



Perspectives from FSF Scholars
September 14, 2021
Vol. 16, No. 49

Inequality In America: Joe Biden, Meet Alexis de Tocqueville

by

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[Real Clear Markets](#)
September 13, 2021

On January 20, 2021, his first day in office, President Joe Biden issued an "Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government." The first sentence proclaims: "Equal opportunity is the bedrock of American democracy." Nevertheless, despite the order's nod towards promoting "equal opportunity" rather than "equal outcomes," there's still cause for concern.

In no uncertain fashion, the executive order commits the Biden administration to "an ambitious whole-of-government equity agenda. In other words, a "comprehensive" and "systematic" approach to "advancing equity for all," including people "adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality."

The order's action-oriented substantive provisions make clear that the "whole-of-government" embrace is no exaggeration. Every federal agency, under the coordination and supervision of the Domestic Policy Council and the Office of Management and Budget, is mandated to identify methods to assess equity; conduct equity assessments; allocate resources to advance equity;

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promote the equitable delivery of government benefits and equitable opportunities; and engage with members of underserved communities.

Certainly, many in the Biden administration, along with many of its most "progressive" acolytes, with their persistent invocations of systemic ingrained injustices, have evidenced an admitted preference for pursuing what they call "transformational" measures to achieve more equal outcomes and not merely more equal opportunity.

The goal for promoting equal opportunity for all citizens is worthy of support. But for purposes of considering government's proper role, the difference between pursuing equal opportunity versus equal outcomes is hugely consequential. Put bluntly, to the extent the government pursues policies intended to further equality of outcomes, the space in which individual freedom and initiative may be exercised necessarily will shrink.

Just ask Alexis de Tocqueville.

Tocqueville was only 25 years old when he arrived from France in May 1831 for his nine-month visit to America and only 30 when he published the first part of his famous *Democracy in America*. In one sense, *Democracy in America* is a sweeping travelogue with vivid descriptions of early nineteenth century life in America. But in a more fundamental sense, as its title implies, the book is a significant work of political science that incorporates Tocqueville's philosophical insights and understandings, especially those regarding human nature.

And many of Tocqueville's insights are especially relevant today. Indeed, they ought to remain at the center of current debates regarding the extent of inequality in America and what, if anything, to do about it. Tocqueville argued that a democratic regime, like ours, would ceaselessly move in the direction of striving for ever greater degrees of what he called "equality of condition" – he meant the same as "equality of outcome." This movement would be propelled by the sheer force of the majoritarian impulse, and the majoritarian canon, that a democracy, by definition, embodies.

According to Tocqueville, the unrelenting compulsion for ever more "equality of condition" necessarily would lead to an ever-increasing expansion of government power at the expense of individual freedom and liberty.

Why? Because, despite the majoritarian impulse to achieve ever greater degrees of "equality of condition," or leveling of society, human nature is such that "the personal pride of individuals will always seek to rise above the line, and to form somewhere an inequality to their own advantage." Given human nature, individuals will always seek to "rise above the line."

Tocqueville predicted government, inevitably, would respond by taking "each member of the community in its powerful grasp" as it grows to cover "the surface of society with a network of small, complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd."

Those are strong words of warning.

Again, and to be clear, none of this is to suggest that it is improper for government to pursue policies that have the goal of promoting equal opportunity for all citizens. And I do not mean to suggest that President Biden's "equity" executive order may not achieve some positive results in some respects. But I do suggest that we keep Tocqueville's admonitions uppermost in our minds – because they are just as relevant to our current debates regarding inequality as they were when written almost two centuries ago.

In other words, to the extent that the Biden administration acts in a way that seeks to promote more equality of outcome rather than equality of opportunity by adopting measures that restrain the natural human impulse "to rise above the line," the domain of individual freedom will be curtailed.

Although America was still a young nation – and Tocqueville still a young man – when he published *Democracy in America* in 1835, he was prescient in describing the danger to liberty from a future society "with a network of small, complicated rules, minute and uniform." Today's Americans should take heed.

* Randolph May is President of the Free State Foundation, a free market-oriented think tank in Rockville, MD. The views expressed in this *Perspectives* do not necessarily reflect the views of others on the staff of the Free State Foundation or those affiliated with it. *Inequality In America: Joe Biden, Meet Alexis de Tocqueville* was published in *Real Clear Markets* on September 13, 2021.