

**SQUARING THE CIRCLE: THE MULTIPLE PURPOSES
OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN TOCQUEVILLE'S
*DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA****

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When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States, he was amazed by the new uses to which Americans put voluntary associations. In his classic work, *Democracy in America*, he wrote that “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all minds are constantly joining together in groups.” From commercial corporations to religious and moral societies to political parties and hospitals, Americans formed associations to pursue common objectives. Associating, Tocqueville argued, teaches citizens how to cooperate. It protects liberty from the dual threats of atomistic individualism and despotism. He considered the “science of association” to be “the fundamental science” in a democracy.¹

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Tocqueville’s observations have gained new life among intellectuals interested in civil society and the role of voluntarism in civic life. Some might argue that Tocqueville is all things to all people. That Tocqueville can be used by writers of different intellectual perspectives might lead us to dismiss his ideas as inchoate or contradictory. This would be a mistake. Instead, it is precisely because Tocqueville understood that voluntary associations in civil society had

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multiple, and at times contradictory, purposes that his words should be remembered. Instead of using Tocqueville to serve distinct purposes, then, we can see in his comments in *Democracy in America* a way to reconcile opposing writings on civil society today.

This essay will provide a brief overview of what Tocqueville observed – that is, what antebellum American civil society looked like – and then use this context to provide a more balanced appraisal of Tocqueville’s ideas about voluntary associations. It will conclude with some questions concerning the relationship between social capital and democratic deliberation.

There are three major modes in which we today discuss the value of associations: the pluralist, the deliberative or civic, and the communitarian.² Each relies on particular elements of Tocqueville’s discussion of associations while downplaying others and, in doing so, distorts the multiple uses Tocqueville assigned to associations. The most influential current reading of Tocqueville is that made by neo-Tocquevillian communitarian social scientists such as Robert D. Putnam who emphasize the importance of associational life to producing “social capital,” or the “networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”³ This communitarian rendering of Tocqueville takes account of only one aspect of Tocqueville’s discussion of associations, namely their role in mitigating the problems of individualism. Communitarians argue that Tocqueville’s observations – and by extension the voluntary associations that proliferated in 1830s America – were mediating institutions that linked individuals to their communities. They ignore the equally important role Tocqueville assigned associations as a check on the “tyranny of the majority.”

Pluralists, unlike communitarians, emphasize diversity. Some pluralists value associations for their private uses, most notably for their role in allowing individuals and groups in a diverse society to explore and to fulfill their own conceptions of the good.⁴ Political pluralists, on the other hand, are more concerned with the public utility of associations, in particular the role of associations in giving expression to competing interests in the political realm. The political pluralist reading of Tocqueville was particularly salient in the context of the Cold War when Americans compared American civil society with its totalitarian counterpart.⁵ In 1953, Robert Nisbet invoked

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Tocqueville to defend pluralism, arguing that “In the present age, he who cries Unity will inevitably have more listeners than he who cries, so irrelevantly it must seem, Plurality and Diversity.” (How much things have changed since then!) Nisbet continued that “it is the continued existence of this array of intermediate powers in society, of this plurality of ‘private sovereignties,’ that constitutes, above anything else, the greatest single barrier to the conversion of democracy from its liberal form to its totalitarian form.”⁶ To pluralists, associations provide a check on the power of the majority – or the state – to impose one set of moral values or conception of the good on all citizens in a diverse society.

Political pluralists share much in common with those who may be called the civic or deliberative school.⁷ These writers argue that associations are most important for mobilizing citizens and encouraging sustained debates over the common good. Jean L. Cohen, for example, contends that the absence of the public sphere is “the most glaring defect” of Robert D. Putnam's recent work on voluntarism. The civic school accepts that political life is often contested. As Benjamin Barber writes, “Ideological argument is an expression of the conflict of interests, and conflict is the *raison d'être* of politics.”⁸ Although not every writer accepts all the principles about deliberative democracy as outlined by Jürgen Habermas or John Rawls⁹, they agree that democratic politics are more important than community. According to Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, communitarians overemphasize “the neo-Durkheimian stress on social trust as the essence of democracy. Democracy, after all, grew up historically out of century-long struggles among social groups and between state authorities and their subjects.”¹⁰

Communitarians also value civic engagement and public deliberation, but they go one step further and suggest that associations will not only revitalize democratic public life but will do so in a way that will encourage social and political harmony. For many sociologists, the communitarian perspective emerged from the study of complex organizations and, in particular, how social capital is generated within them. These works also emphasize the importance of associations as mediating structures between the individual and the civic community.¹¹ Communitarians invoke Tocqueville as one of the first observers of American society to recognize the role of associations in overcoming the democratic tendency towards

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atomistic individualism by bringing Americans together into groups. According to Robert N. Bellah and his team, “Tocqueville argues that a variety of active civic organizations are the key to American democracy. Through active involvement in common concerns, the citizen can overcome the sense of relative isolation and powerlessness that results from the insecurity of life in an increasingly commercial society.” Bellah concludes that to Tocqueville associations were “the best bulwark against the condition he feared most: the mass society of mutually antagonistic individuals, easy prey to despotism.” Although Bellah acknowledges that Tocqueville considered associations in part a check on “the tendencies of centralized government to assume more and more administrative control,” he is more interested in Tocqueville's belief that joining associations “was in itself capable of generating a sense of responsibility for the public good.”¹²

All three readings emphasize different aspects of Tocqueville's writings. To understand how these readings relate to what Tocqueville would have observed, we turn now to the world he visited.

