



At Your Service: Democracy, Bureaucracy, and Governance in the Field of Public Administration

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Local institutions and communities, such as BYU-Idaho, are important fixtures of democratic society. They serve an important role in educating citizens about what it means to live a virtuous life that serves the greater good rather than merely satisfy their own individual interests and passions. The power of these institutions to inculcate a moral sense among citizens is central to the success of democracies over the long-term. From the foundation of our nation, universities have aided in developing responsible and active citizens who are capable of governing themselves. Through a liberal arts heritage that preserves and perpetuates the wisdom of the ages, institutions of higher learning encourage students to develop the necessary virtues to contribute to civic life. In particular, BYU-Idaho does this through its mission of preparing disciple leaders: it pairs together the obligation to educate the soul and the responsibility to serve the broader community.

Although it is easy to see the importance of virtue-enriching associations in democratic society, these groups face significant challenges. Among these is the primacy of the individual in the American concept of democracy.

While institutions can support the perpetuation of core values, many Americans prefer a sense of robust freedom, being independent from everyone else and each other. The natural outcome of prioritizing individualism to such a degree is isolation. This becomes problematic when an individual finds himself or herself in need of the support of a community, only to realize that a life of independence has diminished its reach and power to provide aid. This is where a government by the people creates public bureaucracies in order to step in; these large-scaled organizations become an instrument of care to meet the needs of citizens. When democracy and bureaucracy work together to help individuals, local institutions are no longer seen as necessary. As a result, community associations begin to be nudged to the periphery of civic life as the needs of democratic citizens and bureaucratic power grow together and become its center.

The tendency of democracy and bureaucracy to displace these intermediary institutions is brought front and center with the tragic story of four-year-old Joshua DeShaney, who was so severely beaten by his father that he had

permanent brain damage. In response to this horrific crime, his mother contested that the Department of Social Services (DSS) in Wisconsin had a special responsibility and relationship with Joshua under the Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment to protect her son. While the Supreme Court recognized the "undeniably tragic" nature of this case, it ruled that state entities do not have an affirmative obligation to protect a citizen, even a child, from violence committed by their parents (*DeShaney v. Winnebago County Department of Social Services*, 1989).

Justice William Brennan, in dissent, pointed out that DSS is tasked with protecting children, especially from neglect and abuse. The agency should be held to account to determine whether it acted arbitrarily. His reasoning rested on a fundamental understanding about how the rise of bureaucracy had altered our understanding of what we expect from each other as citizens of a body politic. He noted that once the state assigns a public responsibility, such as securing minors from maltreatment, to an administrative body, it relieves "ordinary citizens" from "any sense of obligation to do anything" apart from the bare minimal commitment to report misconduct (*DeShaney v. Winnebago County Department of Social Services*, 1989). He added that transferring responsibility from the community to the state is so powerful that "no one will step in to fill the gap" if the state does not fulfill its obligations. The impact of this moral shift revealed how bureaucratic responsibility is heightened while citizenship responsibility is lowered. Instead of looking at how things should be, Brennan looked at how things are. He understood that assigning a



Portrait painting of Tocqueville

bureaucratic entity to carry the burden of resolving public problems reshapes and reorients what is expected from democratic citizens. Constitutional scholar John Rohr characterized the far-reaching implication of what this means, noting that "we are no longer our brother's keeper once the state preempts this role by pledging to care for the wellbeing of our children, as well as our elderly, our disabled, our handicapped, our unemployed, and so forth" (2002, p. 137).

The field of public administration has struggled with the problem of how democracy and bureaucracy work together to eclipse the responsibility of citizens to watch over each other (and the accompanying local institutions which educate them on their distinct responsibilities to each other). In the late 1960s, George Frederickson, a BYU alum who would become a leading scholar in the field, advanced a solution that called for civil servants to become more active in caring for citizens in a benevolent manner (1997). While a call to be charitable electrified the field, his solution did not resolve the problem that Justice Brennan raised. As the bureaucratic state grows, it inversely reduces the benevolence that citizens have for each other. The state crowds out the ability of citizens to help each other. And this tendency of citizen inaction is only amplified by a democratic desire to be left alone. In response to these issues, the field of public administration has sought to limit the scope of bureaucracy while reframing democracy to focus on a participatory bent that would leverage the vitality and goodness of local associations and ordinary Americans to solve public problems. They have primarily explored this option through governance, which is essentially working with private actors to become more involved in addressing public needs.

Even though the field of public administration has moved in the direction of governance, it is still wrestling

with how democratic individualism coupled with bureaucratic growth aided in eroding a citizen's character to willingly engage in solving public problems. A capacity to capture these problems in the field means looking back to recover insights by the most astute and powerful observer of America, democracy, and bureaucracy: Alexis de Tocqueville (Mansfield & Winthrop, 2000). Although he wrote before big bureaucracy came to America, Tocqueville would not have been surprised by Brennan's analysis nor of Rohr's critique. He understood how democracy and bureaucracy work together to undermine our responsibilities as citizens to reach out to each other. He also understood how these problems could be solved or at least mitigated through a restoration of association. In other words, what is needed to thread society together again is to (1) redefine democracy to build up civic associations that teach citizens to reengage in public life while at the same time (2) reframe the role of bureaucratic government that tends to dismiss the participatory power of the people.

