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Intertemporal Choice and Political Thought

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Most work on intertemporal choice has been done within philosophy, psychology, and economics. Much of it is surveyed elsewhere in this book. In this chapter I discuss how issues of myopia, deferred gratification, and self-control have been discussed within political theory. I first consider political constellations as examples of imperfect rationality, that is, as devices of precommitment against future weakness of will. To the extent that constitutions are considered as devices, that bind later generations, we may inquire into the optimal tightness of the bounds as well as the optimal difficulty of untying them. Next I survey at some length the views of Alexis de Tocqueville—of all political theorists probably the one who attached most importance to problems of intertemporal choice. I discussed how political institutions affect the general ability of the citizens to defer gratification, and—probably the most original aspect of this thinking—how the ability to defer gratification in one part of life affects the ability to do so in others.

Constitutional Self-binding

Most Western democracies have written constitutions. (Great Britain and Israel are the main exceptions.) Their task is to set up the ma-

1 For a survey, see V. Bogdanov, Constitutions in Democratic Politics, Aldershot: Gower, 1988. Yet both the British and the Israeli political systems have quasi-
chinery of government and to protect basic rights and freedoms. Constitutional clauses differ from ordinary laws in two ways. First, they are supposed to deal with more basic or fundamental issues. If this were the only difference between the constitution and other laws, there would not seem to be much point in having one. In virtually all cases, however, constitutions also differ in being more difficult to change. Whereas ordinary legislation usually requires no more than a single majority vote, constitutional changes have to pass more difficult hurdles. Qualified majorities, ranging from 60 percent to 75 percent, are very common. In federal systems, a qualified majority of the states may have to give their consent. Often, constitutions impose delays that prevent changes from being made on short notice. The new clause may have to be passed by several successive parliaments or, as in Norway, be proposed during one parliament and passed by the following one. Some constitutions (such as the Norwegian one) impose both qualified majorities and delays; others (such as the Swedish one) require only delays; still others (such as the West German and U.S. ones), only qualified majorities; while New Zealand appears to be unique in that here "only ordinary legislative efforts are required to supplement, modify or repeal the Constitution." 

constitutional elements. For Britain, see, for instance, the practice described in footnote 7. In Israel, many basic laws contain entrenchment clauses similar to constitutional amendment clauses.

1. Obviously, the distinction between basic and nonbasic is anything but hard and fast. In the Fifth French Republic, for instance, the electoral system is not mentioned in the constitution. In consequence, parliament is free to stipulate proportional representation and single-member districts according to the interests of the current majority.

2. To the independence Constitution of Kenya, the majority required to change certain parts of the document was set at nine tenths of the vote in the Senate (J. Jacneill, "Majority Rule and Special Majorities." Public Law, 1989, p. 587-616, at p. 600). As observed by Alexander Hamilton (The Federalist, no. 75), similarly difficult hurdles may be created by requiring a qualified majority of the total composition of the body, irrespective of how many are actually present to vote. When turnout is traditionally low, even a simple majority of the electorate may prove difficult to obtain.

3. A similar practice obtains in Great Britain: "Under the Parliament Act 1911, as amended by the Parliament Act 1949, a non-money bill can be passed into law over the opposition of the House of Lords if it has been passed by simple majority in two consecutive sessions of the House of Commons and one year has elapsed between the second reading of the Bill in the Commons in the first session's third reading in the Commons in the second session." (Jacneill, "Majority Rule and Special Majorities," p. 597.)

4. In Eule, "Temporal Limits on the Legislative Mandate," American Bar Journal Foundation, 1987, pp. 379-459, at p. 394. Eule goes on to say, however, that "even in such a system...there remain moral and political restraints on the legislative alteration of constitutional doctrine."