The America Tocqueville visited was riven by factions, special interests, and political conflict.¹³ In time, some of these tensions would produce a civil war. It was also a period of extremely high social capital. More citizens were participating in grass roots voluntary associations than ever before in American history. Thousands of American men and women joined reform associations to promote such causes as the observation of the Sabbath, temperance, antislavery, and female suffrage.¹⁴ Political parties mobilized voters in localities throughout the nation. Elections were heavily contested. Voting rates climbed steadily. Real issues were on the table, including the tariff, the expansion of America (and slavery) westward, war and peace, and moral values.¹⁵ While only white men were included in the political nation, women and African-Americans participated in public life through their membership in associations.¹⁶ It was a time when citizens believed that organizing could affect change.

High levels of social capital produced intense social and political conflict. In the decades following the American Revolution, American leaders had struggled to limit the spread of associations in order to protect the common good from being subverted by special

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interests.¹⁷ To many observers, it looked like their most dire predictions had come to pass. Instead of promoting the common good, society was divided into competing interests each claiming to serve common good. How could the republic survive?

Participants of the various reform movements, of course, believed that their cause served the common good. Sabbatarians argued that since republics require virtuous citizens, protecting the Sabbath would encourage citizens to attend church and learn moral values. Advocates of temperance argued that alcoholism was a grave threat to civic well-being. By authorizing the sale of liquor, the state allowed citizens to drink away their hard-earned money and to engage in vice. Similarly, antislavery activists and female suffragists believed that their cause was inseparable from the republic's. And the leaders of each political party claimed that their platforms alone served the people's true interests.

Reformers appealed to public opinion. Historians have noted the rise of public opinion as the ultimate authority in antebellum democracy.¹⁸ Tocqueville also commented on the authority of public opinion in a democracy: "In democratic nations the public possesses a singular power, of which no aristocratic nation can even conceive. Rather than persuade people of its beliefs, it imposes them, it permeates men's souls with them through the powerful pressure that the mind of all exerts on the intelligence of each."¹⁹ Reformers argued that it was up to citizens to shape public opinion. If citizens did not step up to the plate, leaders would be free to promote their own agendas without any check from the body of the people.

Finally, antebellum civil society was rampant with class conflict. In the midst of industrialization, workers experienced a relative drop in their status as they became full-time employees. Laborers organized to protect their autonomy and to improve their working conditions. Their efforts were resisted by leaders in both parties. Democrats argued that labor unions threatened individual freedom in the marketplace. Whigs agreed, but they also emphasized that laborers used their collective power to promote their class interests instead of the public's. In either case, laborers faced stringent legal limits on their ability to associate and met with much hostility.²⁰

There were many concerns about this new civil society. To those who opposed the reform movements, their power and passion

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appeared downright dangerous. Thousands of citizens were being mobilized to promote specific causes. They influenced public opinion and pressured lawmakers. Their organized power was felt not only by their neighbors but in the halls of power. Members of both major parties criticized the new movements. Their critique should be taken with a grain of salt since the new groups competed with parties for the hearts and minds of voters.²¹ Nonetheless, these criticisms were in the air when Tocqueville arrived and they influenced how he made sense of the proliferation of associations and their role in public life.

The most convenient way to explore critics' fears is by examining two major controversies that took place around the time Tocqueville visited, the first over sabbatarianism and the second over Antimasonry. Sabbatarians were evangelicals committed to protecting the Sabbath. While the roots of the sabbatarian movement can be found as early as 1809, the conflict exploded in 1825 for two reasons. First, Congress renewed a rule mandating that post offices be kept open on Sundays in violation of the Sabbath. Second, by the 1820s, religious leaders had discovered the power of using voluntary associations to mobilize citizens at the grass roots to pressure political leaders. The Rev. Lyman Beecher and his allies quickly organized the General Union for the Promotion of the Christian Sabbath and sent agents and fliers out to evangelicals throughout the nation. Everywhere, new local associations popped up to protect the Sabbath and to petition Congress to repeal the rule. By May 1829, 467 petitions had been sent to Congress; by 1831, the number topped nine hundred.²² Evangelicals mobilized their base so efficiently that for a few short years the General Union claimed over one percent of the national population, the number sociologist Theda Skocpol employs as a benchmark of a powerful association.²³

The Jacksonian Democrats believed that the sabbatarians threatened the separation of church and state and thus endangered important civil liberties. They disapproved of the efforts of organized citizens to force their own worldview on other Americans. The most adamant – and famous – expression of the Democrats' perspective came from Senator Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky. In his January 1829 report for the Senate committee on the post office, Johnson accused sabbatarians of seeking a union of church and state. "The principles of our Government," Johnson wrote, "do not recognize in the majority any authority over the minority, except in matters which

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regard the conduct of man to his fellow man.”²⁴ In 1830, Johnson reiterated his earlier position and the movement slowly dissolved. In 1832, the General Union disbanded.²⁵