The Virtues and Vices of Democracy and Bureaucracy

During his visit to America in the 1830s, Tocqueville observed key insights about American democracy. He saw how the virtues of equality and liberty would unleash human potential. Americans were not trapped by tradition, birth, or their government. They could change who they were and where they were going. With this newfound freedom, individuals were endowed, according to Tocqueville, with the "indefinite faculty of perfecting himself" (2000, p. 427).

While this potential was noble, the turn toward greatness was stifled by a democratic tendency to focus on the self. Instead of participating together to achieve human perfection, individuals preferred to be left alone to pursue their own lower ends of interest. For Tocqueville, their interest-based aims led to excessively valuing "rapid sparks and superficial conceptions of the intellect" (2000, p. 435). The problem was that individuals might be constantly on the go, but they did not necessarily know where they were going, apart from being directed by their interest. People would be like projectile pinballs; they would have some semblance of direction, but would crash into everything

and anything. And when these pinballs came crashing down, there was no one there to help.

The resulting condition of a democratic order that pushed people toward a focus on their own individual needs meant that people were increasingly insulated from each other. In fact, people become so isolated from each other that they are often left without a support network to help. While they were independent, they were also weak without each other. Under these circumstances, Tocqueville pointed out that they could "do almost nothing by themselves, and none of them can oblige those like themselves to lend them their cooperation" (2000, p. 490). To fill a hole of need, government intervenes to offer help. And, the potency of this function of government has its charms. Administration can regiment almost anything that is disorderly or messy. Bringing order to chaos provides certainty of a helping hand that is reliable and consistent.

Yet, bureaucracy only amplifies the democratic problems of loneliness and separation; it would neither facilitate bringing people together nor would it make people stronger over the long run. Unleashing a type of power that could centrally coordinate and coercively control would gradually loosen the ties that brought people together. Instead of looking for local solutions to local problems, citizens would refocus their gaze toward the government. There would be no need to engage or work out public problems with each other. The responsibility to fix issues did not reside at a personal or community level. In essence, citizens would not look to each other for help; the result was that individuals would drift inward to their own interest and look outward merely to the government for help.

The Threads that Tie: Associations

Although the problems he warned of would continue to rise through the 20th century, Tocqueville also observed in early America a potential solution to the problems

There would be no need to engage or work out public problems with each other.



The painting " Farmhouse in Provence" by Vincent van Gogh

generated by democracy and bureaucracy: the seamless ability of Americans to create local associations and institutions. He witnessed that individuals “constantly unite” (2000, p. 489). In fact, they had “perfected the art of pursuing the objective of their common desires in common” (2000, p. 490). And this spirit of togetherness was not just confined to a small segment in society. Employing the use of association to achieve things of public and private importance spread to politics, religion, social, commercial, national, and local issues. There was nothing that associations did not touch, which was critical to offsetting many of the threats that a democratic administration was susceptible to produce. Most notably, by harnessing and channeling their energy in cooperative efforts, Americans were made strong and interdependent, not weak and separate. Tocqueville added that, through their common efforts and endeavors, “sentiments and ideas renew themselves, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed” (2000, p. 491).

The field of public administration is adopting these insights through a governance mentality. First, it is moving in this direction by moving away from excessive individualism and moving toward an older form of democratic thought. This recovered knowledge understands that a participation of the people, for the good of the people, means that we could come together to uplift each other to achieve even greater heights than we can achieve alone. A government by the people is

an expectation from the people to be a neighbor who is engaged with addressing community issues.

Second, the field of public administration recognizes that bureaucracy cannot solve community or individual problems by itself. It needs help. Instead of viewing associations as a threat or a hinderance, they are vital ingredients to addressing public problems. But, they do more than just provide another tool for society to tackle thorny issues. They help form the character of citizens. Working in these associations teaches citizens on what it means to be honest and dutiful, having a capacity to serve a cause greater than oneself.

By being able to see the nuances in both democracy and bureaucracy, Tocqueville provided insights into what ails us even today. Without strong local institutions and associations, Tocqueville understood that character development would be stifled. He also understood that through these associations we can be knit together by creating habits of benevolence. Imperative to these efforts is the role of communal institutions, such as BYU-I, to bolster the next-generation of citizens. We can recognize our collective responsibility to ennoble the lives of students by educating them on how to use their liberty in a way that is elevating and enriching. ❖

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- Note: This research was part of a broader project on Tocqueville, which has been generously supported by the Allene R. Chiesman Fund for Civic Education.
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