

# A Tocquevillian assessment of a tool to promote monitorial citizenship in Brazil

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## **Abstract**

The MIT Center for Civic Media ([civic.mit.edu](http://civic.mit.edu)) has developed a system called Promise Tracker ([www.promisetracker.org](http://www.promisetracker.org)) comprised by a Web platform and a mobile app that help citizens to keep track of promises made by government officials during campaign season in order to hold them accountable for their commitments. The system has been tested in different cities of Brazil. The stated goal of this social technology is to promote the engagement of ordinary citizens in the political life of their communities between election cycles.

This paper reflects on the premises and preliminary results of this experience using Alexis de Tocqueville's insights about the early development of democracy in America. For him, democracy was not a mere political system, but first and foremost a social state that stemmed from the egalitarian trend in Modernity and that encompassed all dimensions of communal life. His rich view of democracy is used here to explain and evaluate the aforementioned experience to engage civil society and broaden the public dialogue in Brazilian cities with the aid of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

**Keywords:** Monitorial citizenship, Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Brazil.

## 1 On the tool

Promise Tracker is “a web-based tool and complementary set of practices that provides citizens with the capacity to monitor and hold elected officials accountable to the promises they make.” (Promise Tracker 2015a) It “includes a form builder and mobile phone tool for data collection, allowing citizens to deploy data collection campaigns based around specific government commitments.” (Promise Tracker 2015a)

It would be misleading, however, to focus on the computational aspects of the system. Promise Tracker is first and foremost a civic technology. As such, people and engagement comprise its most important building blocks. In fact, the mobile app and the associated Website are trivial elements from a computational standpoint. All the innovation stems from Promise Tracker’s approach to promote civic engagement and political participation. A concrete example might help to understand what that approach consists of.

Let us assume that a group of citizens is concerned about kindergarten education. They get together to list all the promises made by elected officials related to that issue. Those promises would arguably fall into two – non-mutually exclusive – categories: promises that are considered priorities for the community and promises that can be monitored with a cell phone.

In fact, not all promises are equal. Some of them are deemed essential by citizens and therefore provide bigger electoral dividends for politicians. At the same time, not all promises are a good fit for mobile-based oversight: only those that involve some kind of material infrastructure that can be photographed or mapped over time. For instance, the improvement in

performance of teachers and students cannot be easily tracked with a cell phone. On the other hand, the construction of new kindergarten facilities can be easily tracked.

Accordingly, our group of concerned citizens would choose elected officials' promises that lie in both categories: commitments that are, at the same time, priorities for the community and easily overseen with cell phones. Let us suppose that the mayor promised to build three kindergartens in the southernmost neighborhood, the region with the highest shortage of kindergartens in the city. Based on the aforementioned criteria, that goal would be a good fit for oversight with Promise Tracker.

The next step is performed through a Web platform (Promise Tracker 2015b). Our group of citizens visits Promise Tracker's Website and creates a data collection campaign to track the construction of those three kindergartens. On the Web platform, they define what kind of data will be requested from people who want to contribute to the campaign. That data might include, for instance, a picture of the construction site, its geolocation, or a piece of information about the stage of construction.

Then, it is time to invite the local community to download the mobile app (MIT Center for Civic Media 2015b) to collaborate in the data collection campaign that was created through the Website. Presumably, parents who experience the pain of kindergarten deficit will be the first ones to engage with the campaign and start collecting data.

The mobile app automatically uploads every piece of information to Promise Tracker's Web server. The data becomes automatically available to any internet user through the Web interface. Our initial group of citizens must then discuss how they intend to use the collected information. They can show it to the community to make it aware of the mayor's commitment

to the goal or his lack of responsibility. In other occasions, they can use it for advocacy: to support a media campaign, a meeting with elected officials, or a rally in the neighborhood.

Since November 2013, the tool has been developed under the auspices of the MIT Center for Civic Media, a research center inside the MIT Media Lab that, “hand in hand with diverse communities, [...] collaboratively create, design, deploy, and assess civic media tools” (MIT Center for Civic Media 2015a). The project has received financial support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and Google.org.

## **2 Original inspiration**

Promise Tracker was conceived by Ethan Zuckerman, director of the MIT Center for Civic Media. He realized that many developing nations are on the threshold of a truly democratic public life. They managed to guarantee an essential sine qua non: free and fair elections. Zuckerman mentions his beloved Ghana as a case in point – a country where he lived and that he is personally attached to.

Nevertheless, following economist Paul Collier’s intuitions and informed by his Ghanaian experience, he wonders if we may not “be seeing a lot of elections in the developing world that are free, fair, and bad” (Zuckerman 2014). By bad elections, he means those where people “vote for a candidate because they expect some personal financial gain or because they see an electoral victory as a victory for their tribe or group” (Zuckerman 2014). As a result, elected officials remain largely unaccountable to the general public and democratic participation is reduced to voting every four years. To some extent, Promise Tracker is an answer to

the question of how people can effectively engage in citizenship between election cycles and hold politicians accountable.