It is commonly asserted that these hurdles are a form of self-binding. The term, although convenient, is multiply misleading. First, the constitution, even if followed religiously, rarely binds in an absolute sense, because it is usually possible to unbind oneself by going through the required procedure. Second, there is no certainty that the constitution will be followed, religiously or even approximately. Extraconstitutional action is a permanent possibility. An individual may bind himself through court-enforceable promises, but the World Court cannot ensure that societies stick to the constitutions they have given themselves. Third, a constitution usually binds more than "oneself," because it is almost invariably intended to last beyond the current generation. It is only by the dubious device of construing the nation over time as a single entity that constitutions can be viewed as acts of self-binding. In all these respects, constitutional self-binding differs from individual acts of precommitment such as voluntary and irreversible commitment to mental institutions.

The constitution binds, and only the constitution can bind. In particular, a legislature cannot bind its successors. Blackstone's dictum, that "Acts of Parliament derogatory from the power of subsequent parliaments bind not," seems to apply to all parliamentary systems. In political systems without a constitution, there is no way in which the actions of future majorities can be restricted: The majority can neither bind nor be bound. In constitutional systems, simple majori-

4. This statement requires two qualifications. First, some constitutions contain clauses that cannot be undone by the usual amendment procedure or indeed in any other way. Thus, the Constitution of West Germany makes it impossible to undo the federal nature of the system. Similarly (although slightly more weakly), Article V of the Constitution of the United States stipulates that "no state, without its consent, shall be deprived of its equal suffrage in the Senate." In Canada, there are a number of matters that can be amended only by unanimous provincial agreement (including an amendment of the amendment procedure). Second, the fact that a clause can be changed may be totally irrelevant if, as is often the case, the amendment procedure is time-consuming and the need for change urgent.

7. An exception is found in another part of Article V in the U.S. Constitution: "no amendment which may be made prior to the year one thousand eight hundred and eight, shall in any manner affect the first and fourth clauses [related to slavery] of the first article."

8. Also, a majority may use the constitution to bind the minority. Suppose that the constitution requires three fifths majority for a change. A majority of 60 percent that fears that one day it might find itself in a minority of 49 percent might then implement its partisan interests through the constitution rather than through ordinary legislation.


10. Eule, ibid.

11. One might argue, however, that this fact in itself constitutes a minimal unwritten constitution. Cq. also the following note.
ties can be bound but not bind. Although the people can bind its representatives through the constitution, the representatives cannot bind the people by limiting the freedom of action of future representatives.

This is not to say that legislative attempts to bind future legislatures are unheard of. In a survey of the problem, Julian Eule mentions as one example Rule 32 (2) of the Standing Rules of the American Senate: "The rules of the Senate shall continue from one Congress to the next Congress unless they are changed as provided in these rules." According to Eule, there is little doubt that the rule is unconstitutional. The Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act (the Gramm-Rudman Act) enacted by the American Congress in 1985 intended to curb the spending of Congress by establishing "maximum fiscal deficits" for each of the next 6 fiscal years. Eule argues that the Act, although leaving future Congresses free to repeal the enactment by simple majority, represented an unconstitutional attempt to bind the future by setting the form by which prior legislation can be altered. Under the Constitution, he argues, a later Congress could just ignore the Act: Explicit repeal is not necessary. The Congress that enacted Gramm-Rudman bound its successors de facto if not de jure, by exploiting the fact that explicit repeal would create greater political risks for the legislators than overspending by itself would do.

The purpose of entrenched clauses (i.e., those that cannot be changed by a simple majority vote) is to ensure a reasonable degree of stability in the political system and to protect minority rights. By "reasonable," I mean that there should neither be too much nor too little stability. If all decisions were made by simple majority vote, small changes in the electorate and their representatives could create drastic changes on major issues. Even without any changes in the representatives and their preferences, the problem of cyclical majorities (the Condorcet paradox) would leave collective decisions dangerously vulnerable to agenda manipulation. Conversely, the current majority could reshape electoral arrangements so as to reduce the chances of the opposition of ever getting into power. Unchanging rules facilitate the change of majorities, without which democracy has little substance.