If Democrats were concerned about protecting civil liberties, National Republicans and later Whigs worried about impassioned social movements that promoted special interests. Nationals and Whigs believed that citizens in a republic must put aside their own interests to serve the common good. In sabbatarianism, however, a small but loud minority pressured voters and politicians to support a narrow interest. The most eloquent criticism came from the Rev. William Ellery Channing. In an 1829 essay, Channing noted that “everything is done now by Societies” but “no general principles” exist to judge them. Channing began with the assumption that the ideal citizen would “control or withstand the social influences to which he is at first subjected.” In other words, a good citizen must resist the force of public opinion and follow his/her conscience. In mass movements like sabbatarianism, however, citizens “substitute the consciences of others for our own” and are “swept away by a crowd.” Such citizens were little better than slaves. Organized mass movements were “at war with the spirit of our institutions,” Channing argued, because they enabled a powerful cadre of elite ministers to promote “as cruel a persecution” as in “a despotism.” Sabbatarians’ reliance on the “sway by numbers” would “create tyrants as effectively as standing armies.” It was the duty of citizens to resist associations “directed by the tyranny of the few.” Channing concluded that associations allowed evangelicals to manipulate public opinion “tyrannically against individuals or sects,” proving that “public opinion is often unjust.” If they became too powerful, mass membership associations would become “a kind of irregular government created within our Constitutional government.” Channing hoped that sabbatarians would not allow their associations to be “perverted to political purposes” and “meddle with government.”²⁶

Perhaps nowhere were Channing’s fears more legitimate than in the case of Antimasonry. The immediate cause of Antimasonry was the disappearance and supposed murder of William Morgan in western New York state in 1826. Morgan, a Mason, had decided to publish the secrets of Masonry in violation of his fraternal oath of secrecy. A Freemasonic mob attempted to burn down the printing

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press that was to publish Morgan's exposé. Morgan was arrested on specious grounds and, after someone mysteriously paid his bail, he disappeared and was never heard from again. Many citizens were convinced that Freemasons had used their influence to take Morgan hostage and to kill him, although Morgan sightings came in from Canada and even from Turkey.²⁷ Although the immediate source of Antimasonry is clear, the movement's rapid growth throughout the North had deeper causes. Antimasons were composed largely of evangelical middle-class citizens who considered Masonry a moral threat to the republic. Antimasons argued that Masonry's emphasis on Enlightenment values would undermine the supposedly Christian foundation of American democracy. In addition to their moral concerns, Antimasons also had a political agenda. Political Antimasons believed that Masonry corrupted American democracy by forging secret bonds between leaders. They pointed out that no political leader was punished for William Morgan's disappearance. Since Masonry exerted its influence over all leaders, to save the republic voters should elect candidates who were neither members nor defenders of the fraternity.²⁸

Antimasonry was a new kind of political movement that took place within a new civil society. With the exception of their most prominent political and religious leaders, Antimasons were self-organized, largely middle-class men and women committed to eradicating Masonry. They originally formed "people's committees" in towns throughout the nation which, as their name suggests, claimed to represent the true interests of the people against corrupt leaders.²⁹ The movement soon morphed from a pressure group into a political party. In the final years of the 1820s, Antimasons ran candidates in local and state elections. In 1830, they held a national convention in Philadelphia. In 1831, Antimasons were the first party to institute popular nominating conventions. (Previously, parties nominated candidates in closed sessions of congressional leaders.)³⁰ Among their more prominent members was former President John Quincy Adams, who in 1833 ran on the Antimasonic ticket for governor of Massachusetts. Although he lost, he prevented Massachusetts Whigs from securing a majority, proving just how powerful social movements could be in civil society.

Democrats and National Republicans (and later Whigs) reacted with hostility towards the Antimasonic movement. Both parties raised

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ideological objections to Antimasonry's goals. Echoing their claims about the sabbatarians, Democrats argued that no party or association in civil society ought to be allowed to impose its moral agenda on other citizens. Democrats were convinced that Antimasons, inspired by sectarian zeal, would use state power to serve their religious purposes. They considered Antimasons "bigots in religion and fanatics in politics." They accused Antimasons of wanting "to introduce a despotism as complete, odious and oppressive, as that of Ferdinand or Don Miguel."³¹

National Republicans also framed their arguments around protecting minority rights. Nationals accused the Antimasons of supporting the "terrors of proscription" by imposing a theological test on political candidates. They noted that in a republic, "opinion shall be free from political power as well as legal restraint." Americans should not permit "the beginning of a system of intolerance, that may in its course successively proscribe every party in Government and every sect in religion." Antimasons hoped to "drive free men from their principles and their associations by violence and by exclusion from the privileges of citizens."³² Antimasons were "a combination among the sects, to seize the civil power."³³

Antimasons responded that it was their right as citizens to speak out and to urge voters to support candidates who disapproved of Masonry.³⁴ One Antimasonic writer commented, "we are told that political antimasonry is a monstrous office," and that Antimasons could only "disapprove of masonry morally, but that it is an outrage upon civil liberty and the rights of conscience, to deprive masons" of political office. Yet, the writer wondered, was this not the very meaning of democracy? "If any class of citizens wish to bring about what they consider an important reform, if they wish to have laws passed to remedy what they consider political evils, have they not a right to be fairly represented whenever they hold a majority of the votes?" The issue was one of "numbers," namely who could secure the most votes by convincing "public opinion."³⁵

These debates – as divisive as they were – were just the beginning. In January 1831, William Lloyd Garrison published the inaugural edition of his antislavery newspaper *The Liberator*. In 1832, a month before Tocqueville's departure for Le Havre, Garrison and his colleagues established the New England Anti-Slavery Society and