In other words, if we want strong, responsive democracies, we can't just fix electoral systems – we have to fix monitorial systems. And we can't just establish a culture of clean elections, as Ghana has done – we need a culture of monitorial citizenship. (Zuckerman 2014)

In that excerpt Zuckerman reveals his main theoretical inspiration: the concept of monitorial citizenship as described by journalism scholar Michael Schudson at the end of his book *The Good Citizen: a History of American Civic Life*.

Schudson argues that the contemporary “good citizen” is an evolution of the model of the informed citizen that arose in the Progressive Era and that “remains the most cherished ideal in the American voting experience today” (Schudson 1998, 6). Schudson describes the informed citizen as someone “disciplined enough to register, educated enough to read, thinking enough to choose candidates with little or no party guidance, and docile enough to leave many matters to experts” (Schudson 1998, 185). His main duty is to wisely elect political officials every four years and let them do their job.

Notwithstanding Schudson's criticism of the informed citizen model and its reductionist emphasis on rational elections, he recognizes that an alternative model that requires all-encompassing and perennial commitment to political action is also unrealistic and unsustainable in the long run. Most people are unconcerned about most issues most of the time and they have the right to be so. As a more balanced approach that reconciles political engagement with selective attention, he proposes the model of the monitorial citizen.

I would propose that the obligation of citizens to know enough to participate intelligently in governmental affairs be understood as a monitorial obligation. Citizens can be monitorial rather than informed. Monitorial citizens scan (rather than read) the informational environment in a way so that they may be alerted on a very wide variety of issues for a very variety of ends and may be mobilized around those issues in a large variety of ways. (Schudson 1998, 310)

Schudson had the traditional media in mind when he wrote that paragraph. A few lines below, he equates “scanning the informational environment” with “scanning the headlines.” He goes further to say that “print journalists regularly criticize broadcast media for being only a headline service, but a headline service is what, in the first instance, citizens require” (Schudson 1998, 310). Schudson’s optimism about the role of broadcast media in civic life was already apparent in his public debate with political scientist Robert Putnam two years earlier in the pages of *The American Prospect*.

Those series of articles on America’s civil and philanthropic institutions – significantly titled *The Tocqueville Files* – started with Putnam gloomy diagnosis that “the culprit [for the disappearance of civic life in America] is television” (Putnam 1996). While newspapers increase social cohesion, Putnam argues, “each hour spent viewing television is associated with less social trust and less group membership.”

Schudson challenges the very premise of Putnam’s argument. He poses a provocative question at the title: “What if civic life didn’t die?” (Schudson 1996) For him, “if we look more carefully at the history of civic participation [...], we would have to abandon the rhetoric of decline” and “could not convict TV of turning off civic involvement.”

Obviously, new media was totally out of the picture when Schudson debated with Putnam. However, the journalism scholar left the seeds for Zuckerman to reap when he wrote

that “the monitorial citizen engages in environmental surveillance more than information-gathering” (Schudson 1998, 311). The idea of “environmental surveillance” fits well with contemporary use of mobile technology. A cell phone is a sensor, a camera, and a GPS close at hand. And the current pervasiveness of the technology can also help citizens, paraphrasing Schudson’s words, to always “keep an eye on the scene.”

The monitorial citizen is not an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else. Citizenship during a particular political season may be for many people much less intense than in the era of parties, but citizenship now is a year-round and day-long activity, as it was only rarely in the past. (Schudson 1998, 311)

Zuckerman conceived Promise Tracker as a tool to promote this sustainable commitment between election cycles. He had two countries in mind: Kenya and Brazil. Historically, he had been connected to the African continent for decades and had many good contacts on the ground in Kenya. At the same time, a few Brazilian institutions had sponsored the MIT Media Lab – the house of the MIT Center for Civic Media – and there was a desire to pay back the support and deepen the ties with Brazil. A variety of political and social factors contributed to the final decision to conduct the first workshops in Brazil, but one reason was paramount: a new legal framework that started to be enacted in many Brazilian cities to hold politicians accountable for their campaign promises.

### **3 Why Tocqueville?**

Putnam’s argument that civic life is disappearing in America has explicit Tocquevillian roots. In the first paragraphs of his seminal study, he quotes Tocqueville several times (Putnam

1995). In the third paragraph, for instance, he praises the following Tocquevillian depiction of the diverse associational environment in America during the 1830's:

Americans of all ages, of all conditions, of all minds, constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which they all take part, but also they have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, intellectual, serious ones, useless ones, very general and very particular ones, immense and very small ones. [...] There is nothing, in my opinion, which merits our attention more than the intellectual and moral associations of America. (Tocqueville 2012, 896-902)

In his response, Schudson concedes that the signs of civic vitality he can adduce to contradict Putnam do not fit in a “Tocquevillian democracy” (Schudson 1996), but that does not trouble him since “the citizen may be able to influence government more satisfactorily with the annual membership in Sierra Club or the National Rifle Association than by attending the local club luncheons” (Schudson 1996).