None of these arguments for collective self-binding has an analogue at the individual level. Yet in other cases we can find a parallel. When an individual tries to bind himself in advance to a certain course of action, it is usually for one of two reasons. First, as Thomas Schelling has shown us, by throwing away some of his options, an individual may gain a strategic advantage in his dealings with others. Second, if the individual is subject to weakness of will, he may follow the example of Ulysses and bind himself to the mast. Of these, the first reason is rarely present as an argument for constitutional self-binding. The second, however, is massively important. The remainder of this survey will be devoted to a discussion of collective analogies to individual weakness of will and to self-binding as a remedy (and a problem).

In the heat of passion or under the influence of some immediate temptation, an individual can deviate from prudent plans formed in advance or do things that he will later regret. Groups of individuals,
such as voters or members of a political assembly, are no less prone to such irrational behavior. Sometimes, aggregate irrationality is simply the sum of irrational individual responses to the same external situation; at other times, passionate factions may form by interaction effects and crowd psychology. Whatever their origin, collective fits of passion can be extremely destructive in their effects. Inflamed majorities have violated the rights of minorities, spent money they did not have, and declared war for no good reason.

Although a qualified majority is less likely than a simple majority to yield to irrational impulses, it is by no means immune against such temptations. Hence, a constitutional requirement of a qualified majority does not by itself provide much of a protection against the people's propensity to collective weakness of will. As explained earlier, the purpose of such clauses is rather to make the system less vulnerable to random fluctuations and manipulation. To alleviate the problem of collective passions, other procedures are necessary. In the Athenian assembly, for instance, new legislation was made by the notalhetai, a group of individuals chosen by lot and summoned by the assembly with the task of debating and then approving or rejecting laws proposed in the assembly. They met only for a single day, presumably to make them immune to factionalism and corruption. Another institution with a similar purpose was the gripho paraomén, whereby an individual might be punished for having made an illegal proposal in the assembly, even if it had already been passed. These quasi-constitutional procedures served to protect democracy against itself.

In modern constitutions different devices are adopted to protect the people against itself or—on an alternative interpretation—to reduce the power of the people. Some of these are constitutional constraints on ordinary legislation. Executive veto is one example. Another is to adopt a bicameral system, with one chamber representing the parts of the electorate who can be expected to hold the more conservative views. Other devices include constitutional constraints on constitutional change, notably through clauses that ensure some delay between the time a proposal to change the constitution is first made and when it is finally adopted. This is the main case in which the self-binding interpretation is compelling. Executive veto and bicameralism may just as plausibly, and sometimes more plausibly, be viewed as devices for controlling the people, quite independently of the more or less well considered nature of the popular will.

A classic argument for the need for constitutional self-binding was made by Madison at the Federal Convention in Philadelphia.

In order to judge of the form to be given to [the Senate], it will be proper to take a view of the ends to be served by it. These were first to protect the people against their rulers; secondly to protect the people against the transient impressions into which they themselves might be led. A people deliberating in a temperate moment, and with the experience of other nations before them, on the plan of Govt. most likely to secure their happiness, would first be aware, that those charged, with the public happiness, might betray their trust. An obvious precaution against this danger would be to divide the trust between different bodies of men, who might watch & check each other. It would next occur to such a people, that they themselves were liable to temporary errors, and want of information as to their true interest, and that men chosen for a short term, & employed but a small portion of that in public affairs, might err from the same cause. Another reflection equally becoming a people on such an occasion, would be that they themselves, as well as a numerous body of Representatives, were liable to err also, from fainness and passion. A necessary fence against this danger would be to select a portion of enlightened citizens, whose limited number, and firmness might seasonably interpose against imputable counsels. It ought finally to occur to a people deliberating on a Govt. for themselves, that as different interests necessarily result from the liberty meant to be secured, the major interests might under sudden impulses be tempted to commit injustice on the minority.


"err from fickleness and passion" and to act on "sudden impulses." At this point, the analogy to individual precommitment becomes very close.