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committed themselves to the immediate abolition of slavery. Like sabbatarians and Antimasons, abolitionists relied on the press and on hired agents to organize citizens across the country. By 1838, the American Anti-Slavery Society claimed over thirteen hundred auxiliary associations.³⁶ Abolitionists forced antislavery onto the public agenda through mailings, speeches, and petitions. In response, Congress passed the infamous gag rule which prohibited its members from introducing or discussing antislavery petitions. The rule violated citizens' right to communicate with their elected leaders and for those leaders to bring their constituents' concerns before Congress, a point John Quincy Adams made with much eloquence in the House of Representatives at the risk of being censured by his colleagues.³⁷ In 1835, President Andrew Jackson called for a national censorship law to silence abolitionists. Abolitionist speakers were subject to violence in northern towns,³⁸ while southerners refused to allow abolitionists to distribute their material through the U.S. Post Office.³⁹

The above discussion, although brief, should make clear that antebellum civic life was far from harmonious. Deep divisions separated different groups within the polity. These divisions manifested themselves not only in the rivalry between different associations and parties but also, at times, in violence. When Tocqueville arrived in the United States, therefore, he would not have observed a society in which associations reinforced communal norms and encouraged social and political unity, as communitarians claim. Instead, he, and his informants, realized that associations were vital agents in fostering conflict. Sabbatarianism and Antimasonry spawned intense public debates about the virtues and vices of associations, a debate to which Tocqueville must have paid attention.

Alexis de Tocqueville concluded that associations serve varied – and contradictory – purposes in a democracy by simultaneously building social capital while ensuring democratic deliberation and the protection of minority rights.⁴⁰

Tocqueville would agree with communitarians that associations check the dangers of individualism. But it is worth making clear what that danger was. Tocqueville is explicit that the primary purpose of associating is to protect liberty from an expansive state. Tocqueville worried that without an aristocracy to serve as a barrier against state

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power, there would be no force capable of preventing the state from becoming despotic. In aristocratic societies, Tocqueville noted drawing from Montesquieu, “secondary bodies” such as the nobility “constitute natural associations that halt abuses of power.” But in a democracy, where citizens are equal and the state recognizes no intermediaries (with the exception of the states within the federal system), Tocqueville believed that there would be “no impediment to any form of tyranny.” In a democracy, all individuals are equal, and thus equally powerless. Only by joining together could individual citizens halt abuses of state power.

It was not until the concluding sections of the final book in *Democracy in America* that Tocqueville most clearly laid out why the freedom of association is fundamental to protecting liberty. Comparing Europe to the United States, Tocqueville argued that in Europe the sovereign power was slowly expanding into all spheres of social and political life. In such an environment, it would take “considerable intelligence, science, and art to organize and maintain secondary powers...and to create, in a situation characterized by the weakness of individual citizens, free associations that are in a position to struggle against tyranny without destroying order.”⁴¹ In other words, Europe needed to foster the same spirit of associating so prevalent in America. In Europe, however, the sovereign was frightened of associations because they challenged the sovereign's right to do as it willed. But this is exactly why they were necessary. Unfortunately, Tocqueville wrote, the laws of Europe restricted the freedom of association: “In all the nations of Europe, certain associations are not allowed to organize until the state has examined their statutes and authorized their existence.” Tocqueville worried that unless Europeans defended the freedom of association, the time would come when the state “would soon claim the further right to supervise and control these associations.”⁴²

Tocqueville also shared contemporary concerns about individual alienation. He believed that associations brought citizens out of their isolation and into contact with each other, building bonds of affection that transcended immediate self-interest. In associations, Tocqueville wrote, “Feelings are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another.” Communitarians are thus correct to emphasize the role Tocqueville assigned to associations in fostering community. For

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Tocqueville, it was in associations that private bonds gained their public significance. Associations built social capital by teaching each citizen to link his or her good to that of others and by creating networks of trust and cooperation. It was for this reason that Tocqueville concluded, “In democratic countries, the science of association is the fundamental science.”⁴³

Associations not only mitigated the dangers of individualism but also enabled citizens to participate in democratic deliberation. Tocqueville commented that when he first observed temperance conventions he thought they were a joke. Only later did he discover that they were a mechanism by which weak individuals could overcome their powerlessness and affect public life. The lesson to be learned is that “when Americans have a feeling or idea they wish to bring to the world’s attention, they will immediately seek out others who share that feeling or idea and, if successful in finding them, join forces. From that point on, they cease to be isolated individuals and become a power to be reckoned with, whose actions serve as an example; a power that speaks, and to which people listen.”⁴⁴ By joining together, Americans ensured that citizens could take part in the deliberative process by making their collective, if not their individual, voices heard.

Tocqueville worried not only about the dangers of individualism or an expanding state but also about what he called the “tyranny of the majority.”⁴⁵ Tocqueville hoped that by encouraging associations, “the state would be protected against [both] tyranny and license.”⁴⁶ Tocqueville understood that the majority (public opinion) in a democracy always appears to have the moral high ground even when it is wrong or its actions threaten liberty. He invoked James Madison’s *Federalist 51* to argue that in order to protect the rights of minorities it is necessary to have some system of checks and balances.⁴⁷ In the United States, Tocqueville found several such checks, including federalism and localism, the rule of law, the jury, and the proliferation of voluntary associations. Some readers have argued that Tocqueville’s fear of majority tyranny arose from both his own conservatism and that of his Whig informants, but his analysis in *Democracy* goes well beyond this.⁴⁸ While it is true that Tocqueville agreed with Whigs like Channing that the common good might be undermined by impassioned majorities, in the text Tocqueville emphasizes the importance of dissent on its own terms.⁴⁹ Tocqueville