Sure enough, there is a seeming irony in the fact that this paper resorts to Tocqueville to support Schudson’s monitorial citizenship. Schudson does not share Putnam’s nostalgia for Tocqueville’s America nor believes in an idyllic civic past. However, it is fair to say that Schudson, Putnam, and Tocqueville agree in one essential premise: a vibrant civil society is essential for the health of democracy. Such common ground is the cornerstone for the next sections.

Another objection to bringing Tocqueville in support not only of Schudson’s monitorial citizenship but also of its incarnation in a contemporary MIT project is the incommensurable differences between 18<sup>th</sup>-Century United States – the backdrop of *Democracy in America* – and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Brazil – the test bed for Promise Tracker.



However, as Wolin (2003) reminds us, Tocqueville's theory transcends his experiences in America. In an age of rampant discontinuities, Tocqueville was trying to recognize the underlying coherence of diverse sociopolitical phenomena in both sides of the Atlantic. As theoretical as his project might sound, it aims at a very practical outcome: nothing less than "the revival of the political." (Wolin 2003, 5)

Tocqueville claimed to have witnessed a vibrant political life in America and he devoted his energies, both as a writer and as a politician, to nurturing *la politique*, the political, in France. (Wolin 2003, 6)

Promise Tracker shares the same objective of reviving the political and, therefore, it can hardly find a more congenial mentor in modern political thought than Tocqueville.

Tocqueville might be the last influential theorist who can be said to have truly cared about political life. Few of his contemporaries did. Marx thought of politics as a form of combat. As for John Stuart Mill, he leaves the uncomfortable impression of a philosopher holding his nose as he writes about politics and attempts to remove its stench by having it submit to the deodorizing influence of experts. (Wolin 2003, 5)

Tocqueville's reflections on *la politique* swings between two poles: the heroic and the mundane, the noble deeds of statesmen and the small-scale politics of townships. "The latter politics, confined to the daily concerns of ordinary citizens – roads, schools, taxes – [is] better described as participation than as action" (Wolin 2003, 6).

For obvious reasons, Promise Tracker is situated close to the second pole of politics as participation. It intends to foster a culture of democratic engagement in different communities. Tocqueville himself seemed to favor that pole.

You draw a man out of himself with difficulty in order to interest him in the destiny of the entire State, because he poorly understands the influence that the destiny

of the State can exercise on his fate. But [...] it is by charging citizens with the administration of small affairs [...] that you interest them in the public good and make them see the need that they constantly have for each other in order to produce that good. (Tocqueville 2012, 891-892)

He was the first to point out that democracy is not just a political system but first and foremost a social and cultural practice.

The following sections should be understood as hypotheses about the possible impact of Promise Tracker in promoting a truly democratic culture in Brazil based on Tocqueville's reflections on America.

### **3.1 A remedy for individualism**

Individualism is a key concept that Tocqueville employs to understand social relations in a democracy. Nevertheless, as many other words in the Tocquevillian lexicon, it is not devoid of ambiguity. It would be certainly mistaken to equate individualism with egoism. In his chapter "Of individualism in democratic countries" (Tocqueville 2012, 881), he draws a series of parallelisms that underline the connections but also the distinctions between both terms.

His definition of egoism – "a passionate and exaggerated love of oneself, which leads man to view everything only in terms of himself alone and to prefer himself to everything" – echoes St. Augustine's formulation – "two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self" (Augustine 1871, 47). Elster points out that the Augustinian influence in Tocqueville's ideas "probably owes much to La Rochefoucauld" (Elster 2009, 48), who phrased his reflections in a similar way: "Self-love is the love *of* self, and of all things *for* self. It makes men self-worshippers" (La Rochefoucauld 1902, 135).

In contrast, individualism is a “peaceful sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and to withdraw to the side with his family and his friends” (Tocqueville 2012, 882). Notwithstanding its more benign appearance, individualism is at the heart of the Tocquevillian dystopia that looms democratic societies:

I see an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men who spin around restlessly, in order to gain small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others; his children and his particular friends form for him the entire human species; as for the remainder of his fellow citizens, he is next to them, but he does not see them; he touches them without feeling them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone, and if he still has a family, you can say that at least he no longer has a country. (Tocqueville 2012, 1249-1250)

“Egoism is a vice as old as the world” while “individualism is a recent expression given birth by a new idea” (Tocqueville 2012, 881-882). Nevertheless, he pinpoints the seeds of the latter in the Old Regime, when “each one of the thousand little groups of which French society was composed thought only of itself” (Tocqueville 1998, 162-163). He even describes that archaic individualism as a “collective individualism, which prepared people for the real individualism” that accompanied the aftermath of the French revolution.

The victims of both vices are initially distinct, according to Tocqueville. While “egoism parches the seed of all virtues”, individualism “at first dries up only the source of public virtues” (Tocqueville 2012, 882). Nevertheless, in the long run, individualism gradually mimics and ends up “absorbed into egoism.”

