**A Brief Analysis of the Polis in the U.S.**

Source: Leadership Institute for Public Life,

Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good

In the 1830’s the American democratic experiment seemed to be working and it was

of great interest to people around the world, including a Frenchman named Alex de

Tocqueville who came to the US at that time to see what lessons he could learn. The

book he wrote to share those lessons with the world, *Democracy in America*, has long been considered a classic.

In *Democracy in America,* de Tocqueville argues that one of the most critical elements in America’s success was the presence of a strong Civil Sector made up of hundreds of “voluntary associations” – places where people would gather to support each other, discuss the challenges of the day and debate the future they wanted for their community and country. More importantly, Tocqueville argued, those associations – and the strong Civil Sector as a whole – held the Government and Market Sectors in check and made sure that they served the Common Good.

What the Greeks called the Polis – the city-state or public arena – was occupied by three sectors of comparable power. It was that balance – the even legs of a three-legged stool – that made American democracy work.

Think about the Polis today, compared to de Tocqueville’s day. The Government

Sector and Market sector have both grown significantly, and dominate the public arena. This becomes especially clear if we think about this in terms of our self-image in society. Most people in this country think of themselves primarily as “consumers”. Even in the relationship with the Government Sector most people have a consumer orientation – that of “taxpayer” or “recipient” of goods and services. Politicians even refer to “voters” as their customers.

The concept of “citizen” – which demands ongoing engagement with and responsibility for public affairs – has largely faded from our collective consciousness. Very few people these days really think of themselves as citizens. The values and practices of citizenship – we believe – are primarily formed by Civil Sector institutions.

The Civil Sector has become fragmented and largely disengaged from the public arena. Many voluntary, non-profit institutions - religious, education, labor, and community organizations – are in survival mode, and are focused inward. Those that are publicly engaged are often working in charitable or service mode, rather than one of citizenship. In addition, these institutions are isolated from each other – in their own silos – severely limiting their ability to influence the market and government sectors.

We do not believe that the legs need to be cut from the Market and Government sectors – they are not evil, and they play critical roles in our society. We do believe, however, that we must restore the balance that Tocqueville saw, by strengthening the Civil Sector.

We are not proposing a return to the past. We seek to build a new balance for our time, by helping our unions, religious institutions, parent-teacher groups and civic institutions to become stronger and better connected, and to reclaim their role in the public arena.

And we believe the cost of inaction to address this imbalance is too great. The result of weak and fragmented civil sector institutions is greater pressures bearing down on families and institutions. Without strong institutions working with them to respond proactively and creatively, individuals and families are left to deal with societal pressures alone, often with limited power and resources.