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puts forward a compelling argument for protecting minority rights and for the role of minorities in deliberation regardless of their class background. He combined Whig concerns for protecting the common good from temporary popular majorities with the Democrats' commitment to pluralism and protecting civil liberties.⁵⁰

Americans ensured that there would never be a consensus about the common good because associations served as countervailing powers, Tocqueville argued. Discussing political parties (but I believe we must include grass roots reform associations under the category of the political), he wrote, the “freedom of association has become a necessary guarantee against the tyranny of the majority.” The only way to effectively challenge a ruling majority, Tocqueville believed, was for the minority “to bring all its moral force to bear on the material power that oppresses it.” Minorities had to be allowed to associate not only “to ascertain their numerical strength and thereby weaken the moral ascendancy of the majority” but also “to promote competition among ideas in order to discover which arguments are most likely to make an impression on the majority.” Associations provide the most effective check to tyrannies of the majority and they also encourage deliberation between opposing groups. To Tocqueville, the cost to community consensus was worth the gains: “The omnipotence of the majority in my view poses so great a peril to the American republics that the use of dangerous means to limit it [the majority] seems to me still to be a good thing.”⁵¹

Tocqueville argued that associations helped produce stability while ensuring that that consensus was never so strong as to threaten liberty. Perhaps nowhere is this made more clear than in his discussion of the relationship between civil and political associations. Although Tocqueville is fuzzy on the distinction between civil and political associations, he seems to define civil associations as associations committed to commercial or moral purposes and political associations more narrowly as parties seeking political power. States have a temptation to limit the freedom of association for political purposes, Tocqueville noted. This might be done in extreme cases, but it is usually a bad idea for two reasons. First, political and civil associations are co-dependent. Each type teaches citizens about the benefits of associating. Limiting one limits both. Political associations teach citizens that they must work together in public life, a lesson they carry over into their private lives as well. But political

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associations can be dangerous because they mobilize large groups of people around a desire for power. On the other hand, civil associations turn people inward, committed to their private lives, and thus moderate the dangers of political associations. It is also there where the affections are generated, Tocqueville commented in an earlier section. When sovereigns limit political associations in the interest of stability, then, they also “deprive themselves of an effective remedy” for instability in the shape of civil associations. The more people are vested in their own associations, Tocqueville believed, the less they will seek revolution. In essence, Tocqueville suggests, associations are both generators of stability and conflict and limiting one threatens the other. Tocqueville wanted both. Political associations would defend against the tyranny of the majority while civil associations ensured that no political association would go too far to threaten political stability. “Thus,” Tocqueville concluded, “it is through the enjoyment of a dangerous freedom that Americans learn the art of reducing freedom's perils.”⁵² As he has done throughout, Tocqueville assigns opposing goals for associations simultaneously.

Tocqueville did worry that associations would disrupt political stability but he believed that the gains were worth the risks. Unlike in Europe, where, he thought, parties represented fundamentally opposing perspectives, Americans shared what John Rawls would call an overlapping consensus that mitigated the dangers of association. This consensus was generated, however, in civil society as much by mores or “habits of the heart” as by reason.⁵³ Second, in a society with universal (white male) suffrage, parties and associations could not claim to speak for the majority unless they won electoral campaigns. “Associations therefore know that they do not represent the majority, and everyone else knows it too. The very existence of associations proves this, for if they did represent the majority, they would change the law themselves rather than petition for its reform.” Most important, however, was the simple fact that Americans had learned to use associations for deliberative rather than coercive purposes. Thus, Tocqueville concluded, despite the danger of allowing the unlimited freedom of association, in the United States, most associations are “peaceful as to their purposes and legal as to the means they employ, and when they claim to want to win only by legal means, they are generally telling the truth.”⁵⁴ A shared

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commitment to democratic practices, Tocqueville believed, is a necessary prerequisite for the freedom of association.

If the above reading of Tocqueville is correct, this suggests that Tocqueville did not believe that a polity with high social capital would produce the kind of harmonious society many communitarians desire. His primary interest was in the role of associations in protecting self-government and individual liberty. We thus need to be more careful in how we make causal links between associations and community. The proliferation of associations may produce a more participatory democracy but this does not necessarily mean that it will overcome social and political divisions. In fact, associations are the source of these divisions. By forming and joining associations, citizens express their commitment to a cause and, at times, pursue that cause dogmatically. They seek to convert public opinion. There are myriad examples of such conversions in American history, including antislavery, temperance, female suffrage, the civil rights movement, popular conservatism, evangelicalism, and the gay rights movement. In each case, brave citizens organized to challenge the reigning consensus of their communities and caused deep ruptures in American public life and in communities throughout the nation.

It would be equally wrong to ignore the importance of associations in building community. The purpose of this essay is not to dismiss Tocqueville's comments about the role of associations in overcoming individual alienation but to place these ideas within the context of a more complicated reading. Tocqueville understood that social capital was vital to making democracy work, and that voluntary associations helped produce it. He was a keen observer of the importance of mores and their role in fostering social stability. Social capital may not reduce conflict but it can provide a mediating force by increasing social trust and supporting norms that commit citizens to orient their activities around the common good. As Robert D. Putnam and Charles Taylor both argue, a certain amount of social capital or trust is necessary to enable democratic deliberation. Overlapping memberships in different associations produce bonds between people that mitigate against rabid social fragmentation. As Taylor puts it, "It is difficult to conceive of a widespread acceptance to abide by the rules and outcomes of democratic decision among

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people who had no bond whatever to each other. Only those with a supermuscular Kantian conscience would be willing to knuckle under a majority with which they felt no links.”⁵⁵ Associations ensure that all citizens will be linked to others and, as a result, citizens will learn to care for their community. But this does not mean that all citizens will agree on the common good.