If the Tocquevillian individualism requires “an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men” then it could hardly illuminate the vicissitudes of Brazilian society. Even the most opti-

mistic observer is forced to admit that political, social, or economic equality has never prospered in those lands. Even today, with a Gini index of 52.7, Brazil presents an unfortunate performance. It is the 14<sup>th</sup> country in a world ranking of income inequality.

Nevertheless, some authors identified in Brazilian society that archetypical man for whom “his children and his particular friends form for him the entire human species,” while “his fellow citizens, he is next to them, but he does not see them.” Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, one of the most influential Brazilian historians, coined the term “cordial man” to describe that archetype. The adjective “cordial” is no compliment in this context. It refers to the deep-rooted tendency to not distinguish public and private dimensions in social life or, even more, to subordinate the public to the private dimension. Holanda points out that “blood relations formed in domestic life were always the mandatory models for any of [Brazilian] social groupings” (Holanda 2012, 117). For him, such tendency explains why “the impersonal ideology of democratic liberalism never came naturally to [Brazil]” (Holanda 2012, 129).

All liberal thought can be summed up in Bentham’s famous phrase: “The greatest good for the greatest number.” Clearly, this idea contrasts directly with any kind of human relation based on emotion. All affection between men is perforce based on preference. To love someone is to love him more than others. This one-sided view is frankly adverse to the legal and neutral point of view on which liberalism is based. In this sense, democratic benevolence is [...] the result of a well-defined social behavior that tries to balance selfish tendencies. The humanitarian ideal preached by this benevolence is, at best, paradoxically impersonal; it is based on the idea that love in its highest degree is necessarily love for the greatest number of men, thus subordinating ideals of quality to quantity. (Holanda 2012, 152)

He goes on to say that there is nothing more foreign to the Iberian mindset than “democratic benevolence” based on “impersonal relations.” And that Iberian prejudice is a constitutive element in Brazilian history.

The individualism that Tocqueville sees as a looming threat to democracy in the United States, Holanda describes as the original sin of democracy in Brazil (Oliveira 2008). For that reason, Tocqueville might have some advice on how to remedy it.

Amid the aforementioned distinctions between egoism and individualism, the most intriguing one – and perhaps the most insightful – reads as follows: “egoism is born out of blind instinct; individualism proceeds from an erroneous judgment rather than from a depraved sentiment” (Tocqueville 2012, 882). It seems a vague idea, but has unsuspected consequences. If individualism was as ingrained in human psyche as egoism, the remedy to uproot it would be, in Augustinian terms, personal conversion and asceticism. However, since individualism does not come out of “blind instinct” or “depraved sentiments”, but of an “erroneous judgment”, it can be remedied by the “right judgment” or, in other words, by a rational argument. In fact, that is Tocqueville’s prescription for that ill.

A few pages ahead, he explains “how the Americans combat individualism with free institutions” (Tocqueville 2012, 887) or, in Elster’s happy paraphrase, “born of equality, individualism is neutralized by liberty” (Elster 2009, 57). In practical terms, Tocqueville argues that “from the moment when common affairs are treated together, each man notices that he is not as independent of his fellows as he first imagined, and that, to gain their support, he must often lend them his help” (Tocqueville 2012, 889).

As a sort of social miscalculation, individualism can be overcome by experiences that show the radical insufficiency of individual efforts. Circumstances that help citizens realize their interdependence can play an important role in defeating the disruptive influence of individualism. Promise Tracker provides that kind of experience.

Frequently, during the Promise Tracker workshops, participants were amazed by the unexpected complexity of some problems in their communities – problems that they were often unaware of, from public transportation to waste dumps. However, they did not feel discouraged or overwhelmed because they stood shoulder to shoulder with other community members. That way, they experienced the fulfilment of broadening the boundaries of love outside the family circle, to use Holanda’s turn of phrase.

Many political theorists underline the importance of expanding the horizons of political and civil associations. Cohen and Arato, for instance, argue in explicitly Tocquevillian terms that “without active participation on the part of citizens in egalitarian institutions and civil associations, as well as in politically relevant organizations, there will be no way to maintain the democratic character of the political culture or of social and political institutions” (Cohen and Arato 1992, 19). Promise Tracker is based on that same premise.

### **3.2 Schools of public engagement**

Elster underlines Tocqueville’s role as an original social scientist – in his book’s catchy title, he calls the French thinker the “first social scientist” (Elster 2009). He admits that Tocqueville “is much less of a household name than Marx, Durkheim, or Weber” (Elster 2009, 2), but he attributes the lack of recognition to the questionable tendency of viewing social science “as resting on lawlike theories and aiming at sharp predictions” (Elster 2009, 2). Elster is certainly critical of the rationalist paradigm in sociology. For him, that mindset “led to all sorts of absurd arguments and conclusions, many of them deserving a prominent place in the

cabinet of horrors in the history of science” (Elster 2009, 6). Accordingly, he praises Tocqueville’s preference for describing social mechanisms with broad strokes instead of wrangling over the intricacies of universal laws.

