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INDIVIDUALISM REVERSES FREEDOM IN AMERICA BEGINNING WITH POLITICAL
FREEDOMS
BY DANIELLE MOORE

In Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, the author takes great caution to warn America of a tyrant lurking in the shadows of society that could threaten and destroy this Nation's freedom without its even noticing. That warning is this: if our natural tendency towards individualism goes unchecked, our political freedom as we know it will begin to dissolve and the powers of soft despotism will slowly begin to seep into the very foundations of American democracy. This form of Democracy was characterized by a unique character of self-governance amongst the citizens. It was the people living in the townships who governed their communities and their voices were heard because of the political arrangements that existed. Tocqueville argues that individualism is a vice specific to America and, that due to this latent truth, we alone face a new form of despotism never before seen in political arrangements. This type of tyranny introduces itself in providing us small conveniences. It seeks to lighten the burden of our civic responsibilities and then wholly robs us of all political freedoms. From that point it is not difficult for Americans to become entirely estranged from their once known founding political freedoms. In this paper I will lay out the logic which Tocqueville uses in order to make clear his warning and then show how modern America has been affected by the problem of "individualism."

Tocqueville sees the definition of individualism as follows: "Individualism is a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself" (Tocqueville, pg 482). How this comes about is by a severing of oneself from society because equality is satisfactory and political freedom takes sacrifice and work and can also be taken care of by someone or something else. Individualism is a vice of the new age whereas the classical vice of selfishness was more prominent in aristocracies. The reason aristocracies experienced this particular vice was because there was an interconnectedness among people that drew them out of themselves and attached them to something greater that existed outside the individual. To the aristocrat being selfish requires self-reflecting and a deliberate and conscience turn away from everyone you were connected to and a shift to place all importance upon yourself rather than the community. In an aristocracy you played a role in the larger picture and knew yourself in that context. You were tied to the past through your ancestry and you were connected to the future through your progeny. Family and family connections meant everything, someone was always hierarchically above and below you. It was comfortable. If you had an excessive love for yourself, on the other hand, it was because you deliberately chose yourself over all others in a malicious and spiteful way. This vice took deliberation and action, it was not just an impulsive act. That selfishness withdrew you from other individuals and destroyed all virtues.

"Individualism is of democratic origin, and it threatens to develop as conditions become equal" (Tocqueville, pg 483). To understand why individualism is a vice particular to the American character, an understanding of what early America regarded as her highest virtues is necessary. When Tocqueville had first come to America to observe how democracy functioned, he noticed that there were two virtues that were valued above all others: equality and freedom.

Of these two, equality seemed to precipitate an almost religious zeal amongst the people. On the character of equality, Tocqueville writes of Americans, “they have an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion; they want equality in freedom, and, if they cannot get it they still want it in slavery. They will tolerate poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not tolerate aristocracy” (Tocqueville, pg 482).

Hierarchy and the idea of people being unequal in any way was repulsive. For Americans, equality was not just an ideal but a way of life. He found that the notion of equality was built into the people’s mores, laws, and even their ideas. Equality in America was not just an ideal, but a way of life. “Equality suggests several ideas to the human mind that would not otherwise have come to it, and it modifies almost all those already there” (Tocqueville, pg 426). Americans were so infatuated with this notion of equality that freedom, especially political freedom, was not as easily brought to the people’s attention. Political freedom was something delicate and fragile. Equality is easily understood by people, and the benefits received from it are immediate. “Equality furnishes a multitude of little enjoyments daily to each man” (Tocqueville, pg 481). To see that you are not above or below anyone else in class and opportunity is clear. The political power which you, as a citizen, hold is more difficult. Only those with a deep appreciation for their freedoms could see its results and payoffs in the long run. It is because of a blindness to the needs of their political freedoms and an excessive desire for equality that Tocqueville points out the dangers that can stem from them in the creation of a new vice - individualism.

Individualism, on the other hand, is more cunning. It is not malicious towards other individuals, but rather takes a seat when one should be focusing on the political welfare of society. This vice is unique to American democracy because of the societal conditions that allow it to occur. Tocqueville warns about this vice, “for equality they have an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion; they want equality in freedom, and, if they cannot get it, they still want it in slavery. They tolerate poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not tolerate aristocracy” (Tocqueville, pg 482). The people want equality at the expense of their own freedoms. The individualism that leads to this happened when each person becomes self-interested moves away from others and only listens to his own voice of reason rather than the community’s. Most frightening are the effects in which a democracy cuts people off from any connection to themselves and others. The author states, “(t)hus not only does democracy make each man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants from him and separates him from his contemporaries; it constantly leads him back towards himself alone and threatens finally to confine him wholly in solitude of his own heart” (Tocqueville, pg 484). This was a threat to the new American people, one for which the founding fathers needed to account for.