A deliberative democracy with engaged citizens and high social capital may look more like the historical Tocqueville's America than today's communitarian neo-Tocquevillians would like to admit. Social capital and pluralism, unity and conflict, consensus and deliberation, must be seen as reinforcing instead of opposing goods in civil society. The power of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* emerges out of Tocqueville's ability to square the circle. He understood the multiple roles of associations in a democracy and appreciated them all. A vibrant civil society serves the communitarian agenda of building social capital by fostering dense networks of communal life and a citizenry committed to the common good. It also serves the ends of pluralists and deliberative democrats by ensuring that no particular group – especially the majority – will be able to serve its own interests or impose its values on all citizens. Tocqueville teaches us the importance of both strong communities and the freedom of association so that dissenting voices can fragment those communities. Like Tocqueville, we must carry around these complementary but paradoxical ideals.

NOTES

- [1] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), 595-99. This section is also reprinted in Olivier Zunz and Alan S. Kahan, eds., *The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 2002), 180-84.
- [2] My understanding of this literature has been aided by Bob Edwards and Michael W. Foley, “Civil Society and Social Capital: A Primer,” in Bob Edwards, Michael W. Foley, and Mario Dani, eds., *Beyond Tocqueville: Civil Society and the Social Capital Debate in Comparative Perspective*, (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2001), 1-14; Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, “Making Sense of the Civic Engagement Debate,” in

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- Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, eds., *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 27-71; Benjamin R. Barber, *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998); E. J. Dionne, Jr., "Why Civil Society? Why Now?" in Dionne, ed., *Community Works: The Revival of Civil Society in America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 1-14; Robert K. Fullinwider, "Introduction," in Fullinwider, ed., *Civil Society, Democracy, and Civic Renewal* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 1-8; Michael W. Foley and Bob Edwards, "The Paradox of Civil Society," *Journal of Democracy* 07, 03 (1996), 38-52.
- [3] Robert D. Putnam, "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life," *American Prospect* 04, 13 (Mar. 21, 1993), 35-42; "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" *Journal of Democracy* 06, 01 (Jan. 1995), 65-78; and *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). For a history of the idea of social capital, see James Farr, "Social Capital: A Conceptual History," *Political Theory* 32, 01 (Feb. 2004), 6-33. For a history of the emergence of the social capital idea in contemporary sociological theory, see Steven Brint, "Gemeinschaft Revisited: A Critique and Reconstruction of the Community Concept," *Sociological Theory* 19, 01 (Mar. 2001), 1-23; Henk Flap, "Creation and Returns of Social Capital: A New Research Program," *Tocqueville Review* 20, 01 (1999), 5-26. For a theoretical discussion of social capital, see James S. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, Supplement (1988), S95-S120.
- [4] Nancy Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Nancy Rosenblum, "The Moral Uses of Pluralism," in Fullinwider, ed., *Civil Society*, 255-72; Yael Tamir, "Revisiting the Civic Sphere" in Amy Gutmann, ed., *Freedom of Association* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 214-38; William Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 110-23.
- [5] For a discussion of the Cold War context for political pluralism, see David Ciepley, "Why the State was Dropped in the First Place: A Prequel to Skocpol's 'Bringing the State Back In'." *Critical Review* 14, 2-3 (2001), 157-213. Classic works include David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion* (1951, reprint: New York: Knopf, 1971); Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Oscar Handlin and Mary Handlin, *The Dimensions of Liberty* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 89-112; Robert A. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953). See also Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Biography of a Nation of Joiners," *American Historical Review* 50, 01 (Oct. 1944), 1-25.
- [6] Nisbet, *Quest for Community*, 232, 235.

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- [7] Skocpol et al. and Fiorina, *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*; Theda Skocpol, "The Tocqueville Problem: Civic Engagement in American Democracy," *Social Science History* 21, 04 (Winter 1997), 455-79; Barber, *A Place for Us*; National Commission on Civic Renewal, *A Nation of Spectators: How Civic Disengagement Weakens America and What We Can Do About It: Final Report of the National Commission on Civic Renewal* (College Park, Md., 1996); David Hollenbach, "Virtue, the Common Good, and Democracy," in Amitai Etzioni, ed., *New Communitarian Thinking: Persons, Virtues, Institutions, and Communities* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 143-53; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); Jean L. Cohen, "American Civil Society Talk" in Fullinwider, ed., *Civil Society, Democracy, and Civic Renewal*, 55-85; William A. Galston, "Civil Society and the 'Art of Association,'" *Journal of Democracy* 11, 01 (2000), 64-70. A recent version of the civic argument that integrates expressionist pluralism with civic engagement is Will Kymlicka, "Ethnic Associations and Democratic Citizenship," in Gutmann, ed., *Freedom of Association*, 177-213. See also Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*.
- [8] Barber, *A Place for Us*, 8.
- [9] On deliberative democracy, see the essays in James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996); Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- [10] Skocpol and Fiorina, "Making Sense of the Civic Engagement Debate," 14.
- [11] Amitai Etzioni's early work, for example, was about complex organizations before he turned to society in general. For a discussion of the theoretical approaches to the study of community in sociology see Brint, "Gemeinschaft Revisited."
- [12] Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 36-39, 167-218. See also Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Don E. Eberly, ed., *Building a Community of Citizens: Civil Society in the 21st Century* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994), esp. Edward A. Schwartz, "Tocqueville's Democratic Prescription: 'Self-Interest: Rightly Understood,'" 83-92; Don E. Eberly, ed., *The Essential Civil Society Reader* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield 2000); Dionne, ed., *Community Works*; Charles Taylor, "Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere," in Etzioni, ed., *New Communitarian Thinking*, 183-217; Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1996). For a critical assessment of these works for ignoring economic realities, see John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 224-32. In "The Idea of Civil Society" *Dissent* (Spring 1991), 293-304, Michael Walzer