One of such social mechanisms is – in Elster’s terminology – the spillover effect that he defines with a general example: “if a person follows a certain pattern of behavior P in one sphere of his life, X, he will also follow P in sphere Y” (Elster 2009, 13). Elster points out that, for Tocqueville, the most important spillover effect seems to go from politics to civil society (Elster 2009, 18). He quotes the following passage to support his claim:

This constantly recurring agitation that the government of democracy has introduced into the political world passes afterward into civil society. [...] Incontestably the people often direct public affairs very badly; but the people cannot get involved in public affairs without having the circle of their ideas expand, and without seeing their minds emerge from their ordinary routine. [...] Democracy does not give the people the most skillful government, but it does what the most skillful government is often impotent to create; it spreads throughout the social body a restless activity, a superabundant force, an energy that never exists without it. (Tocqueville 2012, 398-399)

Later, Tocqueville would stress the same argument when he described civil and political associations in the United States:

It is within political associations that the Americans of all the states, all minds and all ages, daily acquire the general taste for association and become familiar with its use. There they see each other in great number, talk together, understand each other and become active together in all sorts of enterprises. They then carry into civil life the notions that they have acquired in this way and make them serve a thousand uses. (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* 2012, 916)

If we translated Tocqueville’s point into contemporary terms, we would probably say that political associations promote their participants’ social capital. Social capital has become a disputed term since it gained currency in the late seventies. Some authors define it as the

level of trust in a community or, in a more technical turn of phrase, “the propensity to play the cooperative solution even if it is not the [Nash] equilibrium” (Paldam 2000, 637). Others adopt an individualistic perspective: “social capital is a person’s social characteristics – including social skills, charisma and the size of his Rolodex – which enables him to reap market and non-market returns from interactions with others” (Glaeser, Laibson e Sacerdote 2000, 4).

Tocqueville’s eulogy of political associations seems to encompass both dimensions of social capital. On the community level, political associations invigorate social bonds and trust. On the individual level, they help citizens to build a set of skills to thrive in society or, in Tocqueville’s metaphor, they “can be considered as great free schools, where all citizens come to learn the general theory of associations” (Tocqueville 2012, 914).

According to the last Legatum Prosperity Index, an annual ranking of national wealth and well-being, Brazil is ranked 65<sup>th</sup> of 142 countries when it comes to social capital, a rather mediocre performance (Legatum Institute 2014). The data is amassed from the Gallup World Poll and assesses self-reported behavior associated to social trust, community engagement, and altruism. It confirms the results of an extensive scientific literature that tries to reconcile the broad formal support to democracy among Brazilians with their skepticism and distrust of fellow citizens and institutions (Costa 2012, Moisés 2008, Moisés e Carneiro 2008).

If participatory councils and civic action networks are the contemporary “great free schools” of political participation in Brazil, Promise Tracker might act as a good teacher of civilized decision-making. Its methodology offers a roadmap to guide discussions that would otherwise derail or decay into sterile finger-pointing. It promotes a dialogue that gradually evolves from the definition of elected officials’ concrete commitments to the design of a data



collection campaign on primary commitments and, finally, a strategy to guarantee the fulfilment of those promises based on the collected data.

Interestingly, Tocqueville foresaw the broader advantages of such discursive paths that are so characteristic of democratic regimes:

[M]an finds it almost as difficult to be inconsistent in his words as he normally finds it to be consistent in his actions. This, to say in passing, brings out one of the great advantages of free governments, an advantage about which you scarcely think. In these governments, it is necessary to talk a great deal. The need to talk forces men to reason, and from speeches a bit of logic is introduced into public affairs. (Tocqueville 2012, 31-32)

If the aforementioned spillover effect can be applied to the Brazilian context, it is reasonable to expect that the outcomes of the Promise Tracker experience will not be restricted to the political sphere. Community leaders and engaged citizens will probably profit from this exercise of public debate and transpose it to different societal settings where they can bear unforeseen economic and entrepreneurial fruits.

### **3.3 A tripartite distinction**

During the Promise Tracker workshops, people with shared interests naturally got together to explore the same set of goals. More often than not, they had already worked together and advocated for those same issues in the community. In some cases, they belonged to formally-constituted groups that supported a myriad of items in the local agenda, from bikers' rights to universal healthcare.

Although participants did not hide their political preferences, most of those groups were not associated to any particular political party. They were genuine civil associations aimed

at improving a concrete aspect of social life. They would certainly interact with political parties to push ahead with their desired reforms, but they would rather remain as independent actors. For those civil associations, the participatory councils were seen as a privileged space to interact with the political establishment and put pressure on it.

In fact, the participatory councils lie at the intersection of the Tocquevillian tripartite distinction among civil society, political society, and the state: the councilors are usually members of local civil associations and both the ruling coalition and the opposition – the two poles of the local political society – often court them to win their support. At the same time, the councilors' opinions ideally inform (and at least respond to) local state policies.

