LUISS

Department of Political Science

Program in Politics: Philosophy and Economics

Course in History Of Political Institutions

Federalism and Centralism: An Analysis of French and American Political Institutions through Tocqueville's "Democracy in America" and "The Old Regime and the Revolution"

Prof. Lorenzo Castellani

SUPERVISOR

Alexander Milano

099872

CANDIDATE

Academic Year 2023/2024

Federalism and Centralism: An Analysis of French and American Political Institutions through Tocqueville’s "Democracy in America" and "The Old Regime and the Revolution"

Table of Contents

Introduction

It would be paradoxical to deal with the history of democratic political institutions without acknowledging the two most notable revolutions in the Western world–the American and French revolutions–both symbolized by Enlightenment ideals and the upheaval of oppressive regimes that gave rise to a new school of political conscience. Despite their ideological similarity and historical proximity, both the United States and France established two radically different political views on the role of the state: Federalism and Centralism.

"Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité" is the current national French motto, which finds its origins in the French Revolution. This rallying cry encapsulates a revised type of centralization, sharing the ideals that fueled the birth of modern France which became a means, to some extent, to unite the nation under a shared vision of democracy and equality. On the other hand, across the Atlantic, the United States adopted a very different approach to governance. From its foundation, American political thought has been shaped by the principle of federalism—where power is deliberately divided between national and local governments to ensure a balance and safeguard against tyranny. The contrast between these two systems—centralism in France and federalism in the United States—has long fascinated political theorists, particularly the French aristocrat and political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville.

Alexis de Tocqueville, who spent nine months in the then-new-born United States, serves as a first-hand witness to the creation of this modern state. Having also contributed to the liminality of his own, he, therefore, becomes a central figure in attempting to compare both nations through his works *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, which address the strengths and weaknesses of both systems of governance. Tocqueville's dual examination of America and France reflects his deep engagement with the challenges and potentials of establishing democratic states. Through his keen analysis, Tocqueville not only contributed to the understanding of his own time but also laid the groundwork for future explorations of democratic theory and practice.

His comparative analysis extends to the contrasting political systems of federalism in the U.S. and centralism in France. Though these systems are often seen as opposites, Tocqueville identifies both similitudes and differences in their operation and impact. His examination of these two political

systems provides a rich basis for understanding the broader implications of both systems in shaping political culture, civic engagement, and the relationship between government and citizens.

In his seminal work, *Democracy in America,* Tocqueville provides an insightful analysis of American federalism. He observes that the federal system was designed to balance the benefits of a large, unified nation with the advantages of smaller, more localized governance. Tocqueville notes, "The federal system was created with the intention of combining the different advantages which result from the magnitude and the littleness of nations."[1] This delicate balance allows for a diversity of local policies and practices, while still maintaining the coherence and stability of a single nation. The local governments in the United States serve as laboratories for democracy, where different policies can be tested and adapted to suit the needs of diverse communities. Moreover, the role of civic engagement in American federalism is characterized by the division of power between national and local governments which encourages citizens to participate actively in their local communities. This engagement fosters a sense of responsibility and empowerment among citizens, as they have a direct influence on the policies and decisions that affect their daily lives. This active participation in local governance is a cornerstone of American democracy and a key factor in the resilience and adaptability of the federal system.

In contrast, Tocqueville's reflections on French centralism, particularly in *The Old Regime and the Revolution,* offer a different perspective on the relationship between government and citizens. Centralization in France, according to Tocqueville, emerged as a response to the need for national unity and efficient administration. While he acknowledges that centralization can be an effective tool for nation-building and governance, particularly in times of crisis or when a strong, cohesive response is required, Tocqueville also warns of the potential dangers of excessive centralization. He also argues that centralization is an indispensable means of government for a nation traversing a process of formation. He describes it as a useful administrative instrument while considering it as being a dangerous weapon of despotism. The concentration of power in a central authority can lead to a disconnect between the government and its citizens, reducing civic engagement and increasing the risk of authoritarianism. Despite these concerns, Tocqueville recognizes the achievements of centralized governance in France, particularly in fostering a sense of national

[1] Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1. Edited by Phillips Bradley. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1945, 168.

identity and unity. The centralization of power allowed for the implementation of uniform policies and reforms, which helped to solidify the principles of “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité” across the nation. While this centralized approach is seen as instrumental in shaping modern France and establishing a shared vision of democracy and equality, Tocqueville’s view that post-revolutionary centralism was a continuation of the Monarchy’s centralized system remains a central theme in his analysis.

The key characteristic of this thesis is to explore the contrasting political systems of France and the United States through Tocqueville’s insights. By examining the historical development, structural characteristics, and cultural implications of federalism and centralism, we can better understand their respective advantages and disadvantages. Tocqueville’s works serve as a valuable framework for this exploration, offering a nuanced perspective that goes beyond mere theoretical discourse. His observations, drawn from meticulous study and personal experience, provide a rich source of knowledge that remains relevant in contemporary discussions about governance and democracy.

This brings us to the central question surrounding the creation of these two distinct systems: How can we explain that, despite departing from similar foundational ideas—rooted in Enlightenment principles and the desire for emancipation from oppressive regimes—the United States and France developed two fundamentally different political systems?

Building on this question, it is essential to delve deeper into the historical and cultural factors that shaped the political trajectories of both nations. In the chapters that follow, the thesis will firstly delve into the specifics of federalism in America and secondly into centralism in France, drawing on Tocqueville’s analyses to highlight key themes and insights. The last chapter will be dedicated to the comparison of these two systems which will reveal how different approaches to governance can shape political culture, influence civic participation, and impact the overall functioning of a nation. By juxtaposing the federalist model of the United States with the centralist model of France, the thesis aims to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of each system, offering a comprehensive understanding of their implications for democracy and political stability.

Federalism and centralism are not merely abstract concepts; they are dynamic systems that have real-world consequences for the societies they govern. The balance of power, the role of local versus national authority, and the relationship between the state and its citizens are all influenced

by the chosen system of governance. Tocqueville's works provide a critical lens through which we can examine these issues, offering timeless insights that continue to resonate in modern political discourse. By understanding the principles and practices of federalism and centralism, we can better appreciate the complexities of governance and the challenges of fostering a democratic society.

Chapter 1: Federalism in America

1.1 Definition and Characteristics of American Federalism

Federalism in the context of American governance refers to a system where power is divided between a weaker central (national) government and stronger regional (state) governments. This division of power, explicitly outlined in the United States Constitution, has evolved over time to become a fundamental tenet of American democracy. However, the origins of American federalism can be traced back to the American Revolution and the subsequent debates regarding governance for the newly independent states.

Before independence, the American colonies were largely self-governing under British rule. Each of the thirteen colonies had its own government, including an elected assembly, and managed local affairs autonomously, even though they remained under the authority of the British Crown and Parliament. This early experience with self-governance fostered a sense of independence and local control, which later influenced the states' desire to retain significant power within the emerging federal system. As Alexis de Tocqueville highlighted in *Democracy in America*, the colonies were loosely united by common interests such as trade and defense, but no centralized government existed to oversee them until the first constitution of the United States: The Articles of Confederation, adopted in 1781.

The American Revolution, which lasted from 1775 to 1783, was essentially a rebellion against the overreach of British power. After achieving independence, the United States needed a government structure that reflected the values of liberty and self-governance for which the revolutionaries had fought. American federalism emerged as a reaction to the centralism of the British crown, aiming to balance central authority with the autonomy of individual states.

A major influence of the revolution and the state-building process in the U.S. was the French Enlightenment movement, which inspired, primarily through the dissemination of key philosophical ideas, an emphasis on individual rights, liberty, and rational governance. Revolutionary Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau profoundly contributed to the ideas of the American Revolution and further influenced the United States Constitution. John Locke's concept of natural rights, including life, liberty, and property, provided

the philosophical foundation for the Declaration of Independence. His idea that governments are created to protect these rights and can be overthrown if they fail to do so was key to justifying American independence. Montesquieu's theory of the separation of powers, outlined in *The Spirit of the Laws*, directly influenced the U.S. Constitution. His idea that government should be divided into separate branches to prevent tyranny was adopted in the American system of checks and balances between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Rousseau's notion of the social contract, where the legitimacy of government stems from the general will of the people, influenced the colonists' desire for self-governance and sovereignty. This idea helped shape the democratic ideals embedded in the American political system. The Enlightenment ideals of liberty, resistance to tyranny, and the concept of popular sovereignty critiqued monarchy and advocated for governments built on the consent of the governed.

The first attempt to unify the states under a national government was the Articles of Confederation, adopted by the Continental Congress in 1777, and later enforced in 1781 as the first U.S. constitution. These documents were deeply shaped by the Enlightenment ideals which consequently also influenced the French Revolution. The Articles of Confederation created a confederation of states which were supposed to be united under a common government. However, this resulted in a loose alliance of sovereign states under a weak central government, with most powers remaining within the individual states.

The Articles were originally written because the newly independent American colonies needed a governing framework to unite them during and after the Revolutionary War. Their eventual unsuccess was mostly linked to a failure to implement national measures. As described by Jack N. Rakove, American historian and author, the Articles of Confederation "stemmed not from a heady sense of independence but rather from the enormous difficulties that all the states encountered in collecting taxes, mustering men, and gathering supplies from a war-weary populace."[2] Despite their inadequacy, originally the Articles were crafted to reflect the values and concerns of the time, specifically the desire to avoid creating a centralized government that could turn into tyranny, as they had experienced under British rule. Therefore, under the Articles, the national government had limited powers. It could conduct diplomacy, negotiate treaties, and manage Western lands, but it lacked the authority to levy taxes, regulate interstate commerce, or enforce laws. Most powers

[2] Barlow, J. Jackson, Leonard W. Levy, and Ken Masugi, eds. *The Collapse of the Articles of Confederation*.

remained within the states, which retained their sovereignty and independence. The national government's effectiveness was dependent on voluntary cooperation from the states, each of which retained ultimate authority over its internal matters.

The Articles of Confederation reflected the widespread fear of centralized power that many Americans had developed after their experience under British rule. Wary of a strong national government infringing on their liberties, the states opted for a decentralized system. The key passage from the Articles of Confederation that reflects the fear of a centralized state is found in Article II, which asserts:

"Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every power, jurisdiction, and right, which is not by this Confederation expressly delegated to the United States, in Congress assembled."[3]

This clause essentially guarantees that the states remain sovereign and that only explicitly granted powers are given to the national government, highlighting a limited central authority. It reflects the prevailing fear among the states of creating a centralized government akin to the British monarchy, which could infringe on their newly won independence and individual liberties. By placing such a strong emphasis on state sovereignty, the Articles sought to protect against any form of overarching centralized power.

This arrangement soon revealed significant weaknesses. The national government was too weak to address critical issues such as interstate trade disputes, financial instability, and foreign threats. Lacking the ability to raise funds through taxation or maintain a standing army, the government struggled to effectively manage the nation's affairs. This inefficiency under the Articles of Confederation highlighted the need for a stronger central authority, ultimately leading to the drafting and ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1787, which established the federal system we recognize today. It marked a significant turning point in addressing the weaknesses exposed under the Articles of Confederation. The new constitution sought to balance the need for a stronger central authority with the preservation of state sovereignty, a challenge that was crucial given the diverse economic and political interests across the states. By adopting a federal system, the

[3] Articles of Confederation, Article II.

constitution integrated both federal (supra-state) and confederal (inter-state) elements, aiming to create a more cohesive and effective national government.

The Philadelphia Constitutional Convention, which produced the second and definitive Constitution, was an effort to shift from a loose confederation of states to a more unified nation capable of addressing both domestic and international issues. This shift involved reconciling competing theories of republican government, namely the compact (confederal) theory and the national (federal) theory, to ensure a balance of power between the national and state governments. The new constitution established a framework that allowed for a stronger federal government with the power to tax, regulate interstate commerce, and maintain a standing army, thereby addressing the critical issues that plagued the nation under the Articles. Thus, the Constitution not only resolved the immediate inefficiencies but also laid the foundations for a political union that could accommodate the various sovereignties of the states while ensuring national unity and stability. The main point from the U.S. Constitution that reflects the strength of federalism can be found in the Supremacy Clause, Article VI, Clause 2:

"This Constitution, and the Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof; and all Treaties made, or which shall be made, under the Authority of the United States, shall be the supreme Law of the Land; and the Judges in every State shall be bound thereby, any Thing in the Constitution or Laws of any State to the Contrary notwithstanding."[4]

This clause ensures that the federal government has the authority to act in areas within its constitutional powers and that state governments cannot override or contradict federal laws, thus reinforcing the balance of power between state and federal authorities. This creates a strong federal structure, with national laws binding on all states.

