Bowling with Government

"The Tocqueville Problem" by Theda Skocpol, in *Social Science History* (Winter 1997), 905 W. Main St., Ste. 18-B, Box 90660, Durham, N.C. 27708–0660.

"Nothing strikes a European traveler in the United States more," Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America* (1835–40), "than the absence of what we would call government or administration." Conservative champions of civil society often cite the French visitor's famous work to show that local voluntary associations only flourish with a minimal national government. But, argues Skocpol, a professor of government and sociology at Harvard University, today's conservatives miss, as Tocqueville himself did, how closely the civic vitality of the early United States was connected with the national government.

"The remarkable size and reach of the U.S. post office gives the lie to any notion that 'government' and 'administration' were 'absent' in early America," Skocpol writes. Whereas France had only four post offices for every 100,000 inhabitants, and Great Britain 17, the United States had 74. "The postal system," she points out, drawing on historian Richard John's *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (1995), "was the biggest enterprise of any kind in the pre-industrial United States," and for most Americans, it *was* the federal government. The 8,764 postal workers in 1831, and the 14,290 a decade later, constituted more than three-fourths of all federal employees, and most were part-time postmasters in towns scattered throughout the countryside.

For the folks lined up to get their mail in Thomas Waterman Wood's The Village Post Office, *and for most citizens in antebellum America, the post office* was *the federal government.*

Tocqueville, traveling by stagecoach through remote areas of Kentucky and Tennessee, was astonished by the "circulation of letters and newspapers among these savage woods." Indeed, Skocpol adds, his travels "might not have been possible had not many U.S. stagecoach companies been subsidized through Congress so that mail could be carried to small communities and representatives could travel home to remote districts."

The relative safety, speed, and reach of the federal mail greatly facilitated commerce in the early United States, of course, but the postal system "was even more important for U.S. civil society and democratic politics," Skocpol says. Congressmen and senators could communicate freely by mail with their constituents, and "citizens, even those in the remotest hamlets, could readily communicate with one another, monitoring the doings of Congress and state legislatures as well as those of local governments. Voluntary associations soon learned to put out their message in 'newspaper' format to take advantage of the mails." By encouraging communications among citizens, she observes, the antebellum postal system helped to draw them into "passionate involvements" in regional and national political campaigns and in moral crusades, such as the temperance and abolitionist movements.

The government's encouraging role did not end then, Skocpol says. Her preliminary studies suggest that large grassroots voluntary associations, such as the American Legion and the United Auto Workers (UAW), are especially likely to be formed during times of intense national political activity—World War I in the American Legion's case, the New Deal in the UAW's. During the 19th century and, to a lesser extent, the 20th, it seems, national politics and government, far from smothering civil society, encouraged it.