The analogy may be pursued further. Individual self-binding can be a risky business. The money that I have saved but cannot touch may be needed for an important operation. Unless I am let out of the drug clinic for a few days, my firm may go bankrupt. Ulysses might regret being bound to the mast if his ship comes into dangerous waters that his men cannot navigate on their own. Ideally, Ulysses and his successors would like to be loosely bound to the mast—with ties strong enough to keep them from acting against their own interest, but not so strong as to prevent him from intervening in an emergency. Usually, one cannot have it both ways. One cannot anticipate all legitimate exceptions to self-binding contracts, and among the unanticipated exceptions, it is often impossible for the enforcing party to distinguish between the genuine ones and those that were the raison d'être for the contract in the first place. What was intended as a safeguard against impulsivity may turn into a prison.26

Political precommitment, similarly, can lead to dangerous rigidities. There are, in fact, several reasons why the constitution should not be immutable en bloc. First, the normative views of the citizens may change. If a large majority of the citizens adopted libertarian views, they ought not to be prevented from writing a ban on income taxes into the constitution. Second, their factual beliefs about institutional means to political ends may be modified as they learn more about the effects of the system. If it turns out that the realizability of the president has bad incentive effects, it ought to be possible to limit his tenure to one term. Third, changes in external factors such as technology or international relations may force rethinking about constitutional matters. If Norwegian entry into the Common Market comes to be seen as imperative by a large majority, the constitution ought not to be an absolute obstacle (and it isn't).

Monetary policy offers many examples of the attractions and dangers of constitutions.27 Governments are often tempted to print money, devalue the currency, and expand credit, to the detriment of

the long-run performance of the economy. A constitution that prevents them from doing so may be a salutary yoke—or, in times of crisis, a dangerous impediment. At the Federal Convention, James Wilson argued that "it will have a most salutary influence on the credit of the U. States to remove the possibility of paper money."28 Against this view—which eventually prevailed—George Mason asserted, "Though he had a mortal hatred to paper money, yet as he could not foresee all emergencies, he was unwilling to tie the hands of the Legislature. He observed that the late war could not have been carried on, had such a prohibition existed."29 Two centuries later, William Nordhaus pointed to a similar dilemma. To prevent "political business cycles" one might, he observes, entrust economic policy to persons that will not be tempted by the Sirens of partisan politics. This procedure is typical for monetary policy, which for historical reasons is lodged in the central bank (as in the independent Federal Reserve System in the US or the Bank of England). A similar possibility is to turn fiscal policy over to a Treasury dominated by civil servants. It may be objected, however, that delegating responsibility to an agency that is not politically responsive to legitimate needs is even more dangerous than a few cycles. This danger is frequently alleged regarding central banks which pay more attention to the "soundness of the dollar" or the latest monetarist craze than to fundamental policy problems.

The argument that a constitutional remedy may be worse than the democratic disease has also been made in the context of Israeli politics. While some have "stressed the stabilising effect of a constitution, which is particularly necessary in a dynamic and volatile population,"30 others have "stressed the dangers of a rigid constitution . . . especially in a dynamic society."31 Does a changing society need a stable constitution as a flywheel—or a flexible constitution that can adjust to the changing environment? Because both arguments have obvious merits, one needs to find an optimal balance between stability and rigidity. Here "rigidity" may refer to the obstacles created by the constitution to the passage of ordinary laws, or to the obstacles

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26 At the level of individual self-binding, this problem can arise in two ways (see Ainslie's Chap. 8 in this volume). In addition to the dangers of precommitment, there are the dangers of backsliding—of coming to see each act of backsliding as a predictor of total moral collapse. Although efficient in preventing backsliding, the bunching strategy can be crippling to emotional life by the excessive rigidities it imposes on the individual. Here again, loose bunching is the ideal.


