

ISSUE BRIEF

“Information to Action”

Topic: Balanced Federalism

Title: *TOCQUEVILLE’S WARNING OF AMERICAN TYRANNY (PART 2)* by Joshua Charles

If you missed Part 1, you can read it [here](#).

Many of Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations are extraordinarily prophetic to this day. While he greatly admired the United States for various reasons, he also saw the potential for significant problems in its culture and governance.

For example, he held in high regard the federalism laid out in the Constitution but, at the same time, believed elements of American culture would ultimately concentrate all power in the federal government.

Found toward the end of his two-volume work *Democracy in America*, below is the second half of Tocqueville’s commentary that was quoted in the last *Issue Brief*.

“I have always believed that this type of organized, gentle, and peaceful enslavement just described could link up more easily than imagined with some of the external forms of freedom and that it would not be impossible for it to take hold in the very shadow of the sovereignty of the people...they [democratic peoples] feel the need to be directed as well as the desire to remain free. Since they are unable to blot out either of these hostile feelings, they strive to satisfy both of them together. They conceive a single, protective, and all-powerful government, but one elected by the citizens. They combine centralization with the sovereignty of the people. That gives them some respite. They derive consolation from being supervised by thinking that they have chosen their supervisors. Every individual tolerates being tied down because he sees that it is not another man nor a class of people holding the end of the chain, but society itself. Under this system, citizens leave their state of dependence just long enough to choose their masters and then they return to it...many people very easily fall in with this type of compromise between a despotic administration and the sovereignty of the people, and they think they have sufficiently safeguarded individual freedom when they surrendered it to a national authority. That is not good enough for me. The character of the master is much less important to me than the fact of obedience...”

I see quite clearly that, in this way, individual intervention in the most important affairs is preserved, but it is just as much suppressed in small and private ones. We forget that it is, above all, in the details that we run the risk of enslaving men. For my part, I would be tempted to believe that freedom in the big things of life is less important than in the slightest, if I thought that we could always be guaranteed the latter when we did not possess the former. Subjection in the minor things of life is obvious every day and is experienced indiscriminately by all citizens. It does not cause them to lose hope but it constantly irks them until they give up the exercise of their will. It gradually blots out their mind and enfeebles their spirit, whereas obedience demanded only in a small number of very serious circumstances involves enslavement on rare occasions and then burdens only a certain number of people. It will be useless to call upon those very citizens who have become so dependent upon central government to choose from time to time the representative of this government. This very important but brief and rare exercise of their free choice will not prevent their gradual loss of the faculty of autonomous thought, feeling, and action, so that they will slowly fall below the level of humanity. I may add that they will soon lose the capacity to exercise the great and only privilege open to them.

The democratic nations which introduced freedom into politics at the same time that they were increasing despotism in the administrative sphere have been led into the strangest paradoxes. Faced with the need to manage small affairs where common sense can be enough, they reckon citizens are incompetent. When it comes to governing the whole state, they give these citizens immense prerogatives [voting]. They turn them by degrees into playthings of the ruler or his masters [the people], higher than kings or lower than men. Having exhausted all the various electoral systems without finding one which suited them, they look surprised and continue to search, as if the defects they see had far more to do with the country's constitution than with that of the electorate. It is, indeed, difficult to imagine how men who have completely given up the habit of self-government could successfully choose those who should do it for them, and no one will be convinced that a liberal, energetic, and prudent government can ever emerge from the voting of a nation of servants...The vices of those who govern and the ineptitude of those governed would soon bring it to ruin and the people, tired of its representatives and of itself, would create freer institutions or would soon revert to its abasement to one single master."