

Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic

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Abstract

Practically everywhere one looks these days the concept of “civil society” is in vogue. Neo-Tocquevillean scholars argue that civil society plays a role in driving political, social, and even economic outcomes. This new conventional wisdom, however, is flawed. It is simply not true that democratic government is always strengthened, not weakened, when it faces a vigorous civil society. This essay shows how a robust civil society helped scuttle the twentieth century's most critical democratic experiment, Weimar Germany. An important implication of this analysis is that under certain circumstances associationism and the prospects for democratic stability can actually be inversely related. To know when civil society activity will take on oppositional or even antidemocratic tendencies, one needs to ground one's analyses in concrete examinations of political reality. Political scientists should remember that Tocqueville considered Americans' political associations to be as important as their nonpolitical ones, and they should therefore examine more closely the connections between the two under various conditions.