29 Ibid., p. 309.


32 Ibid., p. 293.
it creates to amending its own clauses. As to the former, Madison observed that in deciding on the majority needed to overrule the veto of the president "we must compare the danger from the weakness of 2/3 with the danger from the strength of 3/4." As to the latter, Lally-Tollendal remarked in the French Assemblée Constituante of 1789-1791 that "in a given space of time the Constitution may be destroyed by lack of change just as much as by too many changes. It must be neither easy nor impossible to modify it." 34

There may be limits to what can be achieved by piecemeal constitutional revision, especially if some clauses are so entrenched as to be virtually immutable. Many have argued, therefore, the need for periodically occurring constitutional conventions, for instance at 20 or 30 years' intervals, so that each generation could have a chance of fixing its own constitution rather than being under the domination of earlier ones. The issue was not debated at the Federal Convention, although Jefferson (who was not at the Convention) later expressed strong views to the effect that "the dead have no rights." 35 At the Assemblée Constituante, many speakers urged the need for periodical conventions that were to have a free hand in drawing up a new constitution. 36 Generally speaking, the proposal is open to two objections, each of which is sufficient to destroy it. First, as the time for revision approaches, political life will be inflated to a high degree, so that at the convention "the passions, not the reason, of the public would sit in judgment." 37 Far from being "the people deliberating in a temperate moment," the convention would be a struggle of factions. Second, the ground rules for the periodical conventions—notably the electoral and voting procedures—would have to be laid down by the existing constitution and to that extent just constitute another instance of the dead exercising their sway over the living. If, for instance, the new convention were to discuss the extension of the suffrage to new groups, ought not these groups to be represented?

I have tried to highlight the features that are common to constitutional self-binding and individual precommitment. In both cases, pre-

dictable weakness of will is a major reason for restricting future opportunities for action. In both cases, the pervasive uncertainty surrounding human affairs is a major reason for taking great caution before imposing heavy constraints. Although the weakness may be predictable, many other aspects of the situation are not. I have also stressed some differences between the two cases. Some of the reasons for constitutional self-binding derive from specifically political matters, such as fluctuating majorities or procedural manipulations, that have no analogue at the individual level. Conversely, some of the "solutions" to individual weakness of will have no analogue at the collective level. An individual may overcome his tendency toward backsliding through the mental bookkeeping device of "bunching" together a series of future decisions, thus raising the stakes so high that he or she is able to resist temptation. To summarize: The problem of weakness of will and the use of precommitment techniques for solving it are found both at the individual and the political levels. The individual problem, however, can be solved in a different way, and the political solution can be a response to a different problem.

Tocqueville and the Problem of Myopia

Alexis de Tocqueville was only marginally concerned with the issues discussed so far. Although he does refer to the control of the Bank of the United States over the money supply as a "salutary control" (DA 389 fn.) which the provincial banks and the "blind democratic instincts of the country" (ibid.) have great difficulties in accepting, he nowhere suggests that this is a constraint the people has imposed on itself. In fact, the only reference in his writings to any kind of self-control is a heavily ironical one, which tends to dismiss the idea that individuals or communities might try to protect themselves against their own passions. It occurs in a chapter from Democracy in America entitled "Some Observations on the Theater Among Democratic Peoples," where the following argument (in fact an obvious petiole principii) purports to "show that the stage is not very popular in America":

The Americans, whose laws allow the utmost freedom, and even license, of language in other respects, nevertheless subject the drama to a sort of censorship. Plays can only be performed by permission.

of municipal authorities. This illustrates how like communities are to individuals: without a thought they give way to their chief passions, and then take great care not to be carried away by tastes they do not possess. (DA 493)

By contrast, Tocqueville was passionately interested in the causes and consequences of what today we would call myopia, the tendency of individuals to act in light of their short-term self-interest instead of extending their horizon to their life as a whole. To understand his analysis, some preliminary remarks on his psychological conceptions are needed.

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville is constantly concerned with explaining the formation of preferences and desires. Sometimes he appeals to the extrapsychic environment, as when he explains preference formation in terms of conformity to other people or in terms of adaptation to the inevitable. At other times he invokes various intrapsychic mechanisms by which one desire can favor or, on the contrary, block the emergence of another.

