacting change, rather than the desire for change leading to being connected: “friendship networks, not environmental sympathies, accounted for which Pennsylvanians became involved in grass roots protest after the Three Mile Island nuclear accident” (153). However, the development and growth of transnational associations proves the contrary because we can observe that friendship networks are not a necessary condition for associational participation.

Nevertheless, Tocqueville holds the position that individualism is not an inevitable crux of democracy and, moreover, that it can and should be resisted. He suggests that associations provide the greatest defense against individualism and isolationism. This is because they possess a uniquely transformative power, absent in its alternatives, whether they be aristocratic land nobles or democratic governments themselves.

Part of the power of associations are their ability to harness another aspect of individualism: self-interest. The notion of self-interest, as characterized by the self-centered Smithian moralist of the democratic age—what Tocqueville coins “self-interest properly understood”—frames the tendency in America for citizens to engage in associations (Tocqueville 609–13). Underlying this idea is the concept of cooperation. The tendency to justify our actions through our self-interest has become a dominant feature in democratic societies. Even those actions that are *prima facie* altruistic have been justified within this framework.⁵ Associations enable individuals to best fulfill their interests through, rather than in spite of, the public interest. As the general acceptance increases that “working for the happiness of all would be to the advantage of each citizen,” self-interest demands the formation of associations as a means of achieving this goal (Tocqueville 610). Thus, because it promulgates unification and cooperation via associations, the doctrine of self-interest acts as an effective antidote to rugged individualism. Moreover, since the increased connectivity within these associations allows for reliable cooperation between persons, defection from agreements of cooperation become less likely.⁶

Bottom-up affiliations would be more effective facilitators of private self-interest than traditional or top-down affiliations because they have generated benefits that their predecessors could not. For instance, inasmuch as membership is not locally bound, they can expeditiously acquire new members and are more resilient to attrition. They also have the potential to be larger in size. Numerical ascendancy is particularly important because it increases an association’s scope of influence as well as the chance of finding the best arguments and means to communicate those arguments persuasively (Tocqueville 225).

Despite these benefits, however, bottom-up affiliations also draw unique criticism. The predominant issue with bottom-up affiliations is that they can be labelled as “*cheap participation* . . . they can make a political statement of preference, without engaging in the costs (time and

⁵ We even justify actions whereby the primary beneficiaries are not ourselves in terms of our self-interest. International aid is the latest example. In fact, self-interest has become our *de facto* framework for justifying our decision-making procedures (Tran).

⁶ The Prisoner’s Dilemma model illustrates that though payoffs may be higher with cooperation, uncertainty in the actions of the other player may cause one or both to defect, thereby obstructing cooperation. However, if persons are connected via technology in ways parallel to how they would be in reality (e.g. in a town hall meeting), there is good reason to think that cooperation would be just as reliable. Consequently, private self-interest can be fulfilled through these associations also.

money) of real participations” (Putnam 160; emphasis added). This is the argument mobilized against a new cohort of affiliations such as Avaaz and 38 Degrees that stand accused of “slacktivism,” a type of so-called cheap participation (Kingsley). Such affiliations enable people to contribute to civic society without devoting excessive amounts of time into it, allowing more of their time to be consumed by commerce.

However, there is a sense in which cheap participation becomes a virtue: “part of its success is down to the ease with which you can get involved” (Kingsley). Because they are new grassroots movements, bottom-up affiliations are not afflicted by the centralization of top-down movements, as affiliations that evolved from traditional associations are. Avaaz and 38 Degrees represent a new organizational structure that is localized and decentralized so that members make key decisions and establish priorities. Essentially, these organizations act as conduits for their membership, removing the layers of elite-level decision making that characterized political groups in the twentieth century (Dennis). There is, therefore, less systemic risk in these new bottom-up affiliations, and they should be more prevalent in democracies than their predecessors.

III. Channeling the Energy of Democracy

“If an American were to be reduced to minding his own business, he would be deprived of half his existence.” (Tocqueville 284)

This notion emphasizes the importance of associations, which facilitate the transformation of energy into productive activities. Tocqueville suggests that the greatest gift of democratic government is evidently not skilled governance—which is better demonstrated in alternative political systems—but rather the spread of “a restless activity, an over-abundant force, an energy which never exists without it” (286). However this energy can potentially become problematic for democracies if it is not properly channeled. This potential harm is another reason that Tocqueville advocates for the prevalence of associations.