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combines the communitarian goal of building social capital and a state and citizenry committed to common goods with a respect for pluralism.

A subset of the communitarian advocates of civil society are composed of associationalists who discount either statist or market solutions to society's problems. Recognizing pluralism but also seeking new forms of solidarity in civil society, associationalists are an interesting alternative to the existing liberal paradigm in which most writers conceptualize civil society. See Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, "Secondary Associations and Democratic Governance" in Cohen and Rogers, *Associations and Democracy* (London: Verso, 1995), 7-100; Paul Hirst, *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Governance* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

Although John Rawls is not a communitarian, his discussion of "the morality of association" follows communitarian lines. Rawls argues that associations cultivate bonds of affection that enable a well-ordered society to function as individuals learn about reciprocity and gain both an emotional and rational commitment to performing their part in serving the common good. The difference, of course, is that for Rawls the common good always prioritizes the right, namely justice as fairness. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1971), 467-72.

- [13] A similar claim is made in Keith Whittington, "Revisiting Tocqueville's America: Society, Politics, and Association in the Nineteenth Century" in Edwards and Foley, eds., *Beyond Tocqueville*, 21-31. Whittington's primary argument is that a well-functioning constitutional system is necessary to constrain and to structure conflicts in civil society. In this essay, instead, I seek primarily to elucidate the nature of antebellum public life and connect it to Tocqueville's observations. See also Michael Schudson, "What Tocqueville Didn't Say about Voluntary Associations" in *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 98-109.
- [14] Richard D. Brown, "Emergence of Urban Society in Rural Massachusetts, 1760-1820" *Journal of American History* 61, 01 (June 1974), 29-51; Theda Skocpol, "How the United States Became A Civic Nation," in *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 20-73; Johann N. Neem, "The Origins of Civic Voluntarism, 1780s-1840s," in "The Transformation of Civil Society in Massachusetts, 1780s-1840s" (Ph.D. diss: University of Virginia, 2004), 289-344; Clifford S. Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1960).
- [15] Joel H. Silbey, "The Salt of the Nation': Political Parties in Antebellum America," and "Parties and Politics in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," in *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 33-68; Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: Wiley, 1978). See also William N. Chambers and Philip C. Davis, "Party, Competition, and Mass Participation: The Case of the Democratizing Party System, 1824-

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- 1852,” in Joel H. Silbey, Allan G. Bogue, and William H. Flanigan, eds., *The History of American Electoral Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 174-97.
- [16] Kathleen D. McCarthy, *American Creed: Philanthropy and the Rise of Civil Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 30-48, 98-120; Anne M. Boylan, *The Origins of Women’s Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), ch3. See also Theda Skocpol and Jennifer Lynn Oser, “Organization Despite Adversity: The Origins and Development of African American Fraternal Associations,” *Social Science History* 28, 03 (Fall 2004), 367-437.
- [17] On the effort of state leaders to prevent the spread of associations, see Neem, “The Transformation of Civil Society in Massachusetts,” and “The Elusive Common Good: Religion and Civil Society in Massachusetts, 1780-1833” *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, 03 (Fall 2004), 381-417.
- [18] For the centrality of the idea of public opinion in antebellum political culture, see Gordon S. Wood, “The Democratization of Mind in the American Revolution,” in Robert H. Horwitz, ed., *The Moral Foundations of the American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 102-28; John L. Brooke. “To Be ‘Read by the Whole People’: Press, Party, and Public Sphere in the United States, 1789-1840,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 110, 11 (2002), 41-118; Richard Carwardine, *Lincoln* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2003).
- [19] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 491.
- [20] Christopher L. Tomlins, *Law, Labor, and Ideology in the Early American Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia Artisans and the Politics of Class, 1720-1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- [21] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “Prelude to Abolitionism: Sabbatarianism and the Rise of the Second Party System,” *Journal of American History* 58, 02 (Sept. 1971), 316-41.
- [22] My understanding of sabbatarianism depends on Wyatt-Brown, “Prelude to Abolitionism”; James R. Rohrer, “Sunday Mails and the Church-State Theme in Jacksonian America,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 07, 01 (Spring 1987), 53-74; Richard R. John, “Taking Sabbatarianism Seriously: The Postal System, the Sabbath, and the Transformation of American Political Culture,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 10, 04 (1990), 517-67. See also McCarthy, *American Creed*, 133-41.
- [23] Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 26-28.
- [24] Richard M. Johnson, *Report of the Committee on Post-Offices and Post-roads of the United States Senate* (Jan.1829), in Joseph L. Blau, ed., *Social Theories of Jacksonian Democracy: Representative Writings of the Period, 1825-1850* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1947), 274-81.
- [25] Rohrer, “Sunday Mails and the Church-State Theme,” 69-71. The report is re-printed in the Boston *Daily Advertiser* Feb. 10, 1829.

