

8: The Value of Associations in a Democracy

Lawrence P. Grayson, DD, PGK, PFN

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1831, he was highly impressed with the number of associations that he found and which he believed were essential to America's ability to make democracy work. In his seminal work, *Democracy in America*, he stated:

"Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations. They have 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. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; they found in this manner hospitals, prisons, and schools. . . . Nothing, in my opinion, is more deserving of our attention than the intellectual and moral associations of America."

His observation was a reflection both of the civic life that existed and of the way that individual Americans assured themselves of a voice in the political and social concerns of the day. In autocracies, oligarchies, and theocracies, one person or a small group of individuals hold enormous power and can determine how a nation will operate – what the laws will be, how they will be enforced, how the economic system will operate, what opportunities will exist for the population, etc. In a democracy, in contrast, individuals have a good deal of independence to do as they wish, but alone have very little power to control events. They can exercise their influence best by joining like-minded persons, and through their association have greater effect in pursuing common objectives.



Alexis de Tocqueville

In America, people are not members of a single organization, but of many different groups depending upon their interests and desires. They may belong to a church, labor union, neighborhood association, political party, professional society, social club, mothers' group, sports team, literary guild, nature organization, and so forth. Involvement in these groups fosters social interaction, creates networks, builds trust in others, connects people with the life of their community, and develops norms for social engagement that allow people to collaborate and cooperate for their mutual benefit.

Associations have had a powerful and beneficial influence on American society for over 200 years. But beginning in the 1960s, and continuing ever since, most major civic organizations have experienced a steady and substantial decline in membership. Fraternal organizations, veterans groups, youth associations, service groups, and others which are organized on a chapter, lodge, or other local unit model and require the involvement of individuals for their vitality are struggling for want of active members.

Even though national in scope, these types of associations operate at the local level and connect people to one another in joint activities.

In contrast, organizations that are flourishing are those national groups, such as the American Association of Retired Persons, National Rifle Association, Sierra Club, and National Organization for Women, which do not require a personal commitment. People are associated by common ideals or causes or characteristics, and linked through mailing lists, newsletters and magazines, but not personal contact. Although these organizations have strong lobbying influence, they do not establish the social interaction, personal trust, or connection of the individual to the local community that de Tocqueville found essential to democracy.

While the decline may be detrimental to specific organizations and their ability to carry out their purposes, its implications are much greater. Without engagement in associations, the commitment and involvement of the populace in community life erodes. People are less likely to be actively concerned about politics and government – less likely to assist a political party, attend a political rally or speech, or even cast their ballot. It is a sad and dangerous fact that more American's voted in Fox TV's recent competition on *American Idol* than in the last presidential election.

People also are likely to have no more than a cursory knowledge of the issues before their community, and are less likely to have trust in government and its elected leaders. Without trust, without knowledge, without participation, how can America have a government *of* and *by* the people? How can the nation's democracy survive?

While membership in fraternal organizations, such as the Shriners, Elks, Jaycees, Lions, and Masons, has been declining over the last quarter century, the Knights of Columbus is an exception. Its membership has been increasing. In 1980, there were about 1.3 million Knights; today, there are almost 1.7 million. It will be a hollow "success," however, if men join, but do not attend meetings or become active in their local Councils. If the Knights of Columbus is to fulfill its potential, not only in wielding national influence through the dint of numbers, but in serving our parishes and communities, then we must not only enlist new members in our Order, but must engage them in the affairs of the Council. Every Knight should be an involved Knight.