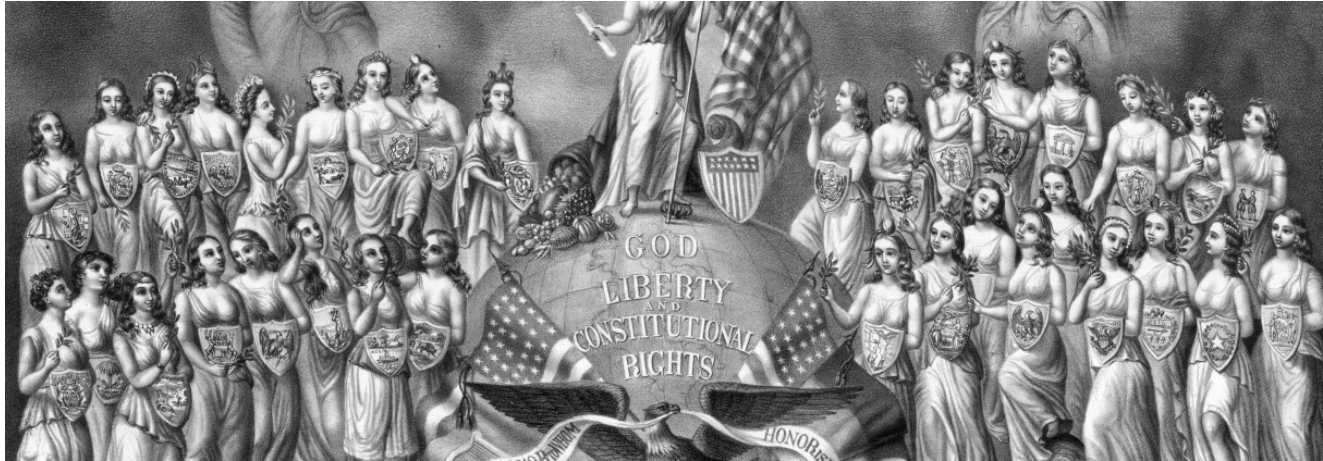


# Tocqueville's Lessons in a Time of Pandemic

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The immediate challenge of COVID-19 has been cast as an examination of how individual Americans will fare should they be exposed to the virus. The effort to arrest the spread of the virus has brought unprecedented changes in the daily routines of all Americans. The limitation of activity is apparent when one walks outside. There is a marked silence, regardless of the time of day, almost eerie, that gives one pause.

The check on movement is accompanied by images of field hospitals and graphs showing curves and spreads displayed across news sites. While many are changing their daily routines to comply with the requirements of staying at home and practicing social distancing, a broader concern is the effect on our American democratic foundation.

Alexis de Tocqueville devotes a chapter of his great work, *Democracy in America*, to discussing the advantages of American democracy. Each of the five parts in the chapter "What Are the Real Advantages That American Society Gains from the Government of Democracy?" encourages thoughtful reflection. The last part, "Activity That Reigns in All Parts of the Political Body in the United States; Influence That It Exercises on Society," prompts us to think about both the negative and positive effects that the country is facing with respect to halting the exchange between people and their movement.

The beneficial effects of the activity of a people is described by Tocqueville in his chapter on the advantages of democracy. He contrasts the activity in a democracy and the lack of it in a country that is not free. The activity of a people in a free country leads to greater riches and prosperity and pervades the whole. "It is no longer a portion of the people that sets out to improve the state of society; the whole people take charge of this concern."

In addition to the bettering of one's condition, happiness is also a result of this activity. Tocqueville contrasts inhabitants of other countries who begrudge time lost to dealing with common interests with the American who revels in it. "From the moment when the American would be reduced to attending only to his own affairs, half of his existence would be taken away from him; he would feel an immense emptiness in his days, and he would become unbelievably unhappy." During the stay-at-home mandate, the current offers of free online entertainment may suffice for some, but they cannot long sustain those who recognize them for the mere pastimes that they are.

The economic benefits are but one result of the activity that Tocqueville describes. Political activity also reigns, as he witnessed during his nine months of travel in America. He paints a vivid picture.

Scarcely have you landed on American soil than you find yourself in the middle of a sort of tumult; a confused clamor arises on all sides; a thousand voices reach your ear at the same time; each one expresses various social needs. Around you, everything stirs: here, the people of a neighborhood have gathered to know if a church should be built; there, some are working on choosing a representative; farther along, the deputies of a district go as fast as they can to the city, in order to see to certain local improvements; in another place, it is the farmers of the village who abandon their fields to go to discuss the plan of a road or of a school.

With no firm pronouncements on when the restrictions on activities and movements will end, there is increasing debate about the costs of isolation from the standpoint of mental health, economic consequences, and, if we take Tocqueville seriously, the cost to our social and political well-being. The negatives readily come to mind, but Americans may reap benefits from the dramatic events that the nation is experiencing if they reflect upon and recapture the different roles that governments play and the responsibilities of the citizenry.

When the U.S. Constitution was drafted, it included an enumeration of powers that limited the size and scope of the new national government. The local and state governments that had been established long before had specific grants of authority from the people.

The application of the concept of federalism to this new design of government in America was intended to maintain these separate entities while each fulfilled its specific duties and responsibilities. The intention was to work cooperatively but within designated spheres.

America has lost this clear delineation of the true responsibilities of a national government (what Americans call the federal government). The current crisis demonstrates that local and state governments must focus on the needs of their citizens because they can more readily know and address them. The federal government must tend to those needs that are *national* in nature.

The current pandemic is gripping the nation, and the federal government is performing the role of coordinating efforts to protect the health and well-being of the citizenry, as it should. As the crisis continues, and in the aftermath, the activity of the citizens that Tocqueville witnessed in the 1830s and described so well in his book must always include assessing how well their local and state governments have prepared for ordinary and extraordinary events.

The success of a democratic republic relies on engaged citizens who tend to their own communities and insist that state and local government officials closest to the people be mindful of why they were elected to office.