It is safe to say that the birthing of federalism in the United States was a gradual procedure nourished by Enlightenment ideals, revolutionary principles that battled monarchical oppression, and an initial weakness of individualist states recognizing their strength uniting against this common enemy. This brought about a union of states which developed a sovereign system based on a common fear of being ruled by a centralized government, and an understanding that a balance was needed between empowering a central authority and preserving state autonomy. This balance

[4] U.S. Constitution, Article VI, Clause 2 (Supremacy Clause)

was achieved through the creation of a federal system, which allowed for shared governance, where states retained significant powers but also collectively contributed to a stronger national government capable of addressing common challenges and fostering unity.

1.2 Tocqueville's Analysis of the Birth of Federalism

Tocqueville writes in the opening of his chapter on The Federal Constitution in *Democracy in America*, the "Origin of the first Union–its weakness,"[5] pointing to the essential but imperfect nature of the initial union. He emphasizes that during the War of Independence, the states were bound together primarily by the necessity of mutual defense. As long as the war with Britain raged, this union held because the common threat required collaboration. Tocqueville notes, "As long as the war with the mother country lasted, necessity prolonged the principle of union. And, although the laws constituting this union were defective, the link continued in spite of them."[6] He affirms that the union of states was necessary from the beginning of the federal experiment, as individual states recognized their collective strength in uniting against a common enemy—the British crown. Tocqueville contrasts this with the extreme centralization in England, stating, "In our time, we see one power, England, where government centralization is carried to an extreme degree; the state seems to move as a single man; it shifts great hordes of people at will; it gathers and spreads its might wherever it wishes."[7] The revolutionary struggle against a powerful monarchy acted as a temporary adhesive for the fledgling union, giving rise to the idea that a centralized authority was necessary, but only to a limited extent.

Even though Tocqueville does attribute the beginning of the formation of federalism to the necessity and fear of the colonies regarding the Crown, he also explains the outcome as being "a variation or summary of the political principles of the republic which was widespread in society and had an existence of its own before the federal government came into being."[8] Moreover, paraphrasing his words, Tocqueville tries to describe the federal government as a pragmatic expression of republican principles, one that, in its final form, synthesizes the political will and democratic energies of the colonies. He views the federal structure not merely as a reaction to external threats or pressures, but as a natural outgrowth of the deeply rooted values of

[5] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 131.
[6] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 131.
[7] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 104.
[8] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 71.

Republicanism which were already flourishing within the colonies. For Tocqueville, federalism is a manifestation of the decentralized, participatory, and community-oriented political ethos that predated and shaped the eventual formation of the United States government. Moreover, he states: "The federal government, as I have just said, is the exception whereas that of the state is the rule,"[9] emphasizing that the real power and vitality of American democracy are found at the local and state levels rather than in the central federal authority.

Tocqueville attributes the birth of a federal system to the growth of independent systems, reaffirming their sovereignty within a broader confederation. Therefore, the procedure commences within individual states. In his chapter The Necessity of Examining What Happens in Individual States Before Considering the Union as a Whole, he relies on the importance of the American Township System. He writes about the American township as the bedrock of democratic life, illustrating how local political institutions serve as the primary training ground for citizens' participation in governance. Tocqueville likens his approach to that of a political anthropologist, focusing on the lived experiences of individuals and their roles within the state as the starting point for his analysis. He chooses to focus on the examination of political institutions, concentrating on individuals and their role within the State, and from that starting point, he establishes a hierarchical order. He states: "At the lowest level is the township followed by the country and ending with the State."[10] For Tocqueville, this hierarchy reflects the decentralized nature of American democracy, in which power initially flows upward from the people and their local communities rather than being imposed from the top. Through this lens, Tocqueville captures the essence of federalism as a political system that reflects both the values of republicanism and the practical realities of a society that values local autonomy and civic participation.

Even though he recognizes that municipal freedom is vulnerable to corruption and the abuses of local power, he affirms that even in a "semi-barbarous society (…) the strength of free nations resides in the township."[11] The township system is for Tocqueville the key to containing chaos as it permits freedom and localized institutions that reflect the locality's customs to flourish within their own legislative administrations. To better describe his point of view, Tocqueville uses the model of the State of New England as an example, to describe what happens locally in other

[9] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 71.
[10] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 72.
[11] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 73.

regions of the United States. He explains that while the township and the county have different methods of organization within the Union, the same underlying principles have largely guided the formation of both. The laws, customs, self-governance, and influence of local entities are what give the townships their strength. The spirit behind this analysis is bluntly described by Tocqueville: "Everyone is the best judge of what is in his own interest."[12] Tocqueville's assertion reflects the democratic ideals expressed in the preamble of the U.S. Constitution, which places citizens at the heart of governance:

"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

By grounding his observations in the principle of individual autonomy, Tocqueville emphasizes that people, when given the freedom and responsibility to manage their own affairs, are best equipped to make decisions that serve their personal and communal interests.

The Magna Carta, the royal charter of rights agreed to by King John of England in 1215, introduced the principle of limiting centralized authority, a key notion that resonates with the federal structure described by Tocqueville. Tocqueville emphasizes that the U.S. federal system arose from the necessity of mutual defense during the War of Independence, when the colonies united against the British crown. This temporary union in response to a powerful external threat can be seen as echoing the Magna Carta's imposition of limits on the monarch's power—a limitation that arose out of necessity and demand for protection of rights. Furthermore, Tocqueville explains that federalism was not merely a reaction to British tyranny but also an embodiment of pre-existing republican principles that valued local autonomy and self-governance. Similarly, the Magna Carta was not just a response to a tyrannical monarch but a reflection of the underlying desire for political order based on legal rights and accountability. Just as the Magna Carta established legal protections against central overreach, Tocqueville argues that American federalism is deeply rooted in the decentralized, participatory political culture of the colonies.

[12] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 77.

Furthermore, Tocqueville's insights into the American township system—where power flows upward from local governance—reflect the spirit of the Magna Carta's assertion that the monarch's powers should be checked and that governance should be more localized and representative. Tocqueville praises the township as the bedrock of democratic life, much like the Magna Carta symbolized the initial push for shared power and legal fairness.

The only limitation Tocqueville attributes to the system of township sovereignty is the size of the townships. In 1830, there were 305 townships in Massachusetts, with an average of about 2000 inhabitants per township. The demography of the region is therefore described by Tocqueville as "standing between the French *canton* and *commune,*"[13] highlighting a unique hybrid of local governance structures. In France, cantons tend to be larger administrative divisions, while communes are smaller, often more localized entities. The Massachusetts townships, situated in this middle ground, embody characteristics of both systems. They possess the intimate governance style of a commune, where residents can easily engage with local officials and influence decisions, yet they also function within a broader framework akin to that of a canton, managing a range of administrative responsibilities. Tocqueville suggests that while this size can promote effective self-governance, it may also limit the scope and resources available for addressing larger community issues. For instance, small townships might struggle with economic sustainability or providing essential services, which could hinder their ability to fully realize the benefits of their sovereign status. Thus, while the township system encourages active civic engagement, the size of the townships poses a potential constraint on their effectiveness and governance capabilities.

Having witnessed both the French and American systems through his personal experiences, Tocqueville further compares both systems stating that whilst in France "the central government lends its civil servants to the central government; in America the township lends its civil servants to the central government."[14] Moreover, local officials are not merely agents of the central government; they are representatives of their own communities who, through their self-governance, ensure that local interests are considered in the broader national framework. This decentralization of authority allows for a more direct form of democracy, where local governments retain a

[13] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 74.
[14] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 79.

significant degree of independence and where individuals, through their involvement in township affairs, play a vital role in shaping public policy and affirming their sovereignty as citizens of the State. This decentralized model, where local institutions lend their vitality to the national government, is what Tocqueville believes to be a key element in the success and stability of the American democratic experiment. By empowering individuals at the local level, the American system builds a strong foundation for national governance, while avoiding the pitfalls of over-centralization, which Tocqueville saw as a potential source of weakness and corruption in France.

Having established that the townships are the first actors within the state's hierarchical order, Tocqueville extends his analysis by discussing the administration as the second actor. Since there are differences in the systems of administration in the states of the Union, this implies that, for there to be a general administration, one must understand the compromise and characteristics of each state. Tocqueville broadly looks at the Union as a whole and highlights that as one gradually moves south in the territory, township life becomes less attractive. The townships have fewer meetings and deal with different or fewer matters, fewer magistrates represent municipalities, and citizens' rights and duties differ. Tocqueville states: "The power of the elected magistrate is thus comparatively greater while that of the voter is smaller; local community spirit is less alive and less powerful."[15] This decline in local engagement has profound implications for democratic participation and civic responsibility. Tocqueville's observation highlights a critical concern: the health of a democracy is intrinsically linked to the active participation of its citizens in local governance. When local institutions fail to engage the populace, it risks creating a disconnect between the government and the governed, ultimately undermining the very foundations of democratic society. However, it also pinpoints the key characteristic of the Federalist political system, which reminds one that "Everyone is the best judge of what is in his own interest."[16]

As the administration of the Union is scattered and lacks a structural shape, and since it cannot be removed, it is difficult to establish a hierarchical structure of authority anywhere. Tocqueville states: "Since there is no hierarchy anywhere and the administrators are elected and irremovable before the end of their contract, the obligation arose to introduce courts of law into the administration to a greater or lesser extent."[17] This introduction of legal systems serves as a

[15] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 95.
[16] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 77.
[17] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 97.

mechanism of accountability, ensuring that the second layer of authority and its representatives adhere to the laws. This judicial oversight is crucial for maintaining order and protecting citizens' rights, but it also reflects the complexities inherent in a decentralized political structure. By relying on courts to enforce laws and regulate the behavior of elected officials, Tocqueville highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of the American system. While the independence of local governance encourages citizen participation, it also requires robust mechanisms to ensure that elected officials remain accountable to the very constituents they represent. This system persisted from the end of the Union to the adoption of the Constitution of the United States, giving one a sense of what the national State government might look like.

The national State, as the final actor in Tocqueville's hierarchy, finds its strength in coupling ideals of administrative centralization and governmental centralization, whilst remaining a federal institution. The analysis that Tocqueville makes is the one where in the United States, "there is a high level of government centralization."[18] He observed that while the federal system allowed for significant local autonomy, there was also a strong central government that played a crucial role in shaping policies and ideals. This centralized power however arises only when the nation requires a common direction. For instance, Tocqueville argues that "it is the township assessor who fixes the taxes, the collector who raises them, the treasurer of the township forwards the receipts to the public treasury and any claims arising are submitted to the ordinary courts. Such a manner of collecting taxes is slow and awkward; it would constantly constrict the progress of any government with extensive financial freedoms."[19] Thus, the strength of the national state lies in its ability to centralize power when necessary, ensuring a cohesive response to national challenges while maintaining a federal structure that allows for local governance. This dual capacity enables the state to adapt to varying contexts, striking a balance between respecting regional autonomy and fulfilling the requirements of a unified national identity.

Tying back to Tocqueville's political anthropological approach, he describes centralization within the federal institution by observing the citizens of the United States and how their patriotism influenced the creation of a cohesive Union. Even though Tocqueville describes the unitary camaraderie of the U.S. as having developed over time due to his statement: "Separated by 2,800

[18] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 105.
[19] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 105.

miles of sea from their enemies, aided by a powerful ally, the United States owed victory more to their geographical position than to the courage of their armies or to the patriotism of their citizens,"[20] he also acknowledges that "in the United States, the motherland is felt everywhere and is a subject of concern from village to the whole union."[21] Tocqueville argues that this collective sentiment not only reinforces the federal structure but also enhances the effectiveness of centralized governance. As citizens engage with local and national issues, their patriotism acts as a catalyst for civic participation and accountability, ensuring that the government remains responsive to the needs of its people. Therefore, the national state's strength is not merely derived from its centralized authority, but also from the active involvement of its citizens, who navigate the balance between local autonomy and national unity. In this way, Tocqueville's insights reveal how the interplay between individual and collective identities is crucial for sustaining a cohesive yet adaptable state, ultimately shaping the trajectory of American democracy.

1.3 The United States and the Federal Constitution

American democracy, as we know it today, still relies upon the framework for American government, embodying the principles of federalism, which were delivered by the articles of the 1788 United States Constitution. Federalism, in essence, is the division of powers between a central authority and constituent political units—in this case, the states. This system was designed to balance the need for a strong national government with the rights and autonomy of individual states. The Constitution achieves this balance through a series of provisions that delineate the powers of the federal government, reserve powers to the states, and establish mechanisms for cooperation and conflict resolution between the two levels of government. This balance is further exemplified by the separation of powers established within the federal structure, ensuring that no single entity holds too much authority.