Not every political thinker sees the Tocquevillian tripartite distinction as essential for a fully functioning democracy. Jürgen Habermas, for instance, is skeptical about the role of voluntary associations as “the intermediary bodies required for [...] the establishment of democratic mediation” (Cohen and Arato 1992, 230). Nevertheless, Cohen and Arato suggest that Tocqueville might correct some limitations of Habermas' political theory.

They argue that “the associations of civil society in Tocqueville's theory prepare individuals for the exercise of public power, a task that the [Habermasian] literary public sphere is, on its own, incapable of performing” (Cohen and Arato 1992, 230).

For them, the French thinker presents a solution for the troublesome “relationship between *homme* and *citoyen*”, between social being and citizen, always on the verge of being reduced to the extremes of a “powerless human being” or an “inhuman citizen”. In Tocqueville's view, any “form of self-organization of political society” can only be maintained by “the

protection and development of independent but apolitical forms of solidarity, interaction, and group life” (Cohen and Arato 1992, 38).

In fact, “the relationship between social movements, political parties, and the state has become, in the last decades, one of the main topics of theoretical elaboration and empirical analysis in the study of social movements [in Brazil]” (Silva and Oliveira 2011). Since 2003, when the country came under the rule of a coalition led by the Workers’ Party, the interpenetration of civil society and the state has deepened. Some authors welcome such change as a beneficial collaboration (Silva and Oliveira 2011, Avritzer 2012), while others deem it as promiscuous and detrimental to the independence of civil society and the neutrality of the state (Soares 2013, Santos 2012).

Nevertheless, there is a consensus that civil society always runs the risk of being co-opted by the hegemonic political forces. Accordingly, civil society is the link that must be strengthened in the chain of the tripartite Tocquevillian distinction. Promise Tracker might help with that as long as it provides a method for effectively calling into question the commitment of political parties and elected officials to the priorities of the community.

In São Paulo, for instance, the City Hall publishes a website with the updated status of the plan of goals (São Paulo City Hall 2013). The initiative is laudable, but civil society must have its own instruments for data collection and analysis. Otherwise, the government might exert a disproportional control over the public agenda and the framing of its own achievements. That is exactly the kind of empowerment that Promise Tracker aims to promote.

### 3.4 Compromise

In January 2014, an unexpected impasse clouded the first Promise Tracker's workshop at Sé – the oldest district in São Paulo. As explained above, each neighborhood in the city of São Paulo has participatory councils and the councilors are democratically elected by the local community. In that first workshop, the attendees belonged to different participatory councils in the Sé district. They represented a heterogeneous group of neighborhoods: commercial areas, decadent quarters, gentrified zones etc. As expected, the councilors reflected that diversity: shop owners, college students, community organizers etc.

The councilors from Consolação neighborhood certainly constituted the most cohesive group. All of them belonged to the MTST, a Portuguese acronym for the Homeless Workers' Movement. Consolação has many abandoned buildings and several have been occupied by the MTST. Nevertheless, their preponderance in the local participatory council was not due to a very unlikely support from the 50,000 traditional residents of that neighborhood. Quite the contrary. In order to survive and grow, the movement has employed an aggressive strategy of occupying not only physical infrastructures but also political spaces where they can influence the decision-making process (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Teto 2011). As a matter of fact, they decided to take over some local participatory councils.

Unlike in conventional Brazilian elections, voting for participatory councils in São Paulo is not mandatory (Prefeitura de São Paulo 2013). As a result, voter turnout has been remarkably low and winning all seats in some neighborhoods has been a cinch for the MTST: mere 300 voters from occupied buildings were enough to safeguard hegemony in Consolação neighborhood, for instance.

In that first workshop in Sé, the councilors were discussing which commitments made by the City Hall were deemed as priorities by the different neighborhoods and should therefore be monitored with Promise Tracker. Each group of five or six councilors had a binder with all 123 goals proposed by Mayor Fernando Haddad at the beginning of his term.

After half an hour of debate, the MTST councilors from Consolação decided to voice an uncompromising position: for them, all goals and commitments made by the mayor were pointless. They were not interested in overseeing them, but in turning them upside down. Needless to say, other councilors got impatient with the intransigent stance.

That imbroglio exemplifies another of Tocqueville's aforementioned "social mechanisms" (Elster 2009, 6). According to Tocqueville, in the United States, "the poor man governs" while "the rich have always to fear that [the poor man] will abuse his power against them" (Tocqueville 2012, 394). The French author concludes that such state of affairs paradoxically provides a relative stability because poor men "cannot fail to obey the laws that they have made and from which they profit" and the rich "does not dare to violate it; because of his wealth." Then he states unequivocally the social mechanism: "In general, among civilized nations, only those who have nothing to lose revolt" (Tocqueville 2012, 395).

In that Promise Tracker workshop, councilors from Consolação had in fact very little to lose. Living in abandoned buildings with no tap water or electricity, under the oversight of the police and the constant threat of eviction, they did not feel dependent on current public policies, much less indebted to them. For obvious reasons, they ruled out an outright revolt, but they were unafraid of engendering a gridlock that could paralyze the participatory council.