Consider first what we might call the spillover effect: Habits and dispositions that have been formed in one sphere of life spill over into other arenas. Here are some examples:

> In Europe almost all the disorders of society are born around the domestic hearth and not far from the nuptial bed. It is there that men come to feel scorn for national ties and legitimate pleasures and develop a taste for disorder, restlessness of spirit, and instability of desires. Shaken by the tumultuous passions which have often troubled his own house, the European finds it hard to submit to the authority of the state's legislators. . . . [By contrast], the American derives from his home that love of order which he carries over into affairs of state. (DA 291–292)

The passions that stir the Americans most deeply are commercial and not political ones, or rather they carry a trader's habit over into the business of politics. (DA 285)

In civil life each man can, at a stretch, imagine that he is in a position to look after himself. In politics, he could never fancy that. So when a people has a political life, the idea of associations and eagerness to form them are part of everybody's everyday life. Whatever natural
distaste men may have for working in common, they are always ready to do so for the sake of a party. In this way politics spreads a general habit and taste for association. (DA 521)

That constantly renewed agitation introduced by democratic government into political life passes . . . into civil society. Perhaps, taking everything into account, that is the greatest advantage of democratic government, and I praise it much more on account of what it causes to be done than for what it does. (DA 243)

The spillover effect operates to the extent that people have an integrated personality, in which the same habits and behavioral dispositions regulate all parts of their life. Walter Mischel argued in a classic study that such intraindividual consistency is much weaker than is often supposed. Mischel added, however, that the cross-situational correlations, although weak, are often statistically significant. "Statistically significant relationships of this magnitude are sufficient to justify personality research on individual and group differences. It is equally plain that their value for making statements about an individual are severely limited." Although Tocqueville seems to assume that the correlations are very strong, this assumption may not really be necessary for his sociological purposes. Later I discuss an alternative interpretation of Mischel's finding.

The second mechanism is that of a compensation effect: Desires or needs that are not satisfied in one arena seek an outlet in others. Tocqueville assumes that people have certain basic needs, which seek satisfaction one way or another. Here are two examples, both of which invoke the compensation effect to explain the emergence of religion in, respectively, aristocratic and democratic societies. The first explanation is of the "opium of the people" variety, whereas the second belongs to the "fear of freedom" category.

> In nations where an aristocracy dominates . . . the imagination of the poor turns to the next world; it is closed in by the wretchedness of the actual world but escapes therefrom and seeks for joys beyond. (DA p. 531)

For my part, I doubt whether man can support complete religious independence and entire political liberty at the same time. I am led to think that if he has no faith, he must obey, and if he is free he must believe. (DA p. 444)


The compensation effect is related to what is sometimes called the hydraulic model of the working of the mind. Although the model can produce absurd results, the idea that people eschew uniformity of behavior across arenas is not necessarily absurd. I return to that question below. Here I want to observe that 20 years after the publication of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville himself expressed his dissatisfaction with hydraulic reasoning, in a remarkable passage from the notes for the second volume of *The Old Regime*:

"It would seem that civilized people, when restrained from political action, should turn with that much more interest to the literary pleasures. Yet nothing of the sort happens. Literature remains as insensible and fruitless as politics. Those who believe that by making people withdraw from greater objects they will devote more energy to those activities that are still allowed to them treat the human mind along false and mechanical laws. In a steam engine or a hydraulic machine smaller wheels will turn smoother and quicker as power to them is diverted from the larger wheels. But such mechanical rules do not apply to the human spirit."

I now proceed to Tocqueville's analysis of intertemporal choice. Tocqueville observes, somewhat tritely, that men always everywhere tend to be selfish and myopic (DA 264). More interesting is the claim that the "democratic social state," characterized by economic and social equality and especially by high rates of mobility, tends to create a short time horizon:

"When everyone is constantly striving to change his position, when an immense field of competition is open to all, when wealth is amassed or dissipated in the shortest possible space of time in the turmoil of democracy, men think in terms of sudden and easy fortunes, of great possessions easily won and lost, and chance in every shape and form. Social instability favors the natural instability of desires. Amid all these perpetual fluctuations of fate the present looms large and hides the future, so that men do not want to think beyond tomorrow. (DA 548)"

