Alexis de Tocqueville: The Role of Local Government and Religion in Shaping American Society

In the early 19th century, the United States stood as a bold experiment in self-government. This caught the attention of many curious thinkers around the world. One of them was a Frenchman named Alexis de Tocqueville.

Alexis de Tocqueville arrived in the United States in 1831 and spent 10 months traveling across the country. Officially, he and his friend Gustave de Beaumont were tasked by the French government with studying the American criminal justice system. However, Tocqueville also took the opportunity to examine the nation's unique political and social structures. He was very interested in understanding how democracy functioned in the United States, as France was struggling to transition from a monarchy to a democracy after the French Revolution.

Tocqueville wanted to learn how equality and liberty coexisted in the U.S., how its institutions prevented the abuse of power, and how its society maintained stability, unlike the chaos France had experienced during and after its revolution. The observations Tocqueville made during his trip became the foundation of his book, *Democracy in America*, which remains one of the most influential descriptions of American political and social life.

[**Editor's Note:** Alexis de Tocqueville uses the term "democracy" somewhat loosely in *Democracy in America*. While modern readers might interpret "democracy" narrowly to refer to a specific system of government characterized by majority rule, Tocqueville employed the term in a broader sense. For him, democracy primarily denoted a societal condition marked by the principle of *equality of conditions*—the idea that social hierarchies based on birth, wealth, or privilege are diminishing, and individuals increasingly see themselves as equal in rights and opportunities. Throughout his work, Tocqueville was very aware of the dangers of majority rule.]

When Tocqueville set out for the United States, he had "two conflicting passions" in mind: the feeling of needing "to be led" and the "wish to remain free."[1] If Tocqueville admired the United States, it was because that young country satisfied "them both at once."[2] To his delight, the United States was an egalitarian country—a place where people are equal—while preventing government overreach or abuse of power. It was a nation that promoted a desire for freedom while preventing an overreliance on a large, powerful government.

According to Tocqueville, this balance was achieved for two key reasons: the local town hall governments and the United States' unique religious character. Let's begin with the local governments. Tocqueville believed the "village or township" is "perfectly natural" because it creates itself whenever a group of people live near each other.[3] Not only do humans naturally form towns, but Tocqueville argued the town "must necessarily exist in all nations," because they "constitute the strength of free nations."[4]

Why would our local towns be responsible for making our country free? Local meetings, like a school board meeting or town hall meeting, "are to liberty what primary (elementary) schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it."[5]

In other words, local government is like a school that teaches you about liberty and the balance of powers. The local government teaches us because it is closest to us in our daily lives, which means we can participate in it. Because of this, a nation cannot be free without local government: "A nation may establish a system of free government, but without the spirit of municipal institutions it cannot have the spirit of liberty."[6]

America has always been a country centered around small, local communities. Long ago, when the Pilgrims came to America, they were given special rules from England called Royal Charters. These rules allowed them to set up their own local governments to make decisions for their towns. Since England—where the king and leaders lived—was over 5,500 miles away, it was difficult to closely govern the colonies. As a result, local government became a fundamental part of life in the United States.

> "In the township, as well as everywhere else, the people is the only source of power; but in no stage of government does the body of citizens exercise a more immediate influence. In America 'the people' is a master whose exigencies demand obedience to the utmost limits of possibility. . .Municipal independence is therefore a natural consequence of the principle of the sovereignty of the people in the United States: all the American republics recognize it more or less;"[7]

Tocqueville used the townships in New England as his main example of local government in the United States. The citizens' involvement in local affairs strengthened his/her loyalty and ensured the town's well-being and safety. By participating, the citizen learned self-governance, developed a love for liberty and order, understood the balance of power, and gained a clear sense of his rights and responsibilities: "he accustoms himself to those forms which can alone ensure the steady progress of liberty."[8]

At the local level, people could work to improve their own lives while also helping the common good.

He believed the goals of self-improvement and service to the community could go hand in hand. As Tocqueville put it, "American moralists do not hold that a man should sacrifice himself for his fellow man because it is a great thing to do; they boldly assert, rather, that such sacrifices are as necessary to the man who makes them as to the man who profits from them."[9] Therefore, local government at the city level lays the groundwork for a successful state and federal government.

[**Editor's note:** Tocqueville believed the Royal Charters and the local city governments heavily influenced the American Revolution. He portrayed it as a positive contrast to the French Revolution. The American Revolution "was the result of a mature and dignified taste for freedom, and not of a vague or ill-defined craving for independence."[10]]

While national and global issues often draw the most attention, local government has the greatest impact on daily life in many ways. It oversees schools, roads, neighborhood safety, water quality, and emergency services, directly shaping the community's well-being.

When talking about local governments, Tocqueville claimed, "I am acquainted with no people which has established schools as numerous and as efficacious, places of public worship better suited to the wants of the inhabitants, or roads kept in better repair."[11] Today, there are roughly 3,144 counties, over 13,000 school districts, and over 16,500 towns in the United States, proving that self-government is still, and will always be, fundamental for a free people.

As mentioned earlier, there was another part of the United States that fascinated Tocqueville: religion. He noted, "The religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention."[12] He observed that this religious passion was not merely a private matter but deeply connected to the spirit of the country.

This is no surprise since Tocqueville's visit was during the Second Great Awakening—a period of intense religious revival that spanned from the late 18th to early 19th century. This movement led to a significant increase in church membership and a heightened influence of Christianity on American culture.