One of the foundational elements of the federal structure is the separation of powers among the three branches of government: the legislative, the executive, and the judicial. Each branch has distinct responsibilities and powers, thereby providing a system of checks and balances that ensures no single branch can dominate the others. This separation is crucial in preventing tyranny and promoting accountability, as it requires cooperation and negotiation among the branches,

[20] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 132.
[21] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 112.

reflecting Tocqueville's insights on the importance of maintaining a balanced government. In addition to this horizontal separation, the Constitution also delineates a vertical separation of powers, which emphasizes the distinct roles of the federal government and the states.

The division of vertical separation of powers is articulated primarily in Article I, Section 8 of the United States Constitution. It essentially enumerates the specific powers granted to Congress. These powers include the ability to regulate commerce, levy taxes, declare war, and maintain armed forces. Importantly, this list of enumerated powers is accompanied by the Necessary and Proper Clause[22], which grants Congress the flexibility to enact laws deemed necessary to execute its enumerated powers effectively. This clause has been the basis for expansive interpretations of federal authority, allowing the national government to adapt to changing circumstances and, therefore address contemporary challenges. Tocqueville observed that while this flexibility allowed the federal government to adapt to the modern challenges of his time, it also raised concerns about overreach. Tocqueville highlighted his concerns about federal overreach by noting that a strong central government could impose uniformity at the expense of local customs and autonomy. He warned that this tendency might lead to a form of despotism, where centralized authority undermines the diversity and unique identities of individual states, potentially stifling local initiative and self-governance.

This balance between federal authority and state autonomy is further illustrated by the Tenth Amendment, which serves to reinforce the principles of federalism and address the concerns Tocqueville raised regarding the potential overreach of a centralized government. The Tenth Amendment reinforces the principles of federalism by reserving powers not delegated to the federal government for the states and the people. It serves as a constitutional affirmation of state sovereignty, ensuring that states retain authority over matters not specifically addressed by federal law. This reinforces the idea that the citizens remain sovereign within the constitution. This dual sovereignty allows states to tailor their laws and policies to the unique needs and preferences of their populations, fostering a diverse political landscape across the nation. Tocqueville noted the significance of this arrangement, as it empowers citizens to engage more directly in governance at the local level, cultivating a sense of agency and responsibility. He describes: “In America the people appoint the lawmakers and the executive; they form the jury which punishes breaches of

[22] U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 8

the law. Not only are institutions democratic in principle but also in their consequences; thus the people *directly* nominate their representatives and, as a general rule, choose them *annually* so as to hold them more completely dependent Therefore, in reality it is the people who rule."[23] This direct participation, Tocqueville argues, not only strengthens democracy but also deepens the relationship between the government and its citizens, as individuals feel a personal responsibility for the laws and policies that govern them. By ensuring that power remains decentralized and responsive to local needs, the Tenth Amendment fosters a more engaged, accountable, and active citizenry that is integral to the health and sustainability of American democracy.

The Supremacy Clause[24], found in Article VI, further defines the relationship between federal and state laws. It asserts that federal law takes precedence over state law in the event of a conflict. While this clause establishes the primacy of federal authority, it also underscores the need for cooperation between the two levels of government. Tocqueville recognized this interplay, highlighting how federalism encourages dialogue and negotiation among various stakeholders, ultimately contributing to a more dynamic political culture. He illustrates this point by discussing the necessity of federal unity in the face of external threats to the nation. Reflecting on the limits of the state system during times of crisis, Tocqueville states, "A nation needs a single government above all to give it the advantage when dealing with foreigners."[25] This underscores why the right to declare war, make treaties, and levy armies is exclusively granted to the Union, reinforcing the need for clear federal authority in critical matters of national security.

In addition to establishing the primacy of federal law, the Supremacy Clause sets the stage for a legal framework that facilitates the resolution of conflicts between state and federal authorities. Moreover, the Constitution creates mechanisms for resolving disputes between the states and the federal government. The judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court, plays a crucial role in interpreting the Constitution and adjudicating conflicts over the scope of federal and state powers. Landmark Supreme Court cases, such as McCulloch v. Maryland (1819) and Gibbons v. Ogden (1824), illustrate how the Court has navigated the complexities of federalism. These cases not only reinforced the broad scope of federal powers but also clarified the limits of state intervention in matters under federal jurisdiction. In these cases, the Court affirmed the broad interpretation of

[23] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, Part 2, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 201.
[24] U.S. Constitution, Article VI, Clause 2.
[25] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 2, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 135.

federal powers while simultaneously recognizing the importance of state sovereignty, thus reinforcing the federal structure envisioned by the framers. These cases reflected Tocqueville's concern with ensuring national unity while maintaining the integrity of local governance, a balance critical to federalism's success.

In McCulloch v. Maryland, the Supreme Court addressed whether Congress had the constitutional authority to establish a national bank and if states could tax it. Maryland argued that the federal government overstepped its bounds since the Constitution did not explicitly permit the creation of such a bank. However, Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that Congress could create the bank under the Necessary and Proper Clause[26], which allows for implied powers to carry out its enumerated duties. The decision significantly expanded federal authority by affirming that the government can take actions not explicitly listed in the Constitution if they are necessary to execute its powers. Additionally, the Court ruled that Maryland could not tax the bank, as this would undermine federal supremacy, citing the Supremacy Clause to reinforce the precedence of federal law over state law. This landmark case affirmed the broad scope of federal power while limiting state interference, marking a pivotal moment in U.S. federalism. As Tocqueville observed, the ruling demonstrated the importance of a strong central government in addressing national needs while preserving the federal system's structure.

In Gibbons v. Ogden (1824), the Supreme Court addressed whether states could grant exclusive rights to operate steamboats in interstate waters, focusing on a conflict between New York's state-granted monopoly and a federal license. The case revolved around the scope of the Commerce Clause in the Constitution, which gives Congress the authority to regulate interstate commerce. Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that the federal government had exclusive power over interstate commerce, interpreting the term broadly to include navigation. This decision established that states could not interfere with or regulate interstate commerce, solidifying federal supremacy in this area. The ruling not only expanded federal control over economic activity but also set a lasting precedent for the broad interpretation of the Commerce Clause. In reinforcing federal authority, Gibbons v. Ogden played a crucial role in shaping the balance of power between state and federal governments, echoing Tocqueville's observations on the need for strong federal oversight in key national matters.

[26] Supremacy Clause, Article I, Section 8

Even though Tocqueville did not cite the two clauses in his work *Democracy in America,* his reflections within his work on American federalism highlight both the strengths and potential weaknesses of this constitutional framework. On one hand, he praised the way federalism empowers local governance and civic engagement, fostering a vibrant democracy. He argued that by decentralizing power, citizens are more likely to participate actively in their communities, leading to a stronger sense of responsibility and social cohesion. Local governments, being closer to the people, can more effectively address specific issues and reflect the diverse needs of their constituents. On the other hand, Tocqueville also warned of the dangers of excessive state autonomy, and cautioned against the risks of decentralization, noting that too much local autonomy could lead to fragmentation and weaken national cohesion. He observed that local interests could sometimes overshadow national priorities, leading to fragmentation and inefficiency.

Tocqueville's observations on the Constitution provide a rich analysis of the delicate balance inherent in American federalism. He recognized that while a strong central government was crucial for national unity and effective governance, it also posed risks to local autonomy and diversity. By advocating for the importance of local governance, Tocqueville highlighted the need for a system that allows citizens to engage actively in their communities, ensuring that their unique identities and customs are preserved.

Chapter 2: Centralism in France

2.1 French Centralism: Origins, Characteristics, and Evolution during the Revolution of 1789

Centralism in France is a political and administrative system where the central government holds primary authority, effectively concentrating power and decision-making at the national level. This structure contrasts with federalism, where power is divided between national and regional governments. The roots of French centralism can be traced back to the historical evolution of the French state, particularly from the era of absolute monarchies to the modern republic.

Unlike in the United States, France's journey toward centralism is deeply intertwined with its historical evolution. The seeds of centralism were planted during the reign of the Capetian dynasty, but it was not until the rise of absolute monarchies that centralism began to take a firm hold. The consolidation of power by monarchs such as Louis XIV played a crucial role in shaping a centralized state. Under Louis XIV, France witnessed the epitome of absolute monarchy. Louis XIV not only centralized administrative control, but he also reformed the judiciary, ensuring that royal courts had the final say in legal matters across France. Moreover, Louis XIV reformed the military, placing control firmly in the hands of the crown and reducing the autonomy of regional militias. This established a precedent for later central control over state institutions. His famous declaration, "L'État, c'est moi"—"I am the state"—encapsulated the essence of centralism. The king exercised direct control over all aspects of governance, diminishing the power of regional nobles and integrating them into the centralized court at Versailles. The construction of Versailles symbolized not just the wealth and power of the monarchy but also the centralization of authority. By requiring nobles to live at Versailles, Louis XIV minimized their influence over regional governance, effectively weakening their local power bases.

The absolute sovereignty of the king formed not only France's centralized institutions and power, but also fostered a uniform administrative system across the country. The Intendants, royal representatives sent to the provinces, played a key role in reducing the power of regional parliaments and ensuring that the king's policies were implemented uniformly, setting the foundation for later revolutionary centralization. The Intendants were royal officials appointed by the king to oversee provinces in France, acting as representatives of the central government. They

held significant power, including implementing royal policies, collecting taxes, and maintaining order, effectively reducing the autonomy of local authorities and ensuring the king's control over regional governance.

The French Revolution in 1789 marked a decisive moment in the evolution of centralism. The revolutionaries sought to dismantle the fragmented feudal system that had dominated France for centuries and replace it with a unified, centralized state based on the principles of “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité.” The revolutionary government abolished regional privileges and established departments governed directly by the central authority. This reorganization aimed to create equality before the law and a cohesive national identity. The reorganization of France into departments was crucial to this centralizing effort. The old provinces, many of which were remnants of feudal or aristocratic control, were replaced by departments that were smaller, more rationally defined, and uniformly administered by the central government. This shift was designed to ensure that no region could resist the implementation of national laws, reducing the influence of local elites.

This push toward centralization was driven by the belief that only a strong, centralized government could safeguard the revolution and implement its ideals uniformly across the country. The revolutionaries viewed regional autonomy as a remnant of the feudal past and a potential threat to the revolutionary cause. Thus, post-Revolution France was governed under a system where most political and administrative power was concentrated in the hands of the central government, with local and regional authorities being directly accountable to Paris. The National Assembly also played a critical role in centralizing power. It sought to create uniform elections and remove local elites, replacing them with officials accountable to the state. This further embedded centralism into the fabric of the French administrative system. The concentration of power was facilitated by a civil service that operated under the aegis of the state, ensuring uniformity and coherence in policy implementation across the country. The nature of laws being uniform and policies that apply throughout the nation aimed to foster equality among citizens, which was often lacking under monarchical sovereignty. This centralized legal framework ensured that all individuals were subject to the same laws regardless of their geographic location, reinforcing a sense of national identity.

However, it is important to point out that while the centralized legal framework was utilized as a means to ensure a uniform national identity, in reality, the French Revolution also exhibited significant geographical centralization. As one moved farther from Versailles and Paris, the heart of revolutionary fervor, French citizens often displayed less enthusiasm for the revolutionary ideals. Rural areas, especially in more distant provinces, frequently harbored populations that were resistant or indifferent to the changes imposed by the revolution. These regions were more attached to traditional social structures and the Catholic Church, seeing the revolution's reforms as an imposition rather than a liberation. This geographical divide highlights how the revolution's centralizing efforts did not uniformly resonate with all citizens, further complicating the vision of a cohesive national identity. This push toward radical centralism further intensified the divide between revolutionary ideals and the realities on the ground, as the Jacobin leadership sought to consolidate power in response to both internal resistance and external pressures.

Centralism reached new heights during the radical Jacobin period of the Revolution around 1792. Under the leadership of figures such as Maximilien Robespierre, the Jacobins viewed centralization as essential for preserving the revolution and enforcing its principles. The Committee of Public Safety, the executive body created by the National Convention, embodied this concentration of power. It exercised significant control over the military, economy, and political life, aiming to suppress both internal dissent and external threats.

During this period, known as the Reign of Terror due to a series of massacres and numerous public executions that took place in response to revolutionary devoutness, anticlerical sentiment, and accusations of treason, the Jacobins implemented strict control over local governments, often replacing local officials with representatives loyal to the central government. They sought to eliminate regional differences, including linguistic and cultural variations, in favor of a singular French identity. This centralization of political and cultural life also aimed at creating a rational and secular state, with uniform laws that transcended regional and religious identities. Standardizing practices such as the Revolutionary Calendar and enforcing a single national language furthered this goal. This centralization was not just about maintaining control; it was about creating a rational, secular state where citizens were equal under a uniform legal and administrative system. While these measures succeeded in consolidating power, they also came at the cost of individual freedoms and regional diversity. The legacy of Jacobin centralism lingered

well beyond the Revolutionary period, influencing subsequent regimes such as the Directory or even under Napoleon Bonaparte's rule.