The other councilors marched to a different drummer. They ardently desired the fulfillment of the mayor's commitments since those promises represented tangible improvements for their communities. It was in their best interest to promote a constructive approach in the participatory council's dealings with City Hall. They also knew that a divided council would impair their ability to influence the local administration.

Tocqueville helps us understand that legitimacy is one of the underlying causes of that impasse. With Europe in mind, he argues that:

[In Europe,] there is hardly any association that does not claim to represent or believe it represents the will of the majority. This claim or this belief prodigiously increases their strength, and serves marvelously to legitimate their actions. (Tocqueville 2012, 311)

America was able to neutralize unreasonable claims of majority representation through universal suffrage because "in countries where universal suffrage is accepted, the majority is never in doubt, because no party can reasonably set itself up as the representative of those who have not voted." As a consequence, all parties are well-disposed to negotiate; "for, if they represented the majority, they would change the law themselves" instead of making concessions and seeking a compromise.

All councilors in Sé acknowledged the aforementioned fact that voter turnout was remarkably low in the elections for participatory councils and they were well aware of the harm that such apathy had in the legitimacy of the participatory councils. No councilor could claim that she represented the majority of her community. In fact, in some neighborhoods, where only three or four voters cast a ballot, a councilor could hardly claim that she represented even a small part of her community.

In that context, it is understandable the MTST's contempt for other councilors' demands. With only a few hundred votes, they had secured a landslide victory in the election for the participatory council. Moreover, they could claim that they represented not just a single neighborhood with 50,000 inhabitants but 670,000 families in São Paulo that are homeless or live in slums (Rede Nossa São Paulo 2013). With nothing to lose and a good moral case on their side, the MTST councilors decided to ignore the mayor's promises and bulldoze their agenda through the participatory council.

In a Promise Tracker workshop, it is not very auspicious when a group seems so wary of democratic values and procedures. The disposition to compromise is one of the system's premises. But can the system itself help users see the importance of that disposition? There is at least one Tocquevillian argument to think so.

For Tocqueville, it is business as usual "when a party gains strength" and "the first idea that comes to its mind" is to bulldoze opponents. Nevertheless, "the idea of persuasion [...] comes later; it arises from experience" (Tocqueville 2012, 310).

It is interesting that Tocqueville situates the conflict in the context of "our inexperience in liberty" (Tocqueville 2012, 310). If he is right, it is just a matter of time – of gaining "experience" – before a less intransigent disposition is brought to the table.

Cohen and Arato also highlight the importance of "experience" in a Tocquevillian fashion. For them, "experience in articulating the political will and in collective decision making is crucial to the reproduction of democracy" (Cohen and Arato 1992, 19). Promise Tracker might offer opportunities to gain that kind of experience.

In fact, in the second day of that workshop, the Promise Tracker team decided to use the system to keep track of the abandoned buildings in the region and of the living conditions in one of the occupations thus leaving aside the mayor's promises and giving in to the MTST's agenda. The experience was useful to sensitize councilors from other neighborhoods about the hardships faced in the occupation: dozens of children, teenagers, and elderly amid filth in stark contrast with empty and decrepit buildings due to real estate speculation. It was also useful to give proofs of good will and empathy to the MTST councilors.

In the third day of the workshop, the animosity seemed to have considerably receded and both sides were more willing to adopt a more understanding and constructive stance. However, it is early to know if those dispositions can have any long-term effect.

### **3.5 An enlightened patriotism**

In the 70s, Brazil was under a military dictatorship. At first, the generals justified the authoritarian rule as a means to save the country from the Communist threat (Mendes 2004). Later, they decided to stay in power to conduct a process of conservative modernization: a gradual shift from an agrarian to an industrial society orchestrated by the State without ruptures or conflicts of any sort (Domingues 2002). The class structure remained largely intact.

The official propaganda tried to mold the national identity, still very malleable by then. About one third of the population was illiterate and half lived in rural or remote areas. Communication infrastructure became a priority. The government feverishly started building highways, railways, and bridges to connect the country. Meanwhile an ambitious telecommunications network began to take shape (de Mendonça 2014).



When the channels of communication became operational, they served to spread the regime's gospel – Brazil is the nation of the future – and to foster the national pride – Brazilians are peaceful, joyous, and creative (Cerri 2002). In 1970, the Brazilian soccer team won the World Cup in Mexico, an early and welcome boost to the regime's morale. It was the first national live broadcast and the first transmission in color (Marczal 2013).

In contrast, the 80s are known as the lost decade. The country experienced hyperinflation, stagnation, and high unemployment rates (L. C. Silva 1992). National hope and pride were converted into bitter cynicism and pessimism. Brazil was a democracy again but there were not many reasons to celebrate. Only in the 90s, after the stabilization of the economy, society started flourishing again with civil society organizations sprouting everywhere (Duriguetto 2008). That was a sign that faith in the future had been restored.