Elsewhere Tocqueville explains that individuals have a short time horizon because they are able to recognize that their desires tend to change constantly. The observation occurs in a brief chapter on "How democratic institutions and mores tend to raise rent and shorten the terms of leases":

"In such a mental climate landlord and tenant too feel a sort of instinctive terror of long-term obligations; they are afraid that one day they will be hampered by the agreement which at the moment profits them. They are vaguely conscious of the possibility of a sudden and unexpected change in their condition. They are afraid of themselves, dreaming that, their taste having changed, they will come to regret not being able to drop what once formed the object of their lust. (DA 582)"

The causal chain, in other words, goes from (1) unstable social conditions through (2) unstable desires to (3) the recognition of their instability and (4) the subsequent shortening of the time horizon. Among the effects of this tendency, Tocqueville cites not only the shortening of the term of leases, but also the U.S. predilection for general ideas:

"One of the characteristics of democratic times is that all men have a taste for easy success and immediate pleasures. This is true of intellectual pursuits as well as of all others. Most men who live in times of equality are full of lively yet indolent ambition. They want great success at once, but they want to do without great efforts. These contrary instincts lead them straight to looking for generalizations, by means of which they flatter themselves that they can paint vast canvases very cheaply and attract public attention without trouble. (DA 440)"

Matters are, however, more complicated, because democratic societies also tend to produce antidotes against myopia. One such antidote is religion. We have seen how democracies produce religion, through the compensation effect. The following passage explains how religion then counteracts myopia, through the spillover effect:

"In ages of faith the final aim of life is placed beyond life. The men of those ages therefore naturally and almost involuntarily grow accustomed to fix their eyes for years together on some static object toward which their progress is ever directed, and they learn by imperceptible degrees to repress a crowd of petty passing desires in order ultimately best to satisfy the one great permanent longing which obsesses them."

"Cp. also DA p. 453: "I once met an American sailor and asked him why his country's ships are made so that they will not last long. He answered disdainfully that the art of navigation was making such quick progress that even the best of boats would be almost useless if it lasted more than a few years.""
When these same men engage in worldly conduct, such habits influence their conduct. They gladly fix some general and definite aim as the object of their actions here below and direct all their efforts toward it. They do not shift from day to day, chasing some new object of desire, but have settled designs which they never tire of pursuing. . . . Religions instill a general habit of behaving with the future in mind. In this respect they work as much in favor of happiness in this world as of felicity in the next. (DA 547)

This type of argument occurs frequently in Tocqueville: The ills of democracy are cured by democracy itself. Here, religion—its endogenous outcome of free democratic institutions—is praised for extending the time horizon of the citizens. Elsewhere, it is praised for restricting their desires: "while the law allows the American people to do everything, there are things which religion prevents them from imagining and forbids them to dare" (DA 292).

Tocqueville also cites the specifically U.S. habit of acting according to enlightened self-interest (intérêt bien entendu). As far as I can understand (Tocqueville never defines the concept), this simply means acting according to long-term interest. In the two chapters Tocqueville devotes to this idea, it is taken as exogenously given, and not itself to be explained in terms of further motives. It is, however, used to explain a number of other phenomena, including religion:

I do not see . . . any plain reason why the doctrine of self-interest properly understood should drive men away from religious beliefs, but rather do I see how to unravel the ways in which it brings them close thereto. Let us start from the assumption that in order to gain happiness in this world a man resists all his instinctive impulses and deliberately calculates every action of his life, that instead of yielding blindly to the first rush of his passions he has learned the art of fighting them, and that he habitually and effortlessly sacrifices the pleasure of the moment for the lasting interests of his whole life. If such a man believes in the religion that he professes, it will hardly cost him anything to submit to such restrictions as it imposes. Reason itself advises him to do so, and habits already formed make it easy. (DA 529)

Here, the spillover effect works in the opposite direction, from the habit of taking the long-term view in secular matters to the ability to act for the sake of the afterlife.