Similarly to the American system, the Revolution and the creation of the state post-monarchical oppression were influenced by the Enlightenment movement. However, unlike in the United States, the authoritarian methods they employed, especially during the Reign of Terror, often conflicted with the more moderate and individualistic elements of Enlightenment thought. The Jacobin system of centralization during the French Revolution was profoundly influenced by the same Enlightenment thinkers as in the United States such as Rousseau and Locke, and implemented other ideas of thinkers such as Voltaire. Rousseau's concept of the *general will* was particularly central to Jacobin ideology. Rousseau argued that the general will represented the collective interests of the people and required a strong, centralized authority to overcome individual selfishness. The Jacobins embraced this idea, believing they alone could embody and enforce the general will, justifying their centralization of power through the Committee of Public Safety, particularly during the Reign of Terror. They viewed centralized governance as essential to promoting equality and dismantling the fragmented privileges of the Old Regime, a criticism also shared by John Locke, who argued that political authority should rest on the consent of the governed and the protection of equality and rights. By centralizing power, the Jacobins aimed to eliminate local aristocratic privileges and enforce uniform laws, creating a more egalitarian society aligned with Enlightenment calls for rational governance.

Montesquieu's ideas, which were greatly influential in the formation of the American federal system, while influential in advocating for the separation of powers and balanced government, were largely set aside by the Jacobins. Instead, Voltaire, known for his advocacy of civil liberties, freedom of speech, and separation of church and state, was of great interest to the revolutionaries. Voltaire's critiques of organized religion and government corruption resonated with the Jacobins. They embraced his ideas to justify their secularization efforts and efforts to reduce the Church's influence in French society.

The Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and secularism also inspired the Jacobins' secularization of power, as seen in their attempts to control and diminish the Church's influence over state affairs, reflecting Voltaire's critique of the Church. Despite drawing on Enlightenment ideals, the Jacobin's authoritarian use of centralized power often contradicted Enlightenment principles of liberty and

individual rights, leading to repressive measures and mass violence during the Reign of Terror. While the Jacobins sought to rationalize and unify France, their extreme centralization sometimes undermined the broader Enlightenment goal of a free and balanced society.

A common misconception is that centralism in France was born solely out of the French Revolution. In reality, the Revolution was built on a pre-existing framework of centralization established by the absolute monarchies. As historian James T. Young noted, "the notion that centralization in France dates from the Revolution, or from Napoleon is far from correct (…) centralization had arisen long before the Revolution."[27] Far from dismantling the centralized apparatus of the Old Regime, revolutionary leaders relied on it to enforce their policies, inadvertently strengthening the central authority they sought to overthrow. Consequently, Napoleon Bonaparte built on Revolutionary centralism by formalizing it through the creation of institutions such as the Napoleonic Code, which standardized laws across the nation. His Prefects system ensured that each region had an administrator directly accountable to Paris, further cementing central control over local affairs. Centralism was not just a tool for governance within France but also for administering its empire. Napoleon exported centralized French administration to conquered territories, spreading French legal, educational, and administrative systems across Europe.

The kick-off of the belief stated by James T. Young, however, is often attributed to Alexis De Tocqueville who described the process of re-centralization during the French Revolutionary years as having "two distinct phases: one during which the French seemed to want to destroy every remanent of the past, another during which they tried to regain a portion of what they had thrown off."[28] Tocqueville's observation, similarly to other scholars, underscores the complexity of the centralization process, highlighting that the revolutionary fervor initially aimed at dismantling the vestiges of monarchical authority eventually gave way to a recognition of the need for a cohesive state. This duality reflects the tension between radical change and the desire for stability, suggesting that the Revolution not only sought to abolish the old order but also inadvertently reaffirmed the importance of a centralized authority for effective governance in a modern nation.

[27] *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 11* (January 1898), 24. Published by Sage Publications, Inc. in association with the American Academy of Political and Social Science.
[28] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)

2.2 Tocqueville's Insights on French Centralism

In *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Alexis de Tocqueville provides significant insights into the roots of the French Revolution by examining the political and social structure of pre-revolutionary France. However, his main reflection on the development of centralism in France can be resumed in one sentence, which is transposed in the title of the second chapter of the first volume of his work, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*: 'That we owe "Administrative centralization," not to the Revolution or the Empire, as some say, but to the Old Regime.'[29] This assertion underscores the continuity of centralism as a defining characteristic of French governance, revealing how the very structures that fueled revolutionary discontent were deeply entrenched long before the outbreak of the Revolution.

A central theme in his work is the growth of centralism, which he views as both a long-standing historical process and a crucial factor in the Old Regime's collapse. He argues that "it would then be an error to consider the old regime as a period of servility and dependence. There was much more liberty than there is now, [post-revolution] but it was an irregular and intermittent kind of liberty, bound up with the class system and notions of privileges and exemptions–a sort of liberty which encouraged rebellion against law as well as against oppression."[30]

Tocqueville's observation challenges the simplistic narrative that the pre-revolutionary period was defined purely by despotism. While centralization had begun under the monarchy, there were pockets of freedom that allowed certain individuals or classes to exercise considerable independence. However, this liberty was unevenly distributed, often existing as a privilege for the aristocracy or certain regions, rather than as a universal right. It was "irregular and intermittent"[31] because it depended on one's social standing and the privileges granted by the state, which in turn fostered resentment and rebellion among most of those excluded from this system. This uneven distribution of autonomy reinforced the notion that liberties were not a right, but a privilege tied to tradition and royal favor.

[29] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)
[30] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)
[31] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)

Liberty under the Old Regime was highly inconsistent, depending on one's class and region. For example, aristocrats were often exempt from taxation and had significant judicial privileges, while peasants, bound by feudal obligations, had little recourse to justice or autonomy. In some towns, local elites enjoyed limited self-governance through charters, but these were fragile rights that could be revoked at the monarch's discretion. This patchwork of liberties, tied to social status rather than universal rights, left large portions of the population disenfranchised, fueling resentment against the inequality entrenched in the system. As an example, to which Tocqueville alludes in numerous passages of his work, in regions like the *Pays d'État*, certain provinces retained a measure of self-governance, where local estates managed taxation and regional administration. However, in other parts of France, particularly the *Pays d'Élection*, direct royal officials controlled governance, diminishing any form of local liberty. This uneven distribution of autonomy further accentuated the sense that liberties were not a right, but a privilege tied to local customs and royal favor.

The paradox Tocqueville identifies is that while pre-revolutionary France did allow for certain freedoms, these freedoms were intertwined with inequality and a lack of rule of law. Privilege, not rights, determined one's access to liberty, creating an unstable political environment. In this sense, the very idea of "liberty" in the Old Regime was a catalyst for revolution: people resented both the privileges of the aristocracy and the arbitrary nature of governance, leading to a widespread desire for change.

"City charters differ widely. Their magistratures bear different titles, or derive their authority from different sources. In one place we find a mayor, in another consuls, in a third syndics. Some of these are chosen by the king; others are appointed by the old seignior, or by the prince in whose domain the city lies; others are elected by the people for a year; others, again, have purchased their office and hold it for life."[32]

This quotation underscores the disorderly nature of pre-revolutionary governance, where local liberties were granted arbitrarily, depending on regional and historical factors. The result was a fractured system that lacked consistency or fairness, further intensifying grievances against the Old Regime.

[32] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)

However, before discussing Tocqueville's analysis of centralization in France during the revolutionary decade, it is crucial to note that while Tocqueville is known for his impartial analysis in *Democracy in America*, he acknowledges a personal engagement with the subject matter in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*.

From the outset, Tocqueville admits the challenge of maintaining complete objectivity, given the subject's relevance to his own experiences as a Frenchman. He notes, "I hope and believe that I have written the present book without any *parti pris*, though it would be futile to deny that my own feelings were engaged. What Frenchman can write about his country and think about the age in which he lives in a spirit of complete detachment?"[33] This personal engagement adds depth to Tocqueville's exploration of centralism, which he sees as a persistent force that shaped both the Old Regime and modern France. He argues that the monarchy, particularly under Louis XIV, gradually centralized power, diminishing local governance structures and autonomy. Tocqueville claims this centralization, rather than being dismantled by the Revolution, continued and intensified, as revolutionary leaders relied on inherited centralized frameworks for efficient governance.

Tocqueville critiques the illusion of strength and order created by the bureaucratic state that emerged from this centralization, noting it masked the erosion of local autonomy. He argues, "set over every Frenchman a government to be his preceptor, his tutor, and, in case of need, his oppressor."[34] This captures his critique that the central government often curtailed individual freedoms and agency, despite its intended service to the populace. Furthermore, Tocqueville emphasizes the role of the middle classes, who gained political power during the Old Regime but were ultimately sidelined by the centralizing monarchy. He stated that "the great crime of the old kings was the division of the people into classes. Their subsequent policy followed as a matter of course; for when the wealthy enlightened portion of a people are debarred from combination for public purposes self-government becomes impossible, and tyranny becomes a necessity."[35] This division, he argues, thwarted true self-governance and necessitated reliance on

[33] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Kindle Edition; New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1955), 137.
[34] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Kindle Edition; New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1955), 208.
[35] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)

authoritarian measures to maintain control. Moreover, Tocqueville often bases his analysis of the Old Regime on edicts and secret correspondences between the king and his subjects. One key edict he highlights is: “all these titles having been granted by surprise,”[36] suggesting that the distribution of titles, which often conferred privilege and power, was not based on a systematic or fair process. Instead, it was capricious, hinting at a lack of legitimacy in how authority was assigned. By examining these historical documents, Tocqueville reveals how the monarchy's actions contributed to the conditions that made the Revolution both necessary and inevitable.

However, instead of liberating the people, the Revolution substituted one form of central authority for another, perpetuating the dynamics that contributed to the Old Regime's demise. This reliance on centralization undermined revolutionary ideals of self-governance and democracy, leading to a state that dominated citizens’ lives. Tocqueville draws a telling comparison between the Old Regime and the revolutionary government, noting that “the King addressed the nation in the language of a chief, not a master,”[37] as if to emphasize that, under the monarchy, power was exercised with a sense of paternal duty, even if paternalism was restrictive. The King’s own words, “We glory in commanding a free and generous nation,”[38] reflect a paternalistic authority that was, at least rhetorically, more respectful of individual dignity. In contrast, Tocqueville suggests, the Jacobins' revolutionary rhetoric concealed a more oppressive form of centralized control, one that stifled true liberty under the guise of revolutionary virtue. Thus, while the Revolution aimed to dismantle the monarchy's authoritarianism, it ultimately replicated—and intensified—the same structures of centralized power it sought to overthrow.

Moreover, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, adopted in 1789, is closely linked to the centralization of power in France during the Revolution as it both articulated revolutionary ideals and facilitated the concentration of authority. While the Declaration emphasized individual rights and equality, revolutionary leaders used it to justify the establishment of centralized institutions that aimed to enforce these principles, often at the expense of local autonomy. By displacing traditional local governance and replacing it with a bureaucratic framework, the revolutionaries sidelined local voices in favor of a unified national policy. Furthermore, the need to protect these rights from internal and external threats led to the creation

[36] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)
[37] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)
[38] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)

of bodies like the Committee of Public Safety, which exercised extensive powers that often curtailed individual liberties. Ultimately, the principles enshrined in the Declaration not only legitimized centralized governance but also laid the groundwork for future regimes to prioritize state authority over individual freedoms, highlighting a paradox where the pursuit of rights resulted in increased state control.

Building on this comparison, Tocqueville's concerns about centralization extend beyond historical analysis to reflect on the future of political liberty in France. He perceives a dangerous trend where concentrated power, whether under monarchic or revolutionary regimes, threatens the very democratic principles the Revolution claimed to uphold. Tocqueville warns that a powerful central government may continue to prioritize control over individual freedoms, suggesting that without true decentralization of power, France could slip into a new form of despotism—one where the state, rather than serving the people, becomes their master once again.

Tocqueville poignantly observes, "Liberty survived in the midst of institutions already prepared for despotism; but it was a curious kind of liberty, not easily understood to-day."[39] This statement encapsulates the paradoxical nature of the freedoms established during and after the Revolution. Although liberty was proclaimed, the structures that emerged often did not foster genuine self-determination. Instead, they created a complex landscape where the state exerted control under the guise of promoting public good. Tocqueville describes this phenomenon by stating that "while the central government was displacing all the local authorities, and absorbing the whole power of the kingdom, its action was often impeded by institutions which it had either created or refrained from destroying, by old usages and customs, by rooted abuses."[40] The process of utilizing centralized power to maintain one's own vision of order ultimately became the reason for insurrection and resistance in France.