Tocqueville observed that, unlike in Europe, where religion often conflicted with political freedom, in America, Christianity and democracy coexisted harmoniously, with religion providing a moral foundation that supports democratic government.

[**Editor's note:** The First Great Awakening laid out many principles enshrined in the American Founding. The religious movement promoted the principles of self-reliance and self-government by making the acceptance of Christ a personal decision in the hearts of everyone.]

He claimed that among the Americans, although religion "never directly involved itself in the

government of society," it was still "the first of their political institutions," for "if it did not give them a taste for liberty, it singularly facilitated their use of it."[13] In other words, religion might not always create a desire for freedom, but it is necessary to preserve freedom.

This discovery was significant to Tocqueville because of the contrasting view in his home country, France. In France, many believed that religion, particularly Christianity, was "the natural enemy of democracy."[14] When the French Revolution broke out two generations earlier, its supporters of liberty mistakenly combined their hatred of the monarchy with an aggressive attack against Christianity during the Reign of Terror.

[**Editor's Note:** A notable event in this effort was the Festival of Reason, celebrated in 1793. During the festival, a statue symbolizing the French Revolution—the "Goddess of Reason"—was placed on the high altar of Notre Dame Cathedral.[15] The revolutionary calendar, adopted in 1793, removed religious influences by eliminating Sundays and replacing Christian holidays with revolutionary ones, further reflecting anti-clerical goals. As a Christian whose parents were jailed during the French Revolution, Tocqueville was very interested in America's religious identity.[16]]

However, Tocqueville argued that, because the Second Great Awakening united all Christians under the idea of equality, "in the United States no religious doctrine displays the slightest hostility to democratic and republican institutions. The clergy of all the different sects hold the same language, their opinions are consonant to the laws, and the human intellect flows onwards in one sole current."[17] In the United States, "the spirit of Religion and the spirit of Liberty," have been "admirably incorporated and combined."[18]

Tocqueville not only rejected the idea that Christianity was against freedom, but he went further, arguing that the "equality of conditions is more complete in the Christian countries."[19] For Tocqueville, "the most profound" minds "of Rome and Greece," were "never able to reach the idea, at once so general and so simple, of the common likeness of men, and of the common birthright of each to freedom."[20] Tocqueville also claimed that it was required that Jesus Christ come to Earth to make men understand that "all the members of the human race are by nature equal and alike."[21]

To understand his reasoning, we need to look at Tocqueville's biggest worry about democracy in the United States. Tocqueville feared the majority abusing and taking away the freedoms of the minority. This is something the Founding Fathers feared as well. In *Federalist No. 51*, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton wrote, "If a majority be united by a common interest, the rights of the minority will be insecure."[22]

Tocqueville agreed that unlimited power is dangerous, and the power of the majority is

potentially unlimited in the United States:

> "When an individual or a party is wronged in the United States, to whom can he apply for redress? If to public opinion, public opinion constitutes the majority; if to the legislature, it represents the majority, and implicitly obeys its injunctions; if to the executive power, it is appointed by the majority, and remains a passive tool in its hands; the public troops consist of the majority under arms; the jury is the majority invested with the right of hearing judicial cases."[23]

Tocqueville concluded that nothing within the United States' political system, on its own, could serve as a strong safeguard against the tyranny of the majority. Yet, what fascinated him was that, with the significant exception of slavery, the majority in the United States did not oppress the minority, as was common in European countries like France at the time. Why was this?

Tocqueville believed that it had less to do with the United States' constitutional form of government and more with what he commonly called the "habits of the heart." One of the most important habits Tocqueville observed among Americans was the habit of restraint, grounded in Christianity. In the United States, Christianity "reigns without any obstacle."[24] As a result, "the human mind is never left to wander across a boundless field; and, whatever may be its pretensions, it is checked from time to time by barriers which it cannot surmount."[25]

In simple terms, when one believes in God, not everything is permitted or good, even if the laws of the country allow it: "Thus whilst the law permits the Americans to do what they please, religion prevents them from conceiving, and forbids them to commit, what is rash or unjust."[26]

The American system of government offered few protections against the dominance of the majority. Instead, it was the values of the American people—particularly their religious principles—that served as the most effective safeguard against tyranny: "In America religion is the road to knowledge, and the observance of the divine laws leads man to civil freedom."[27]

The Founding Fathers thought religion was necessary too. They established a government independent of religious authority but believed that it required a religious foundation.

In his *Farewell Address*, President George Washington reminded his fellow Americans that "religion and morality are indispensable supports," that serve as the "firmest props of the duties of men and citizens," and "lead to political prosperity."[28] He further argued that morality relies on religion: "Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."[29]

So, because the Founding Fathers thought religion was necessary for good government, they protected it by not establishing a state religion.

This gave people the freedom to worship as they wanted. Tocqueville observed that religion "never instructs the Americans more fully in the art of being free than when it says nothing of freedom."[30]

To summarize Tocqueville's point: In his view, Americans developed the ability to manage their own problems at the local level, where they are directly involved in decision-making. This involvement taught them to expect accountability from public officials and to actively participate in civic life. By engaging in local governance, citizens learned how democratic systems worked and built the habits of responsibility, self-governance, and political engagement.

This experience at the local level, according to Tocqueville, laid the groundwork for the success of larger state and federal democratic systems. Furthermore, religion, particularly Christianity, promotes a commitment to the common good, providing a moral foundation that helps prevent the majority from abusing its political power.

Footnotes

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