There are further complications. Although Tocqueville believes that democracies spontaneously generate religion, he also envisages the possibility of having democracy without religion. The effect of skepticism and incredulity is that "once [people] have grown accustomed not to think about what will happen after their life, they easily fall back into a complex and brutish indifference about the future" (DA 548), an effect that is reinforced by democracy, as we saw earlier. Tocqueville concludes that "in such a country where unhappily skepticism and democracy exist together, philosophers and the men in power should always strive to set a distant aim as the object of human efforts" (ibid.). The most important is the advice he gives to the rulers:

It is at all times important that the rulers of nations should act with the future in view. But this is even more necessary in ages of democracy and skepticism than in any others. By giving such a lead, the chief men in democracies not only bring prosperity in public affairs but also teach individuals by their example to conduct their affairs properly. They must especially strive to banish chance, as much as possible, from the world of politics. The sudden and undeserved promotion of a courtier in aristocratic country causes no more than an ephemeral impression, because the whole complex of institutions and beliefs forces men to progress slowly along paths they cannot leave. But such events give the worst possible example to a democratic people, for they urge it on down in the direction whether all its emotions are anyhow leading it. So it is chiefly in times of skepticism and equality that particular precautions are required to prevent the favor of prince or people, which comes and goes at random. One must hope that all promotion will be seen as the reward of effort, so that no high position should be too easily required and men of ambition should be obliged to plan well ahead before they reach their goal. (DA 584-99)

The idea is that of a spillover effect from politics to other secular matters. (This might in fact provide an explanation of the tendency to behave according to enlightened self-interest.) Tocqueville then completes the circle by suggesting a further spillover to religion:

Once men have become accustomed to foresee from afar what is likely to befall them in this world and to feed upon hopes, they can hardly keep their thoughts always confined within the precise limits of this life and will always be ready to break out through these limits and consider what is beyond. I have therefore no doubt that, in accus-

failure in one arena (e.g., violating the private rule of never having a drink before dinner) as a predictor for failure in other arenas (e.g., failing to get up at 6 a.m. to do one’s regular exercise). The benefit of this strategy is that it raises the stakes so high that conformity with the rules is facilitated. The drawback is that it tends to create rigid, compulsive individuals who are never able to give themselves a break.

The spillover effect suggests a positive correlation between intertemporal choice behavior in different arenas. The compensation effect would suggest a negative correlation: The more people defer gratification in one arena, the less they do so in others. Having achieved a success in one domain, they might reward themselves by lax behavior in another. The need for some kind of oral stimulus may prevent overweight smokers from giving up both of their bad habits. Judging from myself and my acquaintances, I would conjecture that the spillover effect dominates in some individuals, whereas the compensation effect is the more prominent in others. This observation, if more generally valid, suggests a different perspective on Mischel’s finding of a weak positive correlation across arenas. Might it not be the case that the population is heterogeneous, consisting of some for whom there is a strong positive correlation and others for whom there is a somewhat weaker negative correlation?  

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6Studies of interindividual consistency have moved a long way since Mischel’s 1968 study. Recent research tends to emphasize the nature of the situations that trigger responses of various kind, so that one person might be consistently capable of delaying gratification in one type of setting, for example, one that requires ability to wait, and consistently incapable of doing so in another setting, for example, one that requires ability to resist temptation (W. Mischel, Y. Shoda, and P. Peake, “The Nature of Adolescent Competencies Predicted by Preschool Delay of Gratification,” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 54 (1988): 687–696). Unless situations and settings are defined so as to render the consistency hypothesis true by definition, one might still ask, however, whether intrasituational relations are governed by the spillover effect or the compensation effect.

6Similarly, the definition of targets of envy can be governed by either of these two mechanisms, both of which are mentioned by Plutarch. On the one hand, there is a spillover effect: Once the habit of envying enemies is established, “it sticks; they come to hate and envy friends.” On the other hand, there is a zero-sum effect: If envy is denied one outlet, it will seek another. “Envy is a fact of life, unload it on enemies, who will render you pleasant to your friends in their prosperity by draining your potential for envy.” (For references, see R. Walcot, Envy and the Greeks. Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips, 1978, p. 30.)