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- [26] [William Ellery Channing], "Associations," *Christian Examiner* (Sept. 1829), 105-40. Re-printed in William Ellery Channing, *The Works of William E. Channing*, ed. by the American Unitarian Association (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1890), 138-58.
- [27] Ronald P. Formisano and Kathleen Smith Kutolowski, "Antimasonry and Masonry: The Genesis of Protest, 1826-1827," *American Quarterly* 29, 02 (Summer 1977), 139-65; Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3-19; John L. Brooke, *The Heart of the Commonwealth: Society and Political Culture in Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1713-1851* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 319-44; Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 277-79.
- [28] Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic*, idem. See also Michael F. Holt, "The Antimasonic and Know Nothing Parties," in *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 88-150.
- [29] Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 203-04; Brooke, *Heart of the Commonwealth*, 322-29.
- [30] Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966).
- [31] *Boston Statesman*, Oct. 13, 1832.
- [32] *Boston Daily Advertiser*, Oct. 3, 1831.
- [33] Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic*, 166.
- [34] Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 294-95.
- [35] *Boston Free Press*, Feb. 9, 1831. See also "Address of the Antimasonic Convention, to the People of the United States," *Free Press*, Oct. 19, 1831. See also the Antimasons' 1832 state convention address, re-printed in the *Free Press*, Sept. 12, 1832; *Antimasonic Republican Convention, of Massachusetts, Held at Worcester, Sept. 5th & 6th, 1832* (Boston, 1832), 28-42, esp. 28-29.
- [36] Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 80.
- [37] Brooke. "To Be 'Read by the Whole People'"; James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976), 81-84; Howe Daniel Walker Howe, *Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 65; Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 64-69.
- [38] Russel B. Nye, *Fettered Freedom: Civil Liberties and the Slavery Controversy* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 1963); Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

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- [39] Stewart, *Holy Warriors*, 69-71; McCarthy, *American Creed*, 145-47; Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing*, 51-75. On abolitionism and the public sphere, see Schudson, *The Good Citizen*, 105-09.
- [40] My reading of Tocqueville builds on Galston, "Civil Society and the 'Art of Association'."
- [41] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 799.
- [42] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 803-13. For a discussion of the relationship between Montesquieu and Tocqueville, see William Henry George, "Montesquieu and de Tocqueville and Corporative Individualism," *American Political Science Review* 16, 01 (Feb. 1922), 10-21; Ehrenberg, *Civil Society*, 161-67.
- [43] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. 10, 489, 585-609, 797-813. On this reading of Tocqueville, see James T. Kloppenberg, "Life Everlasting: Tocqueville in America," in *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 71-81; Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, "Democracy and Associations in the Long Nineteenth Century: Toward a Transnational Perspective," *Journal of Modern History* 75, 02 (June 2003), 269-99.
- [44] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 598-99.
- [45] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 283-318. According to Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 40, "Tocqueville expects always to find democracy somewhere in the passage from an insupportable liberty-in-isolation toward an abject dependence on the majority." See also Ehrenberg, *Civil Society*, 161-67.
- [46] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 10.
- [47] On Tocqueville's relation to Madison, see Bernard E. Brown, "Tocqueville and Publius," in Abraham Eisenstadt, ed., *Reconsidering Tocqueville's Democracy in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 43-74.
- [48] Sean Wilentz, "Many Democracies: On Tocqueville and Jacksonian America," in Eisenstadt, ed., *Reconsidering Tocqueville*, 207-28; Garry Wills, "Did Tocqueville Get America?," *New York Review of Books* 51, 07 (Apr. 29, 2004); George Kateb, "Some Remarks on Tocqueville's View of Voluntary Associations," in J. Rolland Pennock and John W. Chapman, eds., *Voluntary Associations* (New York: Atherton, 1969), 138-44.
- [49] Tocqueville's understanding of the dangers of mass public opinion originated in his conversations and correspondence with the New England Whig and Unitarian minister Jared Sparks. In his notebook, Tocqueville records Sparks as making the following comment: "The political dogma of this country is that the majority is always right. By and large we are well satisfied to have adopted it, but one cannot deny that experience often gives the lie to the principle.... Sometimes the majority has wished to oppress the minority." See "Conversation with Jared Sparks, on the Tyranny of the Majority," in *The Tocqueville Reader*, eds. Zunz Kahan, 52-53. For a discussion of Tocqueville and his relations with New England Whigs, including Sparks, see George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (1938, reprint: Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University

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Press, 1996), 367-68, 390-425. Tocqueville also discussed these issues in Philadelphia with Charles Jared Ingersoll, a former Federalist of New England descent. See *Ibid.*, 474-75, 480-82

[50] Albeit, for Democrats, these civil liberties were limited to whites. Democrats were notably hostile to protecting either Native American or African American rights. Nonetheless, Democrats did make an argument against allowing particular groups in civil society to impose their notion of the good upon all groups.

[51] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 215-23.

[52] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 604-09.

[53] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 331.

[55] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 221-22.

[55] Taylor, "Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere," 204. See also Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*, 143-54.