Building on Tocqueville's observation, the 1795 Directory offers a compelling example of how centralized and decentralized elements coexisted in post-revolutionary France, ultimately contributing to political instability. The Directory, which governed France from 1795 to 1799, was an attempt to stabilize the country after the chaos of the Revolution and the Reign of Terror. It was designed as a reaction against both the authoritarianism of the preceding regime and the radical

[39] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)
[40] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)

democracy of the Jacobins. While nominally aiming to preserve republican values, the Directory's political structure reflected the continued reliance on centralized authority that Tocqueville critiqued. Similarly to the American system, the Directory introduced a bicameral legislature and a five-member executive body, intending to create checks and balances and avoid the concentration of power in a single individual or institution, recalling Montesquieu's philosophy which we find in the United States. However, despite these efforts at decentralization on paper, the government remained highly centralized in practice. The executive, fearing political insurrections and external threats, relied on a strong military presence and centralized control over administrative and judicial processes. Local autonomy was largely suppressed, as the Directory sought to maintain order by appointing officials loyal to the regime and intervening directly in regional governance when necessary.

This centralization of power, which Tocqueville viewed as a continuation of the Old Regime's tendencies, led to widespread dissatisfaction. The Directory's reliance on military force to maintain control, combined with its inability to foster true local self-governance, created a government that was neither stable nor representative. Like the structures Tocqueville describes, the Directory's institutions claimed to uphold liberty but were ultimately "prepared for despotism,"[41] unable to resolve the tension between centralized authority and the people's desire for real political engagement.

This paradox within the Directory's system—attempting to balance republican ideals with central control—set the stage for its downfall. The centralized state, while seeking stability, only fostered further insurrection and resistance, ultimately leading to its replacement by Napoleon's more overtly authoritarian regime. Thus, the Directory is emblematic of Tocqueville's broader argument: even revolutionary governments, while proclaiming liberty, often replicate the very centralized structures they sought to dismantle, perpetuating a cycle of political control at the expense of genuine self-governance. This broader pattern of revolutionary governments replicating structures of control is not unique to France, as Theda Skocpol, American sociologist and political scientist, observes: "Historically no successful social revolution has ever been "made" by a mass-mobilizing, avowedly revolutionary movement. As Jeremy Brecher has aptly put it: 'In fact, revolutionary

[41] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)

movements rarely begin with a revolutionary intention; this only develops in the course of the struggle itself.'"[42]

While centralism initially emerged as a tool for political control and administration, its effects extended far beyond governmental structures. Over time, it became a defining feature of the French cultural and social landscape, deeply influencing local governance, societal values, and national identity. The following chapter will examine how centralism transformed French culture, from its impact on civic life to the shaping of political behavior and public attitudes. Additionally, it will explore how the centralization of power reshaped political representation, weakening local autonomy while reinforcing the influence of the state in everyday life.

2.3 Cultural and Political Consequences of Centralism

The concentration of power in a central authority, which defined much of post-revolutionary France, had profound and lasting effects not only on political institutions but also on the fabric of French society itself. While centralism was originally implemented to ensure administrative efficiency and national unity, it inadvertently reshaped the relationship between the state and its citizens, altering local governance, civic participation, and cultural identity. Centralism did not merely establish a political hierarchy; it engendered a social dynamic where the state became both the guardian and the source of authority in the lives of individuals. This chapter will explore how the entrenchment of centralization influenced political behavior, diminished local autonomy, and led to a passive civic culture where citizens often became reliant on the central government to address their needs. Moreover, it will examine how these trends, while stabilizing the state, subtly eroded the communal bonds that once defined local governance, fostering a culture of dependence that persisted long after the French Revolution.

Before the revolution, France was a patchwork of regions with varying degrees of local autonomy, governed by distinct traditions, privileges, and laws. Tocqueville demonstrates this while discussing the role of Intendants within the pre-revolutionary State. He observes: "The Marquis d'Argenson tells us in his Memoirs that one day Law said to him, (…) 'Let me tell you that this kingdom of France is governed by thirty intendants (…) nothing but thirty masters of requests, on

[42] Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 17.

whom, so far as the provinces are concerned, welfare or misery, plenty or want, entirely depend."[43] This quote underscores the extent to which local autonomy had already been eroded under the Old Regime, with much of the power residing in the hands of royal appointees like the Intendants. Although the monarchy had already centralized power, some local autonomy persisted through regional councils and local elites. The Revolution, aiming for an egalitarian state, dismantled these remaining local institutions, further entrenching centralization in the name of national unity and eliminating class-based privilege. While inequitable, the monarchy's old feudal system allowed towns and regions to retain some degree of local independence, as they managed their own affairs through councils and local elites. This decentralized structure nurtured strong regional identities tied to local traditions and governance. However, the Revolution's sweeping centralization replaced these local institutions with national bodies, gradually eroding the regional identities and local loyalties that had defined French civic life for centuries.

The centralization of power not only reshaped governance but also eroded the distinct regional identities that had flourished before the Revolution, as exemplified by the Loire and the *landes* of Brittany. These regions, known for their rich traditions of local governance and community engagement, experienced profound shifts in their political landscape. As Tocqueville observed, "Around the Loire estuary, in the Poitou fenlands, and the *landes* of Brittany the methods of the past were kept to more tenaciously than in any other part of France. Yet it was in these regions that civil war blazed up after the outbreak of the Revolution and the inhabitants put up the most passionate and stubborn resistance to it."[44] This passionate resistance reflected a deep-seated connection to local customs and governance that the Revolution sought to dismantle. The inhabitants of the Loire and the *landes* of Brittany were not merely rebelling against the changes imposed by a distant central authority; they were also defending their way of life, which had been intricately woven into the fabric of local identity and community cohesion. Tocqueville's observation underscores how the Revolution's push for a uniform national identity inadvertently alienated those who were most attached to their regional roots. In the context of these regions, the imposition of a centralized authority manifested in several ways. Local governance structures, which had once allowed communities to make decisions reflective of their unique needs and

[43] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)
[44] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Kindle Edition (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1955), 176.

traditions, were dismantled in favor of a system that imposed national policies without consideration for regional particularities. Tocqueville notes that the residents of these areas felt the weight of this change acutely, as they were forced to adapt to new systems that ignored their historical ties and local governance practices.

After 1789, revolutionary leaders, driven by the principles of national unity and equality, abolished many of these regional privileges. The creation of departments in 1790 was intended to replace the old provinces with a more rational administrative structure, but this change also further centralized control. Prefects, appointed directly by the central government, were installed to oversee these departments, often undermining local leaders and depriving communities of genuine autonomy. In a sense, this resembled Tocqueville's observation of administrative centralization under the monarchy, where instead of prefects, one could find "some great seniors who were entitled provincial governors. They were the representatives, often by hereditary descent, of feudal royalty."[45] This shift from feudal centralization, scattered under regional governance, to centralized administration marked an apparent significant transformation in the political landscape of France on paper. However, reality proved to replace one form of authoritative administration, with another. While the intentions behind the creation of departments and the appointment of prefects were rooted in the principles of efficiency and equality, the reality was often one of alienation and disempowerment for local communities. Tocqueville highlights this tension when he notes that the central government, instead of empowering citizens through local representatives, imposed bureaucrats who lacked genuine ties to the regions they governed, just as it was under the King's rule. As prefects wielded substantial authority, they became the face of the state in local affairs, enforcing national policies often detached from the unique needs and traditions of their communities. This shift not only diminished local decision-making power but also fostered a culture of dependency on the central government for resources, governance, and social welfare.

This erosion of local autonomy had significant consequences for political behavior. Without strong local governance, citizens found themselves relying more heavily on the central government for direction and decision-making. The traditional mediating institutions between the individual and

[45] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)

the state were weakened or disappeared altogether, leaving a vacuum where citizens, previously accustomed to participating in local politics, now faced a distant and impersonal national authority. This reliance on a central authority fundamentally altered the dynamic of political participation, fostering passivity rather than engagement. Furthermore, the erosion of local autonomy increased post-revolution due to two things: the forgetting of the state's moral obligations and the detachment of national identity from the feudal system, and therefore the Church.

The first point is pinpointed by Tocqueville: "In the old feudal society, the seignior's extensive rights were counterpoised by extensive obligations. He was bound to succor the indigent on his domain."[46] This reciprocal relationship between lords and their subjects fostered a sense of communal responsibility and accountability, creating a framework where the well-being of the populace was directly linked to the actions of their local leaders. As feudalism declined and the central authority grew, however, this moral obligation dissipated, replaced by bureaucratic indifference. The state, now perceived as an abstract entity rather than a community steward, increasingly distanced itself from the lives of individuals, leading citizens to feel disconnected from the very authorities that governed them. Consequently, Tocqueville adds that this principle was even found under the Prussian Code of 1795, highlighting an enduring expectation of state responsibility for the well-being of its citizens. Moreover, Tocqueville remarks that "when the seignior's rights were taken from him, he shook off his obligations. No local authority, or council, or provincial, or parochial association had taken his place. The law obliged no man to take care of the poor in the rural districts; the central government boldly assumed charge of them."[47] As a result, citizens became less likely to see themselves as active participants in the political sphere, viewing the state not as a partner in their welfare but rather as a distant authority that operated without a genuine connection to their everyday lives. This transition thus not only reinforced the centralization of power but also contributed to a passive political culture, wherein individuals relied on the state to fulfill their needs, eroding the communal bonds and civic engagement that had once been vital to local governance. However, to partially defend the post-revolutionary government, Tocqueville also mentions that there are also parts of the centralized bureaucracy that "was not contemplated for a moment,"[48] but which helped the nation in another way. Moreover,

[46] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)
[47] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)
[48] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)

Tocqueville observes: “Not content with aiding the peasantry in times of distress, the central government undertook to teach them the art of growing rich, by giving them good advice, and occasionally by resorting to compulsory methods.”[49] Although aid was attributed to the citizens of the state, the national sentiment remained one of disconnection and alienation, as the government’s interventions were often perceived as top-down impositions rather than collaborative efforts.

The second point, also coined by Tocqueville, is the relationship between the state and the Church which underwent profound changes in the aftermath of the Revolution, reflecting the broader shift towards centralization and control. Revolutionary leaders sought to diminish the Church's influence, viewing it as a remnant of the feudal past that impeded national unity and egalitarian principles. Tocqueville explains this phenomenon by looking at the Enlightenment philosophers: “Our eighteenth-century philosophers attacked the Church with a sort of studious ferocity; they declaimed against its clergy, its hierarchy, institutions, and dogmas, and, driving their attack home, sought to demolish the very foundations of Christian belief.”[50] This is further exemplified in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1790 which aimed to subjugate the Church to state authority, compelling clergy to swear allegiance to the new government, which further alienated religious leaders from their congregations. Tocqueville notes that this attempt to align the Church with the state stripped away its moral and communal functions, as clergy, once seen as integral to local governance and social cohesion, became mere agents of the central authority. This transformation not only undermined the Church’s traditional role as a source of local identity and support but also exacerbated the feelings of disconnection among the populace. Without the Church as a stabilizing force in communities, individuals increasingly turned to the state for guidance and welfare, reinforcing a culture of dependence on centralized authority. This detachment from the Church diminished the communal bonds that had previously connected citizens, leaving a void in local moral authority and further entrenching the passivity that characterized post-revolutionary civic life. The government's imposition of secularism not only stripped local communities of their spiritual leadership but also failed to provide the same level of moral obligation that the Church

[49] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)
[50] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Kindle Edition (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1955), 6.

had historically upheld, thereby contributing to the erosion of the social fabric that had once linked individuals to one another and to their localities.

The Church was also seen, to some extent, as a social stabilizer prior to the Revolution since it was deeply embedded in the daily lives of the French people. It provided not only spiritual guidance but also social services such as education, healthcare, and charity. This role fostered a sense of community and belonging, with parishes serving as critical hubs for social interaction. The clergy were often seen as local leaders who understood and advocated for the needs of their congregations. However, Tocqueville analyzes the distancing from the Church not because of religious beliefs, but for what the Church represented: power and privilege. Moreover, Tocqueville states: "The Church was hated not because its priests claimed to regulate the affairs of the other world but because they were landed proprietors, lords of manors, tithe owners, and played a leading part in secular affairs; not because there was no room for the Church in the new world that was in the making, but because it occupied the most powerful, most privileged position in the old order that was now to be swept away."[51]

As the Revolution dismantled these long-standing structures of authority and communal responsibility, it inadvertently paved the way for the development of a passive civic culture among the populace. With the abrasion of both the Church's influence and centralized government not helping the poor, individuals who once looked to local leaders for guidance found themselves in a political landscape dominated by an abstract and often indifferent central authority. This shift created a disconnect that fostered passivity rather than active participation. Citizens increasingly viewed the state not as a partner in their governance but as a distant entity responsible for their welfare. The expectation that local leaders would engage directly with their communities gave way to a reliance on bureaucratic processes and centralized policies that lacked personal connection. Consequently, the very fabric of civic life became weakened, as individuals adopted a mindset of dependency, believing that their needs and concerns would be addressed solely by the central government. This transformation not only diminished civic engagement but also stifled the

[51] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Kindle Edition (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1955), 6-7.

emergence of grassroots movements that could advocate for local interests, further entrenching the passive civic culture that characterized post-revolutionary France.