Why this new vice is so frightening is that it is not a personal vice that damage’s your own soul and salvation. Rather, this is a civic vice that affects all other members in your community. Individualism which draws you away from public affairs and engagement, also allows for a more centralized administrative government to form. Tocqueville wrote, “private life is so active in democratic times, so agitated, so filled with desires and work, that hardly any energy or leisure remains to each man for political life” (Tocqueville, pg 643). He also found that individualism also makes men more easily susceptible to ignorance. When men are withdrawn from practical issues and take the word of someone else about a civic problem instead of

engaging in the issues, all circulate the same common opinions. “Democratic institutions, which force each citizen to occupy himself practically with government, moderate the excessive taste for general theories in political matters that equality puts forward” (Tocqueville, pg 416). When the same thought is equalized among the people, a place for tyranny begins to form. While Americans are enjoying the ability to be equal with each other they do not notice that the centralized administration is beginning to rid them of more and more of their political freedoms. Once we descend into a more radicalized individualism there will be no centralized voice among the people because there will be too many scattered thoughts from individuals. Due to the lack of a unified voice, the central government must step in and act on behalf of everyone because there is no agreement on anything. Soon the people will just be led because this type of despotism, takes away “the trouble of thinking and the pain of living” (Tocqueville, pg 663). People will no longer even care that their freedom is gone. They did not even notice it while it was there. In short, where individualism thrives, people sleep on their political and civic obligations to be informed and to participate in their government.

It is for these reasons that Tocqueville seeks to warn America. During the time he spent in our country, he did not witness this gravitation towards despotism occurring. Rather, he had the foresight to be able to see the path down which we as a society were heading. Tocqueville did notice how the original founding fathers had taken these concerns into consideration as they first were establishing their democratic government. The solution that they had found to this concern was the encouragement of civic engagement and township freedom. The founding fathers had understood that to keep people engaged in their political freedom that so much had been sacrificed for, they would have to create opportunities for people to be involved in their local government. Their thinking was that when one is required to be involved in something that is outside of oneself, one cannot but be forced to focus on the greater community and common good. Individualism would be less of an issue because there would be a plentitude of offices and posts in the people’s local governments that would need manning. The founding fathers knew that local freedoms that men shared would bring them together and foster an appreciation of the political freedoms that they shared. Even while their instincts for individualism were trying to pull them apart. When you are actively engaged in politics, there is no other option than to take notice of the concerns of the public and strive to advance those concerns towards which you and your community hold dear. This is how Tocqueville observed life in America; citizens were actively engaged in politics.

In modern times it is important to reflect upon these same concerns which Tocqueville warns us to take heed of. These warnings are well suited to our current age. At the time in which he had made his reflections, the founding fathers safeguard against individualism had been employed well. The people of America were actively engaged in political life and were happy doing so. The population during this period was close to 13 million people. Now the U.S. population is well over 300 million. That is over 20 times the population since Tocqueville made his assessments. The problem that such a large leap in population causes is that people have become less and less engaged with political life. One practical problem is that there is less room. As one example, when the country was founded, a member of the House of Representatives represented 30,000 constituents. Today that number is over 500,000. Modernity has raised other concerns as well. Our society has, over 225 years, become far more diverse. Today it is a multilayered culture with less adherence to common values or notions of what constitutes civic

duty. Moreover, as our nation became more industrialized and less agrarian, there exists far more pressure on people for economic rather than political success. All of these trends and developments have fed into the individualism of which Tocqueville warned. In our modern era there are just too many people involved in their own careers and wellbeing to take the time to engage in any civic responsibilities, which today are considered the hallmark of a bygone era. Making things worse, factionalism has come back with a vengeance and divisiveness has been helping to aid the increasing polarity in our government and party system. Population growth, demographics and the stratification of society into separate urban, suburban, and rural population centers with differing needs and interests has also accelerated the pace at which this factionalism has grown in ways that Tocqueville could not possibly imagine. These changes have led to the rise of interest groups designed to protect only segments of society and of bureaucracies that work closely with these groups to advance their interests often at the expense of the common good. This has contributed to an overall dissatisfaction, which creates a government that leaves too many people in a position where they then no longer care. Tocqueville's prediction was not only accurate, but it seems it did not go far enough. The American welfare system, people having complete and utter dependence upon the government for every need and desire, has lodged itself in the fabric of our society. This soft despotism that we were once warned of has completely infiltrated every area of our lives.

America has conceded to factionalism, whether we like to believe it or not. It seems that in many ways as we have given over the running of our government to the peoples competing special interests, none of which would put the common good ahead of what they want for themselves. We do live, it seems, in a world which our founding fathers fought hard to prevent. This makes it difficult to promote the common good. Government is seen as a tool to get what individuals want rather than to promote what the country needs. Consequently, this means that interests will compete and vie with each other for popular supremacy. This has created the nasty hostile divisiveness which we are now seeing between the parties and the populace as a whole. In an important sense, the individualism that Tocqueville warned of has brought us to this unhappy.

Works Cited

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