The energy of democracy is problematic because it is politically self-undermining. Rather than being used for political and social activism, much of the energy is processed by market forces: a constant desire to seek and fill gaps, to move jobs, to seek promotion, and to increase earnings (Tocqueville 643). Tocqueville recognized the strong potential for a deficit in political energy, and the likelihood that the democratic energy would be channeled into commerce rather than politics because commerce appeals not only to impassioned activity as politics does, but also to Americans’ desire for material goods (Berger 103). John Stuart

Mill also observed the power of commerce for channeling energy: “there is now scarcely any outlet for energy in this country except business” (78). Moreover, as consumerism has excelled exponentially since the advent of democracies, there is a greater importance ascribed to the desire for material goods. Hence, when impassioned activity can, *inter alia*, achieve this desire, it is almost self-evident that commerce will supersede civic or political associations in importance—in fact, such associations will remain important largely to the extent that they can improve the prospects of commerce. This means that political associations largely survive in the form of interest groups, which *prima facie* channel their energy into the political sphere but actually exist for the benefit of the commercial sphere. An archetypal organization of this character is the NRA, which is viewed by its members as contributing primarily to the political sphere, when in fact, its leaders view it as contributing primarily to the commercial sphere.

However traditional and modern associations are problematic because they often direct democratic energy in unproductive and ineffectual ways. First, the energy is not always seen through; it is amateurish in essence and can cede real progress as there are time lags in policy implementation. The competing demands on associations in the increasingly complex environments in which they are operating require careful balancing. Associations are compelled to choose between acting in the interest of their members or promoting their own survival through processes such as professionalization and centralization. Time lags give rise to a second problem, which is short-termism. The impatience of activists to see real results expeditiously, fuelled by the rise of information technology, means associations prefer quick campaigns irrespective of their long-term efficacy. The irregular funding arrangements of associations also motivates acting in the short-term rather than the long-term interest.

Nonetheless, as commerce is prioritized over civic and political engagement in the twenty-first century, new bottom-up affiliations allow individuals to engage publicly in less time consuming ways. Thus, bottom-up affiliations are potentially an ingenious solution to the problem of balancing the impassioned activity and desire for material goods. While I have suggested that traditional and modern associations are not as effective at processing democratic energy as supposed by Tocqueville, bottom-up affiliations have the comparative advantage of flexibility. This flexibility allows associational participation without a significant trade-off between the political and commercial sphere. It is for this reason that bottom-up affiliations are more effective at channeling democratic energy despite the aforementioned limitations.

Conclusion

While Tocqueville's observations regarding the natural defects of democratic societies are equally significant in the twenty-first century, the employment of traditional associations that Tocqueville had in mind as instruments to correct such defects would be ineffective. This essay has shown that traditional associations have been professionalized and that this process of professionalization has resulted in the creation of either top-down affiliations or interest groups, both of which are afflicted by a form of tyranny themselves. Furthermore, I have argued that traditional and modern associations are inferior instruments not only with regards to preventing individualism, but also with regards to effectively channeling democratic energy.

To show that traditional associations should not become more prevalent in democracies because of their ineffectiveness, I contrasted them with another organizational structure: bottom-up affiliations. These new associations are expanding exponentially. More importantly, they are more effective in addressing the defects in democracy that Tocqueville observed. First, they resist becoming tyrannical by maintaining decentralization. Second, they prevent an unhealthy individualism by harnessing self-interest and by embracing a cosmopolitan connectedness. Third, they allow for the direction of democratic energy with more flexibility, enabling persons to balance their commitment to civic activity with commerce. As earlier stated, the question of whether or not Tocquevillian associations should become more prevalent arises in the context of a proposed decline in civil society, yet to focus only on traditional associations neglects the rise of other participatory mechanisms, such as these new bottom-up affiliations; associations which are a promising prototype vanguard against democratic excesses.

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