The creation of centralized institutions like the National Guard, the judicial system, and the tax apparatus further extended the state's reach into the lives of citizens. These institutions, while intended to promote order and fairness, often acted as instruments of control. The more the state expanded its authority in the name of national unity, the more it became an oppressive force that stifled local initiative and reduced the space for individual or communal self-governance. The growing power of the state culminated in the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, whose regime intensified the centralizing tendencies of the Revolution. Napoleon's consolidation of power, particularly through the Napoleonic Code and his centralized administration, represents the ultimate manifestation of the revolutionary trend toward centralism. Under Napoleon, the state reached an unprecedented level of control over all aspects of French life, from law and education to the military and economy, further solidifying the culture of dependence on the central authority.

Chapter 3: Comparative Analysis of Federalism and Centralism

3.1 Governance Structures: A Side-by-Side Comparison

French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, in his exploration of power relations, famously remarked that "power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society."[52] This perspective encourages a view of governance structures—whether centralized or federal—not merely as static systems but as dynamic frameworks through which power is exercised, distributed, and contested across different levels of society.

This section delves into the fundamental differences between centralism and federalism, focusing on how each system organizes power and sovereignty, influences decision-making processes, and impacts local autonomy. Through a historical overview, structural comparison, and political anthropological approach, the analysis examines how these governance models, having been brought forth by Enlightenment ideals in the late 18th century, allocate authority between central governments and regional or local entities in France and the United States. Drawing from Foucault's insights, the discussion highlights how each system manages power flows—either concentrating it in a singular authority or dispersing it across multiple nodes of influence.

Historically, both the birth of federalism in the United States and the restructuring of centralism in France were caused by a reactionist consequence of monarchical oppression and rising Enlightenment ideals. The difference between both States' decisions to implement different kinds of political systems is that the United States, through British colonialism, was divided into thirteen States which unified to counter a common threat to the continent. Conversely, the restoration of power under Jacobinism, the French Directory, and Napoleon were all periods where the French administration imposed and implemented measures to recentralize authority in the capital, Paris, consolidating power in the hands of the central government. Therefore, when discussing the power and authority of the state, federalism and centralism diverged completely in these two case studies. On one hand, the federal government implemented policies to unite various regional autonomies

[52] Michel Foucault, *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume 3: Power*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1994).

while preserving their local identities. On the other hand, the French central government imposed a set of universal laws and regulations in the name of equality and uniformity, often at the expense of local customs and regional diversity.

The physical evidence that resulted from the two revolutions was, on one hand, the federal Constitution of the United States, which, even though based upon principles of the Magna Carta, emphasized a framework for governance that allowed for both shared power and regional autonomy. This Constitution not only enshrined individual rights but also established mechanisms for local self-governance, enabling states to maintain their distinct identities while contributing to a unified national framework. The Bill of Rights, in particular, underscored the importance of protecting local interests and individual freedoms, ensuring that diverse voices could be heard within the broader political landscape. On the other hand, the French Revolution produced the Napoleonic Code and a series of administrative reforms that crystallized the centralized authority of the state. The Napoleonic Code established a uniform legal system that applied across the entire nation, thereby erasing local laws and traditions in favor of a standardized framework designed to promote national unity and equality. This shift reflected a broader ideological commitment to rational governance, but it also resulted in the suppression of regional identities and practices that had previously defined local governance.

Structurally, in a centralized governance system, authority is consolidated within a central government, which holds the primary decision-making power. This structure is typically characterized by a clear hierarchy, where lower levels of government are subordinate to the national authority. For example, in France, the post-revolutionary state exemplifies this model, with prefects acting as the central government's representatives in various departments. These officials wield considerable power, executing national policies with limited input from local populations. The centralization of authority can streamline governance and ensure uniform policy implementation across diverse regions; however, it often leads to a disconnect between the state and local communities, which may feel alienated from the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Conversely, federalism operates on a decentralized model, where power is shared between national and regional governments. This distribution of authority is designed to accommodate local

interests and promote regional autonomy. In the United States, the Constitution delineates the powers of the federal government and the states, allowing each to operate independently within their respective domains. This system recognizes the unique cultural, economic, and social contexts of different regions, enabling local governments to tailor their policies to better suit the needs of their constituents. The federal structure fosters a more nuanced approach to governance, facilitating local engagement and accountability.

Structurally, both systems therefore have opposing foundations that delineate powers geographically and systematically. However, the nature of political activity among citizens also varies significantly between centralized and federal governance systems, influenced by the structure of authority, the mechanisms of engagement available to individuals, and the political behavior of the citizens.

In centralized systems, citizen engagement tends to be more limited due to the hierarchical nature of governance. It is described by Tocqueville that the distance between the central authority and local communities often results in feelings of disenfranchisement. Political participation may be perceived as futile, leading to lower levels of civic engagement and public participation. Citizens often rely on established political elites to advocate on their behalf, with their voices muted in broader decision-making processes. For instance, in post-revolutionary France, local communities have expressed dissatisfaction with national policies in regions such as the Loire, yet their ability to influence those policies is constrained by the overarching authority of the central government. Moreover, in centralized systems, political activism is frequently channeled through formal mechanisms such as elections and appointed councils, where citizens may feel that their choices are limited to a narrow set of options that do not reflect their local needs. This may foster a sense of apathy towards political processes, as individuals come to believe that their actions have little impact on the outcomes of national policies. Thus, the centralization of power can inadvertently create a passive civic culture, where citizens withdraw from active participation due to a perceived lack of agency.

In contrast, federal systems encourage greater political activity among citizens by promoting a more direct relationship between individuals and their local governments. Tocqueville even argues that, to some extent, it is from the political activity of the citizens that federalism flourishes. The

decentralization of authority allows for various avenues for political engagement, such as community meetings, local elections, and direct advocacy with local representatives. In the United States, citizens can engage with both state and federal representatives, providing multiple platforms for their voices to be heard. The existence of regional governments that have the power to enact laws and policies enables citizens to influence decisions that directly affect their daily lives, arguably promoting the vision of a direct democracy. Moreover, federalism encourages a diverse political landscape, with multiple political parties and movements emerging at both the state and national levels. This plurality enhances competition and fosters a vibrant public discourse, where citizens can engage in debate and advocacy on a wide range of issues. Grassroots movements often flourish in this environment, as local communities rally around specific concerns, from environmental policies to education reforms. The presence of local governments allows citizens to address specific regional issues, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. This localized political engagement can lead to more vibrant civic life, where community members collaborate to solve problems and advocate for their collective needs.

3.2 Tocqueville's Perspectives on the Efficacy of Each System

"The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults,"[53] while "in France, the central power, which is unrestrained and haughty in its nature, becomes daily more absolute and more intrusive in the lives of its citizens."[54] These two quotes from Alexis de Tocqueville encapsulate his comparative analysis of federalism in America and centralism in France. Throughout his works, *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Tocqueville explores the strengths and weaknesses of each system, revealing his clear preference for the decentralized, participatory nature of the American federal system over the oppressive centralism he observed in France. His insights compel historical and contemporary societies to reflect on the importance of preserving local governance structures to enhance civic responsibility and protect against the dangers of majority tyranny and government overreach. Therefore, this section aims to decorticate Tocqueville's perspectives on the efficacy of federalism and centralism while comparing his thoughts to other thinkers' theories throughout

[53] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), chap. 13.
[54] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)

history. Consequently, this section first analyzes Tocqueville's perspectives on federalism, followed by an exploration of centralism.

As previously stated, Tocqueville wasn't completely impartial in both *Democracy in America*, *and The Old Regime and the Revolution*. Tocqueville's comparative analysis of federalism in America and centralism in France reflects his bias toward the federalist nature of the American system. Tocqueville praises the federal system and its ability to balance power between local and national authorities, allowing for greater civic participation, adaptability, and individual liberty. He sees the township system in the United States as the foundation of democratic life, where local self-government fosters civic responsibility and an engaged citizenry. The decentralized structure, according to Tocqueville, enables America to "repair her faults" through the active involvement of its people in governance.

The township system is a crucial element of this federal structure since individuals can directly participate in the governance of their communities. Tocqueville describes the township as the "primary school of democracy,"[55] where citizens learn the skills of self-government and develop a sense of civic responsibility. In his view, this local autonomy is essential to the health of democracy, as it encourages individuals to take an active role in the political life of their community. Moreover, Tocqueville shows this whilst stating that "in America, not only do institutions belong to the community but also they are kept alive and supported by a community spirit."[56] By involving citizens in decision-making at the local level, federalism fosters a culture of civic engagement that strengthens the bonds between individuals and their government.

While this belief was adopted by Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his Social Contract Theory, it was later supported further by English philosopher and politician John Stuart Mill with Liberalism. Rousseau's concept of the *general will* and his emphasis on direct democracy resonates with Tocqueville's ideas about civic engagement at the local level. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau argues that citizens must actively participate in the formulation of laws that govern them to ensure legitimacy and reflect the collective will. This connection reinforces Tocqueville's view that local governance fosters civic responsibility

[55] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics)
[56] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 80.

and encourages individuals to engage in the political process. Moreover, while the Enlightenment fervor gave rise to numerous philosophical perspectives on democracy under a federalist institution, thinkers like John Stuart Mill continued to champion similar conceptions of civic engagement and local governance as Tocqueville.

In his influential work, *Considerations on Representative Government*, published in 1861, John Stuart Mill underscores the critical importance of individual liberty, self-government, and active participation in civic life. He argues that local self-governance is essential for cultivating responsible citizens and fostering democratic engagement. Mill posits that local governments are better equipped to represent the specific interests and needs of their communities, thus facilitating a more responsive and accountable political structure. Moreover, Mill emphasizes the value of local experimentation in governance, suggesting that decentralized systems allow for diverse approaches to problem-solving, which can lead to innovative solutions that may not emerge in a centralized system. By empowering individuals at the local level, Mill asserts that societies can better nurture civic responsibility and foster a sense of ownership among citizens regarding their governance. This echoes Tocqueville's assertion that the township system serves as a "primary school of democracy," where citizens learn the necessary skills for self-governance and develop a robust sense of civic duty. Thus, both Tocqueville and Mill converge on the idea that decentralized political structures not only enhance individual liberties but also strengthen the fabric of democracy itself by encouraging active participation and engagement in public affairs. In this way, the philosophies of Tocqueville and Mill reflect a broader tradition of thought that values local autonomy as a fundamental pillar of a healthy and vibrant democratic society.

Tocqueville also praises the adaptability of the federal system. He notes that decentralized governance allows for flexibility in response to changing circumstances, enabling local governments to experiment with different policies and solutions. This adaptability, Tocqueville argues, is one of the reasons why the American system has been able to endure and thrive. He states: “The American system, while sharing out the local authority among a larger number of citizens, is not afraid to diversify the duties of the township. (…) Americans cling to the city for the same reason that mountain dwellers adore their hills because, for them, their country has more characteristic features and a more distinct appearance than anywhere else.”[57] Here, Tocqueville

[57] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 81.

illustrates how this local engagement fosters a deep connection between citizens and their communities. This connection is akin to the attachment that mountain dwellers feel for their distinctive landscapes, suggesting that Americans find identity and meaning in their local governance. Such emotional investment not only enhances civic participation but also allows for more innovative and responsive governance, which is crucial in addressing the rapidly evolving social and economic challenges faced by society. Tocqueville's assertion underscores the significance of decentralized governance in maintaining a dynamic and resilient political system. The federal system allows for continuous adjustment and reform of political institutions, ensuring that the government can "repair its faults" and adapt to new challenges. This flexibility is particularly important in a rapidly changing society, where rigid and centralized systems may struggle to keep pace with social and economic developments. The adaptability of the federal system is an idea that one may perceive in Friedrich Hayek's defensive standpoint of decentralized governance in two of his works: *The Road to Serfdom* and *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*.