It is tempting to compare those three decades with the three patriotic moments described by Tocqueville. The first one is purely emotional. It has “its source principally in the unthinking disinterested and indefinable sentiment that binds the heart of the man to the places where the man was born” (Tocqueville 2012, 384). It fits well with the affective and chauvinistic propaganda of the 70s.

The second moment is an intermediary one, when citizens realize the hollowness of their previous pride, but are not personally committed with the project of a nation yet.

In the life of peoples, a moment occurs when ancient customs are changed, mores destroyed, beliefs shaken, the prestige of memories has vanished, yet when enlightenment has remained incomplete and political rights poorly guaranteed or limited. Then men no longer see the country except in a weak and doubtful light; [...] and they withdraw into a narrow and unenlightened egoism. These men escape prejudices without recognizing the empire of reason; they have neither the instinctive patriotism of

monarchy, nor the thoughtful patriotism of the republic; but they have stopped between the two, in the middle of confusion and misery. (Tocqueville 2012, 386)

In Brazil, the depressive climate of the 80s resembled that second moment. Tocqueville makes the point that one must leave that stage – “of confusion and misery” – as soon as possible. Since it is impossible to go back to the first stage, the only alternative is to advance to the third moment defined as “rational love of country”.

[It is] less generous, less ardent perhaps [than the first moment], but more fruitful and more durable; this one arises from enlightenment; it develops with the help of laws; it grows with the exercise of rights; and it ends up merging, in a way, with personal interest. A man understands the influence that the well-being of the country has on his own; he knows that the law allows him to contribute to bringing this well-being into being, and he interests himself in the prosperity of his country, first as something useful to him and then as his work. (Tocqueville 2012, 385)

The profusion of civic and political organizations in the 90s bears witness to the democratic fruitfulness of that moment. But how can someone evolve from the second to the third stages? Tocqueville’s answer is that we must “hasten to unite, in the eyes of the people, individual interest and the interest of the country.” (Tocqueville 2012, 386) And he points out that “the most powerful means, and perhaps the only one remaining to us, to interest men in the fate of their country, is to make them participate in its government.” (Tocqueville 2012, 387)

In fact, many people, especially in disenfranchised communities, seem stuck in the second phase of cynicism. After experiencing unemployment and deprivation, they are understandably skeptical about the possibility of a civic bliss. Therefore, in order to renew their faith in democratic institutions, we need to provide opportunities for them to influence the destiny of their political communities.

Promise Tracker can help with that. Arguably, local public goals are easier to connect with personal interest than nationwide policies. Therefore, they are the right locus to introduce a citizen to that “enlightened patriotism” that Tocqueville describes. The process of defining priority commitments and keeping track of them creates a sense of belonging and, even more, of possession. A person might start valuing “his rights as a citizen as his rights as a proprietor, and he takes an interest in the State as in his cottage or in the field that his labors have made fruitful” (Tocqueville 2012, 388).

## 4 Final thoughts

Democratic institutions need time to sink in. They must be “introduced prudently” and left to “mix little by little with the habits” and “gradually merge with the very opinions of the people.” (Tocqueville 2012, 501-502) Any hastily attempt to transplant them elsewhere is deemed to fail because democratic institutions are answers to existing yearnings from society and there is nothing more absurd than an answer to an as yet unasked question. Nonetheless, if democratic institutions develop progressively and consistently, Tocqueville thought, they will “be able to subsist elsewhere than in America.” (Tocqueville 2012, 502)

Paradoxical yearnings for equality and liberty – those that demand democratic institutions in order to be fulfilled – can be heard today in several developing nations. In Brazil, focus of this research paper, there have been heartening signs of institutional maturity – amid undeniable political and economic crises. In the past months, for instance, a handful of construction moguls, bankers, and high-ranking officials were arrested for alleged bribery, an unheard-of denouement in the Brazilian political system (Almeida and Zagaris 2015).

Such signs of institutional maturity, Tocqueville helps us understand it, are external manifestations of a deeper transformation in *Weltanschauung*. For him, democracy is not just another type of government. Several types of government can “emanate from democracy”, the American model being one of them (Tocqueville 2012, 375). Democracy is, first and foremost, a social system rather than a political one: it is a different way of organizing social life, a way that places acute emphasis on equality and is deeply influenced by individualism.

Changes in the material conditions of daily life can significantly alter the social underpinnings of democracy. Among those changes, shifts in information and communication technology (ICT) are of paramount importance. Promise Tracker can be understood as an effort to take advantage of one of those shifts – the widespread use of mobile – to promote democratic participation.

It goes without saying that a mobile app (or any other technological innovation) cannot determine the basic character of democratic life. In order to be useful, the demand for the tool must precede the tool itself. Paraphrasing sociologist Claude Fischer, one can make a counterintuitive case that technology rarely alter ways of life; rather, people use it “to more vigorously pursue their characteristics ways of life” (Fischer 1994, 5). Nevertheless, in places like Brazil, where a new social and political life is already putting down roots, technology might help us solve what Tocqueville considered the “great political problem [...] the organization and the establishment of democracy” (Tocqueville 2012, 504).

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