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**The Opinions of Democratic Nations Are in Accord With Their Ideas, Leading
Them to Centralize Political Power**

(An essay that is part of a series on De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*)

by

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Perhaps more than anything else, De Tocqueville is remembered for his observation that early Americans were inclined to participate in many voluntary associations. In one of the most oft-quoted passages from *Democracy in America*, De Tocqueville reported that “*Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations.*” These include “*not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds – religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive.*”

For De Tocqueville – at least for the traveling reportorial De Tocqueville – this proclivity to engage in all manner of voluntary associational activity created an optimistic cast for the future of democracy in America. Not only would such “*habits of the heart*” satisfy what De Tocqueville considered to be an innate need of individuals to lead fulfilling lives, but they ought to reduce the need for the government to play as large a role in supporting the populace as would otherwise be the case.

But De Tocqueville the political philosopher painted a distinctly different, darker picture. While acknowledging the positive mediating role of associational activity, De Tocqueville predicted, presciently, that modern democracies inevitably would tend towards a centralization of power that would threaten individual liberty. In this chapter, *“That the Sentiments of Democratic Peoples Are in Accord with Their Ideas in Bringing Them to Concentrate Power,”* De Tocqueville starkly proclaimed that, in the future, *“Centralization will be the natural government.”*

Why did De Tocqueville boldly predict that government power would become ever more centralized? The answer lies in the opening to this chapter: *“If, in centuries of equality, men easily perceive the idea of a great central power, one cannot doubt, moreover, that their habits and sentiments predispose to recognize such power and lend it a hand.”* Here, and in other chapters too, De Tocqueville highlighted man’s natural striving, especially in democratic societies, to achieve ever greater degrees of what he called *“equality of condition.”*

But he understood – and this is key – that human nature is such that some men, by virtue of their greater innate personal pride, will always seek to gain an advantage that will allow them to surpass others, to rise above the common line of equality.

And, for De Tocqueville, it is this inexorable, yet natural, tendency in democracies for men to struggle for equality of condition that inevitably will lead to centralization of government power. For only a strong government, De Tocqueville claimed, will possess the power, through imposition of what he called *“a network of small, complicated, painstaking, uniform rules,”* (II, 4, 6) to restrain those who seek to rise above the uniformity of the crowd. So, to enforce the uniformity that the *“equality principle”* encourages, the citizenry will call for ever more centralized government. And, concomitantly, the central government favors equality, for it *“singularly facilitates the action of such a power, extends it, and secures it.”*

Here is how De Tocqueville, in this chapter, explains the willingness of the populace to cede power – and concomitantly a measure of individual freedom – to the government: *“The sovereign, being necessarily above all citizens and uncontested, does not excite the envy of any of them, and each believes he deprives his equals of all the prerogatives he concedes to it.”* And so *“every central power adores uniformity,”* because it *“spares it the examination of an infinity of details with which it would have to occupy itself if it were necessary to make a rule for men, instead of making all men pass indiscriminately under the same rule.”*

It’s not difficult to discern the relevance of De Tocqueville’s views regarding *“equality”* and centralization of power to the reality of contemporary America. De Tocqueville, in referring to *“equality of condition,”* did not explicitly distinguish, as we often do today, between *“equality of opportunity”* and *“equality of outcome.”* There are many individuals and special interest groups advocating for the latter, of course. And their success has led governments at all levels to adopt various forms of “affirmative action” programs and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, many of which, in efforts to achieve *“equality of outcome,”* naturally depend on government compulsion for enforcement.

My purpose in this essay is not to debate the merits of any particular government program whose objective is to achieve “equality of outcome” rather than “equality of opportunity.” Rather it is to say that I think De Tocqueville, were he alive today, would not be surprised that the powerful “equality” imperative that he foresaw has been responsible, at least in part, for the increasing centralization of power in America at the expense of individual liberty.

But I suspect De Tocqueville would suggest that a counter to such centralization lies in nurturing and supporting private voluntary associations such as those he observed on his travels through America in 1831 and 1832. Elsewhere in *Democracy in America* (II, 2, 5), he asked, “*what political power would ever be in a state to suffice for the innumerable multitude of small undertakings that Americans execute every day with the aid of an association?*”

I bet De Tocqueville would answer his rhetorical question: “None!”

* Randolph J. May is President of the Free State Foundation, an independent, nonpartisan free market-oriented think tank located in Rockville, Maryland. 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. *Essay 98: The Opinions Of Democratic Nations Are In Accord With Their Ideas, Leading Them To Centralize Political Power* was published in [Constituting America](#) on August 7, 2025, as part of a series of Constituting Americas’s annual study, *The Genius of America – A Journey Into Our Republic: A Study on Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy In America*. This essay was also narrated by Constituting America Founder Actress Janine Turner and can be listened to [here](#).