Friedrich Hayek, an Austrian-British academic of the 20th century, argues that centralized planning, by its very nature, struggles to accommodate the complex, evolving needs of society. Bureaucracies and centralized governments, Hayek contends, are prone to inefficiency because they are removed from the nuances of local conditions. Decision-making becomes rigid and disconnected from the realities on the ground, leading to policies that may be well-intentioned but ultimately ineffective or even harmful. In contrast, decentralized governance allows for decisions to be made closer to the people they affect, enabling a more nuanced, responsive, and flexible approach to governance. In short, for Hayek, the strength of decentralized systems lies in their capacity to harness the dispersed knowledge of individuals and local communities. Much like Tocqueville's observation that local governments are better suited to address local needs, Hayek argues that local authorities possess the specific knowledge and insights necessary to adapt to changing circumstances. The localized expertise enables communities to experiment with different solutions, promoting innovation and gradual progress rather than imposing uniform solutions hierarchically. In rapidly changing social and economic environments, this flexibility is vital. Local governments can quickly test, adjust, or abandon policies based on immediate feedback, allowing for a more dynamic and organic evolution of institutions.

Hayek's critique of central planning parallels Tocqueville's warnings about the dangers of overly centralized power. Parallelly, both thinkers recognize that when governance becomes too concentrated, it risks stagnation and disconnection from the people it serves. Both Hayek and Tocqueville go further in this analogy: they argue that centralized planning not only stifles adaptation, it can also lead to a loss of individual freedom, as decisions are increasingly made by distant authorities with little regard for the specific needs and desires of local populations. Decentralized systems, on the other hand, such as Tocqueville's defended American model, protect individual liberty by ensuring that governance remains closer to the individual and more responsive to the particularities of different regions and communities. Therefore, both thinkers see the dispersal of power as essential to preserving freedom, fostering innovation, and ensuring that political systems can adapt to the ever-changing demands of society. This adaptability, grounded in the knowledge and experience of local communities, allows decentralized systems to thrive in complex, pluralistic societies where centralized systems often falter.

Another key advantage of federalism, in Tocqueville's view, is its ability to prevent the tyranny of the majority. Tocqueville was deeply concerned about the dangers of unchecked democratic majorities, which he feared could become oppressive and trample on the rights of minorities. Federalism, with its division of power between different levels of government, provides a safeguard against this danger. By allowing local governments to maintain some degree of autonomy, federalism ensures that the national majority cannot impose its will on local minorities. This balance between majority rule and individual rights is, for Tocqueville, one of the strengths of the American political system. The concern for minority rights and the potential for majority tyranny is also echoed in the writings of James Madison, one of the Founding Fathers and a key architect of the U.S. Constitution. In *The Federalist No. 10*, Madison warns of the dangers posed by factions, which he defines as groups of individuals who share common interests and are averse to the rights of other citizens or the overall interests of the community. He famously states, "Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to animal life, because it imparts to fire its destructive agency."[58] Madison argues that a large republic, such

[58] James Madison, *The Federalist*, Paper No. 10, 1.

as the one being formed in America, is the best means to mitigate the effects of factions and prevent any single group from dominating the political landscape. By dispersing power among various levels of government and creating a system of checks and balances, Madison believes that federalism can protect the rights of individuals and minority groups against the whims of a majority faction.

Both Tocqueville and Madison thus highlight the importance of a decentralized system of governance as a bulwark against potential oppression. While Tocqueville emphasizes local autonomy to ensure civic engagement and protect minority rights, Madison underscores the structural mechanisms that a large republic can employ to control the influence of factions. Together, their thoughts illustrate a foundational principle of American democracy: that a balance of power—both geographically and institutionally—is essential for safeguarding liberty and promoting a more equitable society.

While in *Democracy in America* Tocqueville expresses his subtle admiration for the federal system in the United States, in contrast, in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Tocqueville critiques the over-centralization of power in France. He argues that excessive centralism, characteristic of the French monarchy and later perpetuated by the French Revolution, stifles individual initiative and local autonomy. Tocqueville observed that the concentration of power in the hands of a distant, all-encompassing state weakened civic engagement and created a dependency on the central government. This, in his view, made France more prone to authoritarianism and political instability, as the people were increasingly alienated from direct participation in their own governance.

Tocqueville believed that while centralism may allow for more efficient governance in the short term, particularly in times of crisis, it ultimately leads to a dangerous disconnect between the state and the individual. The uniformity imposed by a centralized authority, particularly in France, became oppressive and undermined the very principles of freedom and equality that revolutionary movements had originally sought to establish. Moreover, Tocqueville encourages the readers of *The Old Regime and the Revolution* to read the *Code de la Nature* by Étienne-Gabriel Morelly, French philosopher and novelist, to understand "the omnipotence and boundless rights of the state," as well as "several political theories which have terrified France of late years, and whose origin we fancy we have seen–community of property, rights of labor, absolute equality, universal uniformity, mechanical regularity of individual movements, tyrannical regulation on all subjects,

and the total absorption of the individual in the body politic."[59] In his analysis, Morelly points out that such uniformity can lead to a form of oppression that stifles diversity of thought and local autonomy. The result is not just a bureaucratic inefficiency but a broader cultural and societal malaise, where citizens feel alienated from the governing body that should represent them. In fact, the first article of the *Code de la Nature* states: "Nothing belongs wholly to any one. Property is detestable, and any one who attempts to re-establish it shall be imprisoned for life, as a dangerous madman and an enemy of humanity."[60] The rigid regulations and blanket policies of a central government, as seen in France, lead to a disconnect between the state and its citizens, fostering alienation and dissatisfaction among the populace. This disconnect is exacerbated by radical ideologies like those espoused in Morelly's *Code de la Nature*, which advocates for the total rejection of property rights and individual autonomy. Such ideas promote a vision of governance that negates personal liberties and enforces conformity, ultimately undermining the revolutionary ideals of freedom and equality that they sought to establish. This critique is not only relevant to Tocqueville's context but also resonates across historical and philosophical discussions on the nature of authority and individual rights.

This thought is shared by Hannah Arendt, a contemporary German-American historian and philosopher. Tocqueville's critique of centralism resonates with Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism since it aligns with his concerns about the disconnect between citizens and their government. In her work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt explores how centralized power can lead to the erosion of individual autonomy. Her analysis provides a pertinent framework for understanding the dangers of centralization since it delves into how totalitarian regimes, such as those of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, sought to control every aspect of life, eliminating individual autonomy and promoting a culture of fear and conformity. She writes, "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convulsive criminal but the banal man who is by nature indifferent to the existence of others."[61] This observation echoes Tocqueville's concerns about the oppressive nature of centralized authority in France, where the state's overreach stifles individual initiative and civic engagement. Building on this, Arendt further emphasizes that totalitarianism thrives

[59] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)
[60] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Original Edition; digitized by Google)
[61] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1951).

on the erosion of public space and civic responsibility, rendering individuals passive and submissive. In such environments, citizens become mere instruments of the state, their voices, and actions dictated by a central power that seeks uniformity and compliance. This parallels Tocqueville's warning that the concentration of power in a distant authority not only alienates citizens from governance but also risks creating a society where individual freedoms are sacrificed on the altar of uniformity and control.

Moreover, Arendt introduces the idea of the "banal man" in her analysis of totalitarian regimes, particularly in her exploration of Adolf Eichmann during the trial in Jerusalem. She argues that Eichmann exemplified a form of evil that arose not from monstrous intent, but from a profound mediocrity and an inability to think critically about his actions. He was more concerned with following orders and adhering to bureaucratic norms than with moral considerations. Arendt famously stated, "The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil."[62] This idea illustrates how individuals can become complicit in oppressive systems through a failure of critical engagement and civic responsibility. Tocqueville's concerns about centralism and the resulting disengagement of citizens resonate with Arendt's notion of the "banal man." In a centralized system, where authority is concentrated in a distant government, individuals may become passive participants in governance, much like Eichmann. The disconnect between the state and its citizens can lead to a culture of conformity, where people prioritize compliance over engagement, akin to the "banal" behavior Arendt describes.

For instance, in a highly centralized system, citizens might rely heavily on the government to address societal issues, diminishing their sense of responsibility and initiative. This could result in a populace that is indifferent to the political process, echoing Tocqueville's fears that central authority fosters apathy and discourages active participation. To further underscore this connection, Benjamin Constant, a Swiss writer and politician, and contemporary of Tocqueville, also warned against the dangers of centralization. In his essay *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns*, Constant highlights the importance of individual liberty in modern society and critiques the trend toward greater central control.

[62] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

He distinguishes between the active participation in civic life characteristic of ancient republics and the individual freedoms that modern citizens should cherish. Constant argues that modern liberty is rooted in the protection of individual rights and the need for personal autonomy, which are often threatened by centralized power. This perspective reinforces Tocqueville's arguments about the need for local autonomy and individual initiative. Both Tocqueville and Constant recognize that excessive centralization can lead to a depersonalized and apathetic citizenry, where individuals become disconnected from the political process. Tocqueville's emphasis on the township system as a "primary school of democracy" resonates with Constant's advocacy for a political structure that nurtures individual freedoms and fosters civic engagement. Moreover, both thinkers suggest that a decentralized approach to governance allows for the flourishing of individual rights and civic responsibility. Tocqueville sees local governance as essential for repairing societal faults and encouraging active participation, while Constant stresses that a healthy democracy requires the protection of individual liberties against the encroachments of a central authority. Together, their insights illuminate a fundamental tension in political thought: the balance between effective governance and the safeguarding of personal freedoms. In highlighting the risks of centralism, Tocqueville and Constant advocate for a political landscape where local autonomy is not just a theoretical ideal but a practical necessity for preserving the values of democracy.

Together, Tocqueville, Arendt, and Constant highlight the critical importance of individual engagement in governance as a counterbalance to centralized authority. While Tocqueville emphasizes local autonomy and civic responsibility, Arendt warns of the dangers of passivity in the face of oppressive regimes, and Constant advocates for the protection of individual rights against encroaching central power. Their collective insights form a robust argument for the necessity of decentralized governance in nurturing democratic ideals.

3.3 Case Studies Illustrating Federalism and Centralism in Practice

Both *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* serve as case studies of political institutions in the United States and France, respectively. However, in these two works, Tocqueville also alludes to both systems within other countries. This section will explore additional case studies that are compared throughout Tocqueville's works to illustrate the dynamics of federalism and centralism, providing a broader understanding of governance structures and their

implications for civic engagement and individual autonomy. This section will first illustrate federalism in other states, and consequently, it will discuss centralism within other contexts.

Concerning federalism, Tocqueville states: "The United States of America does not represent the first and only example of a confederation. Leaving aside ancient history, modern Europe has provided several. Switzerland, the German Empire, the Dutch Republic have been or still remain confederations."[63] In his chapter What Distinguishes the Federal Constitution of the United States From all Other Constitutions, Tocqueville examines the constitutions of these different countries and draws parallels between them and the U.S. Constitution. He argues that even if "among these nations, the federal government has always remained weak and powerless,"[64] the essential feature of federalism lies in its capacity to protect local autonomy and promote civic engagement. He emphasizes that these confederations, despite their inherent limitations, through their commitment to representative governance, allow individual states or regions to maintain a degree of sovereignty that fosters a sense of community and civic responsibility.

For example, in Switzerland, the cantons operate with significant independence, enabling them to tailor policies that reflect the unique needs and preferences of their populations. This decentralized structure not only empowers citizens at the local level but also cultivates a vibrant political culture characterized by active participation and local autonomy within the Swiss *cantons*, where citizens can influence legislation through referenda and initiatives. Tocqueville appreciated Switzerland's unique model of governance, where citizens are not only allowed the opportunity to elect representatives but where they are established in an empowering system that surrounds them with a direct form of governance, fostering a culture of civic engagement that Tocqueville viewed as essential for a healthy democracy. The Swiss model illustrates how federalism can be effectively implemented, allowing for diverse regional interests to coexist while promoting national unity.

Similarly, Tocqueville notes that in the German Empire, while the federal government wielded less power, the individual states retained substantial authority, allowing them to enact policies that resonate with their distinct regional identities. This arrangement promotes a diverse political landscape, where local concerns can be addressed effectively without being overshadowed by a

[63] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 182.
[64] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 182.

central authority. Tocqueville observed that the structure of the German Empire, particularly its federal system, enabled local governments to enact legislation that reflected the unique cultural, economic, and social needs of their respective populations. However, it is important to note that the German states experienced significant changes during and after the German Confederation (1815–1866), which was a loose union of states. The formation of the German Empire in 1871 brought a more centralized structure under a federal monarchy, although some local autonomy was retained, especially in powerful states like Prussia and Bavaria. Tocqueville did not live to witness the unification, but it is consistent with his analysis that this centralization would eventually diminish local autonomy. While the idea that 'local autonomy ensures that citizens feel a direct connection to their governing bodies' aligns with Tocqueville's thoughts, whether this remained true post-unification is debatable, as Prussia came to dominate the empire, potentially weakening the connection between citizens and their local governments.

Moreover, Tocqueville highlights how this federal model in Germany allows for healthy competition among the states, spurring innovation and responsiveness to the electorate's demands. The existence of multiple jurisdictions encourages states to learn from one another and adopt best practices, ultimately enhancing governance across the federation. This dynamic, according to Tocqueville, not only preserves regional identities but also strengthens the overall unity of the nation by promoting a sense of collective purpose grounded in respect for local autonomy.

