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Associations and Democracy

"Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes. If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.

"The first time I heard in the United States that a hundred thousand men had bound themselves publicly to abstain from spirituous liquors, it appeared to me more like a joke than a serious engagement, and I did not at once perceive why these temperate citizens could not content themselves with drinking water by their own firesides. I at last understood that these hundred thousand Americans, alarmed by the progress of drunkenness around them, had made up their minds to patronize temperance. . . .

"[I]f these hundred thousand men had lived in France, each of them would singly have memorialized the government. . . . In aristocratic societies men do not need to combine in order to act, because . . . every wealthy and powerful citizen constitutes the head of a permanent and compulsory association, composed of all those who are dependent upon him or whom he makes subservient to the execution of his designs. . . . Among democratic nations, on the contrary, all the citizens are independent and feeble; they can do hardly anything by themselves, and none of them can oblige his fellow men to lend him their assistance. They all, therefore, become powerless if they do not learn voluntarily to help one another. Governments, therefore, should not be the only active powers; associations ought, in democratic nations, to stand in lieu of those powerful private individuals whom the equality of conditions has swept away."*

De Tocqueville in his prescient way predicted the vital role of associations in a pluralistic and increasingly specialized society. Associations of scientists have proliferated, from subspecialties such as clinical chemists to umbrella organizations such as the AAAS and the National Academy of Sciences. They compete for attention with associations of lawyers, nurses, and librarians. How can Congress and the Executive Branch respond to messages from all these associations? On the basis of the numbers? Ideally no, but practically somewhat. On the significance and wisdom of the message? Ideally yes, but practically, not entirely. If the content of the message were all important, would not that of a farsighted individual contribute more than the blandly worded compromise of an association? It is often said that "a camel is a horse designed by a committee." A message from an association involves a filtering process. Politicians are comforted that crackpot ideas are eliminated. The price may be elimination of the most brilliant ones also.

Are, in fact, our associations doing their jobs well? In certain respects—publishing journals, providing communication, and running meetings—they have proved most adept. In others—evaluating the future of their professions, identifying employment prospects for students, explaining their needs to Washington—their performance is episodic. Some do well; others poorly. If science is to play an increasingly important role in modern society, then the associations that de Tocqueville predicted would be so important to a democracy must constantly prove their effectiveness. We scientists should both contribute to and demand performance from our professional societies.—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.

*A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, first U.S. edition 1840, quoted from Knopf edition (New York, 1946), vol. 2, chap. 5.