Tocqueville also refers to the Dutch Republic as another example of effective federalism. The Dutch experience during the 17th century, with its decentralized political structure and strong regional governance, illustrates the benefits of a system where local entities had significant authority. This allowed for a vibrant commercial and cultural life, wherein individual provinces could pursue their interests and adapt to the needs of their residents without excessive interference from a central government. However, Tocqueville might have also recognized the limitations of this system, particularly in foreign policy and military matters, where the central authority struggled to assert power due to the strong autonomy of the provinces. This weakness often left the Republic vulnerable in external affairs, as the lack of a unified approach hindered its effectiveness on the international stage. The Dutch model thus highlights both the advantages and challenges of a federal system that prioritizes local governance. While it promotes economic dynamism and civic engagement, it can also encounter difficulties in addressing national issues

that require a stronger central authority. This duality further validates Tocqueville's argument about the importance of balancing local autonomy with national unity. Despite its challenges, the Dutch Republic remains historically significant as a federal entity that effectively managed its local governance structures while maintaining a cohesive national identity. The decentralized nature of the Dutch system allowed for a remarkable degree of self-governance, which not only fostered political stability but also cultivated civic engagement among its citizens.

Even if the comparison between all these countries' systems seem to align seamlessly with the American federal system, Tocqueville highlights one slight distinction: "The American government is not a federal but an incomplete national government."[65] This quote highlights the nature of federalism within the United States, presenting a nuance to the previously stated affirmations of Tocqueville's standpoint on federalism in the United States. One must keep in mind that even if Tocqueville did describe the U.S. as a federal system but noted that it had unique features that made it more robust than prior confederations, his use of "incomplete national government" suggests that the U.S. straddles the line between federalism and nationalism but still operates as a federation.

Tocqueville argues that in all of the confederations that preceded the American Union, "the federal government appealed to the individual governments to provide for its needs."[66] This key distinction underlines the unique nature of the U.S. Constitution, which, unlike its predecessors, establishes a federal government that derives its authority directly from the people rather than relying on the representative voices of the states. The American model facilitates a more robust national authority, capable of enacting and enforcing laws that have direct implications for all citizens, thereby enhancing the potential for unified governance while still respecting local autonomy. This framework allows for a greater level of integration across the states, enabling the federal government to effectively address issues that transcend local boundaries, such as civil rights, interstate commerce, and national security. In fact, Tocqueville describes the other nations as having a power-dynamic struggle due to the strength or weakness of the neighboring states. Moreover, Tocqueville states: "If strong enough, it [the regional state] had recourse to arms; if weak, it could tolerate resistance to the laws of the Union, though they were

[65] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 182.
[66] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 183.

its own, by pretending it was helpless and by relying upon doing nothing."[67] Tocqueville underscores the precarious nature of governance in systems where power is decentralized and authority is diffused among various regional entities. He resumes his trail of thought in a single sentence: "In America, the Union's subjects are single individuals, not states."[68]

While Tocqueville admires the benefits of local governance found in other confederations, he recognizes that the American system provides a more comprehensive structure for managing the complexities of a diverse nation. By allowing the federal government to operate with direct authority over its citizens, the U.S. system strikes a delicate balance between preserving local interests and ensuring that the nation can act cohesively when necessary.

Tocqueville acknowledges that this structure comes with its own challenges, particularly concerning the potential for federal overreach and the erosion of state power. However, he emphasizes that the design of the American federal system includes mechanisms for checks and balances that can mitigate these risks. Through a combination of judicial review, the separation of powers, and the ability of states to challenge federal actions, Tocqueville believes that the American system retains necessary flexibility that allows both national and local interests to coexist. He states, that the United States' "force is not borrowed, but self-derived. It has its own administrators, courts, judicial officials, and army."[69] Tocqueville's assertion that the United States' power is "self-derived" underscores the foundational principle that the federal government is directly accountable to the people, rather than merely to the states.

In contrasting the American model with the systems of Switzerland, the German Empire, and the Dutch Republic, Tocqueville highlights how the unique elements of American federalism allow for greater adaptability in the face of social and political change. The ability of the federal government to act decisively can be crucial in times of national crisis or when addressing widespread social issues, such as those that emerged during the Civil Rights Movement. In these moments, the strength of the federal government to enforce laws and protect rights on a national scale can effectively combat the localized resistance that might arise within states.

[67] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 183.
[68] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 183.
[69] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (Penguin Classics), 184.

Conversely, concerning centralism, Tocqueville writes not only of the French centralized institutions but compares them to the medieval centralization that was found in France, England, and Germany. He highlights how similar governance structures existed across nations, where the essence of authority often derived from antiquated systems that became less effective over time. Tocqueville argues that by the 18th century, these institutions were in a state of disrepair, lacking the vitality necessary to adapt to the burgeoning demands of modern society.

To fully grasp the centralism of the French Revolution, it is essential to compare it with the medieval structures that persisted in England and Germany. Tocqueville notes that by the eighteenth century, the disintegration of medieval institutions had progressed significantly in France, but that under inspection, the medieval centralization of power was similar to the one under France's monarchical occupation, and consequently also under the French post-revolutionary era. Tocqueville states: "The administration of all three countries derived from the same general principles; the political assemblies were composed of the same elements and invested with the same powers. The community was divided up on the same lines and there was the same hierarchy of classes. The nobles held identical positions, had the same privileges, the same appearance; there was, in fact, a family likeness between them, and one might almost say they were not different men but essentially the same men everywhere." [70] This analysis highlights Tocqueville's understanding of how centralized institutions have historically manifested in various European contexts, underscoring the similarities and shared characteristics across nations. In his examination of medieval centralization, Tocqueville argues that despite the distinct national identities, there was a commonality in the structure of governance and the social hierarchy, which reflects a broader trend of central authority overpowering local autonomy.

England remained a centralized authority during the late 18th century. The English monarchy evolved from a feudal system to a more centralized authority, especially under the Tudor and Stuart dynasties, which spanned from 1485 to 1714. This transition marked a significant shift in power dynamics, as the crown increasingly asserted control over local governance and diminished the influence of regional nobility. The centralization of power in England led to the establishment of

[70] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Kindle Edition (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1955), 15.

a bureaucratic state capable of implementing policies and laws uniformly across the nation. However, Tocqueville recognized that England, despite its centralizing tendencies, maintained a more balanced system due to its strong parliamentary tradition. Following the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Parliament gained greater authority, providing a counterbalance to the monarchy's centralizing power. This created a system where local interests could still be represented at the national level, tempering the more authoritarian aspects of monarchical control. As a result, while communities felt some degree of autonomy eroding under the crown's authority, the role of Parliament helped ensure that local voices still had a platform for influencing governance, preventing total domination by the central government. The rise of Parliament as a powerful institution was a reaction to this centralization, as it provided a platform for local interests to be represented at the national level. Yet, Tocqueville argues that while Parliament allowed for some degree of regional representation, the overarching authority of the monarchy and central government still dominated the political landscape.

On the other hand, one may compare Tocqueville's analysis of French centralism under the light of contemporary developments in history as well. In Germany, for example, one observes the impact of centralization during the formation of the modern nation-state in the 19th century. Prior to the German unification in 1871, the German states operated with a considerable degree of autonomy; however, the unification process necessitated the creation of a centralized government to streamline decision-making and governance. The emergence of the German Empire led to a system where local governments had to adhere to policies set by the imperial authority, diminishing their power to address specific regional needs. While Tocqueville passed away in 1859, well before German unification, it is reasonable to speculate that his observations on centralization could be applied to this situation. Tocqueville might have highlighted in the German case the challenges faced by local governments as they attempted to navigate the balance between adhering to central mandates and meeting the unique demands of their populations. Although we cannot directly attribute this to Tocqueville, the consequences of centralization—such as stifled local initiatives and a sense of disconnect between citizens and their governing bodies—align with the dynamics Tocqueville identified in other contexts. This contrasted sharply with the vibrant regional identities that had previously characterized the German states. Centralization often led to cultural homogenization, where unique local customs, traditions, and practices were overshadowed by a

dominant national narrative. This shift can diminish the sense of community and belonging that citizens derive from their regional identities.

In summary, Tocqueville's comparative analysis of federalism and centralism illustrates the dynamic relationship between local autonomy and centralized authority in shaping political institutions across different nations. His observations of Switzerland, the German Empire, and the Dutch Republic underscore the advantages of federalism, such as fostering civic engagement, preserving regional identities, and promoting innovation through decentralized governance. At the same time, his discussion of the American federal system highlights its unique ability to balance local and national interests, allowing for more cohesive governance while preserving individual rights. Conversely, Tocqueville's analysis of centralism, particularly in France, England, and Germany, reveals the pitfalls of concentrated power. He underscores how centralization often stifles local initiative and erodes the connection between citizens and their governing bodies. This analysis is especially pertinent when examining the broader implications of nation-building and modern governance, where the tension between regional diversity and national unity continues to shape political landscapes. Ultimately, Tocqueville advocates for a balance between federalism and centralism, suggesting that successful governance requires both respect for local autonomy and the capacity for national coordination, ensuring that both local and national interests are effectively represented within a cohesive political framework.

Conclusion

In concluding this comparative analysis of the political systems of the United States and France, guided by Tocqueville's insights, several key observations can be drawn. This thesis has examined the historical trajectories, structural characteristics, and cultural implications of federalism in the United States and centralism in France, highlighting the unique strengths and weaknesses inherent in each system.

Firstly, it is evident that the Federalist model of the United States was for Alexis de Tocqueville the key institution that offers significant advantages in terms of political stability and democratic engagement. The decentralized nature of governance allows for a more participatory political culture, where local governments have substantial autonomy to address specific regional needs. This has fostered a sense of empowerment and involvement among citizens, contributing to the resilience of American democracy. However, this model is not without its challenges. The balance of power between the federal and state governments can lead to conflicts and inconsistencies in policy implementation, which sometimes hinders efficient governance.

Conversely, the centralist model of France, with its emphasis on uniformity and centralized control, was seen by Tocqueville as facilitating a more streamlined and cohesive governance structure, although it risked falling into despotism. The creation of departments and the appointment of prefects were intended to promote efficiency and equality across the nation. Yet, as Tocqueville observed, this centralization often results in alienation and disempowerment of local communities, undermining the democratic fabric by distancing citizens from decision-making processes.

Historically, these systems have been shaped by distinct cultural and historical contexts. The United States' federalism is deeply rooted in its colonial past and the founding principles of liberty and self-governance, reflecting a cultural preference for individualism and local governance. On the other hand, France's centralism stems from a history of monarchical rule and a revolutionary quest for national unity and equality, embodying a cultural inclination towards collective identity and centralized authority.

In reflecting on these insights, it becomes clear that neither system is inherently superior; rather, each offers different pathways to achieving democratic governance and political stability. The federalist approach of the United States exemplifies the benefits of local autonomy and citizen

engagement, but it requires careful management of intergovernmental relations. Meanwhile, France's centralist model demonstrates the advantages of uniform policy implementation and national cohesion, yet it necessitates mechanisms to ensure local representation and participation.

Ultimately, this thesis underscores the importance of understanding the historical and cultural underpinnings of political systems in evaluating their effectiveness. As nations continue to navigate the complexities of governance in an increasingly interconnected world, the lessons drawn from the experiences of the United States and France can offer valuable insights into crafting political systems that balance efficiency, equality, and democratic engagement.

In conclusion, this comparative study reaffirms Tocqueville's enduring relevance in analyzing political systems. His insights into the dynamics of federalism and centralism remain crucial for understanding the evolving landscape of democracy and governance. As both countries continue to evolve, the interplay between historical legacies and contemporary challenges will undoubtedly shape the future trajectories of their political systems, offering lessons not only to themselves but to the wider world. world.

References

Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1951.

Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.* New York: Viking Press, 1963.

Barlow, J. Jackson, Leonard W. Levy, and Ken Masugi, eds. *The Collapse of the Articles of Confederation.*

Foucault, Michel. *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume 3: Power.* Edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: New Press, 1994.

Madison, James. *The Federalist.* Paper No. 10.

Skocpol, Theda. *Social Revolutions in the Modern World.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America.* Edited by Phillips Bradley. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1945.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America.* Translated by Gerald E. Bevan. Penguin Classics Edition.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *The Old Regime and the French Revolution.* Original Edition. Digitized by Google.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *The Old Regime and the French Revolution.* Kindle Edition. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1955.

United States Constitution. Article I, Section 8.

United States Constitution. Article VI, Clause 2 (Supremacy Clause).

The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 11 (January 1898). Published by Sage Publications, Inc. in association with the American Academy of Political and Social Science.