



## Study Guide on Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*

*Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville is “at once the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America,” according to translators Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (xvii).

Alexis de Tocqueville was born on July 29, 1805. The first volume of *Democracy in America* was published in 1835 and the second volume in 1840. In Volume I he analyzes the origin of self-government, the spread of democracy vis-à-vis laws and governmental structures, and what he termed “equality of conditions.” In Volume II, he emphasizes the influence of democracy upon America with a focus on mores and the lingering effects of democracy.

He originally came to America on the pretext of studying the prison system and ended up observing what he considered a democratic revolution in the United States that was moving towards its “extreme limits.” He understood this movement as providential and writes, “the entire book that you are going to read was written under the pressure of a sort of religious terror in the author’s soul” (Author’s Introduction).

In his nine-month trip in America, he traveled with his friend Gustave de Beaumont to major American cities including: New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Nashville, Memphis, New Orleans, and Buffalo, meanwhile traveling through the Great Lakes to the frontier throughout Michigan and Wisconsin. While there, he met with prominent Americans including John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, Sam Houston and many other less prominent Americans (editor’s introduction).

His method included the use of primary sources “when a point could be established with the aid of written documents...when it was a question of opinions, political usages, or observations of mores I sought the most enlightened men to consult” (Author’s Introduction). Further, if something was what he considered important or dubious, he sought out multiple attestation utilizing more than one source to help verify such claims.

This study guide uses the University of Chicago Press 2002 translation by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Volume, Part, and Chapter are noted for each reference so you can use any edition.

### MAJOR THEMES

*Democracy in America* is one of the first works of sociology versus history as one might see in Thucydides or political theory as one might find in Cicero or Machiavelli. Tocqueville emphasizes democracy as a social condition rather than a system of government. He does examine the Federalism system of government briefly in *Democracy in America*, however, his emphasis on democracy remains focused on its social nature of democracy, particularly in Volume II.



### **Equality of Conditions**

Tocqueville begins his work by highlighting an idea he says permeates the entirety of American society, namely, “equality of conditions.” He writes:

Among the new objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, none struck my eye more vividly than *the equality of conditions*. I discovered without difficulty the enormous influence that this primary fact exerts on the course of society; it gives a certain direction to public spirit, a certain turn to the laws, new maxims to those who govern, and particular habits to the governed...[Equality of conditions] creates opinions, gives birth to sentiments, suggests usages, and modifies everything it does not produce (Author’s Introduction).

Equality of conditions is ubiquitous and impacts every aspect of American society including its: politics, education, economics, social mores, workplace activity, and even family structure according to the author.

As a result of what he saw as a universal spread of democracy, Tocqueville writes that “a new political science is needed for a world altogether new” to “instruct democracy, if possible to reanimate its beliefs, to purify its mores, to regulate its movements...” (Author’s Introduction). What would instructing democracy look like practically? How might it be accomplished on Tocqueville’s view?

He notes his primary interest in writing this text was not in America but in democracy as a social condition. However, since the United States of America was such a young country, he could better understand democracy itself through seeing the origins of America. Consider the following passage:

“I confess that in America I saw more than America; I sought there an image of democracy itself, of its penchants, its character, its prejudices, its passions; I wanted to become acquainted with it if only to know what we ought to hope or most fear from it” (Author’s Introduction). What does Tocqueville mean by writing “in America I saw more than America?”

### **Two goals in writing *Democracy in America***

Tocqueville then informs the reader he wrote *Democracy in America* with two particular goals in mind:

In Volume I he discusses the implications of democracy left to its own devices without any guidance. He emphasizes the laws and democracy as operating within a system of government in this first Volume. He writes that he “tried to show the direction that democracy, left in America to its penchants and abandoned almost without restraint to its instincts, has naturally given to the laws, the course it has imposed on the government, and in general, the power it has obtained over affairs” (Author’s Introduction). Further, it is in Volume I he warns of the “Tyranny of the Majority.”

Volume II covers the impact democracy has had on American society and is intended to “paint the influence that equality of conditions and government by democracy in America exert on civil society, on habits, ideas, and mores...” (Author’s Introduction). For example, he writes that in a democracy “as citizens become more equal and alike, the penchant of each to believe blindly a certain man or class diminishes. The disposition to believe the mass is augmented, and more and more it is opinion that leads the world” (Volume II, Part 1, Ch. 2). Instead of deferring



to the opinion of a few, the democratic society tends to accept the opinion of the many. This second Volume emphasizes the societal impact of democracy on its citizens.

**The beginning of American society**

To truly understand any society, Tocqueville wrote one must go back to the beginning of that society for “the man is so to speak a whole in the swaddling clothes of his cradles” (Volume I Part 2 Ch. 2). Because of the relatively young age of America, someone could, like Tocqueville, study America in its infancy and have a better grasp of its national character. He writes, “America is the only country where one has been able to witness the natural and tranquil developments of a society, and where it has been possible to specify the influence exerted by the point of departure on the future of states” (Volume I Part 1 Ch. 2). This contrasts with European peoples whose national character was already well established. It is this point of departure as Tocqueville describes it that is the key to understanding his entire work.

He notes two principal offshoots of the Anglo-American family – one found in the American South and the other in the American North, the latter primarily originating in New England and spreading out to the entire United States of America.

Regarding the character of the South, Tocqueville noted the impact it had on the region, writing the institution of slavery exerted “an immense influence on the character, the laws, and the whole future of the South. Slavery, as we shall explain later, dishonors work; it introduces idleness into society, and with it, ignorance and haughtiness, poverty and luxury. It enervates the forces of the intellect and puts human activity to sleep. The influence of slavery combined with the English character, explains the mores and social state of the South” (Vol. I Part 1 Ch. 2).

Conversely, he notes the founding of New England represented something singular and original – “the emigrants who came to settle on the shores of New England all belonged to the well-to-do classes from the mother country” who did not leave their home country out of necessity, for wealth, or to improve their situations. He notes they left the Old World because “they wanted to make an idea triumph” (Vol. I Part 1 Ch. 2). These are not mere adventure seekers according to Tocqueville but “the seed of a great people that God comes to deposit from his hands onto a predestined land” (Vol. I Part 1 Ch. 2).

**The beginning of American society – the city**

Above all, it is the idea of local control, or the rise and development of “the township” [cities] that for Tocqueville “forms the principle and the life of American freedom...In America, on the contrary, one can say that the township had been organized before the country, the county before the state, the state before the Union” (Vol. I Part 1 Ch. 2). It was not the federal government that came first in America but cities and towns. Thus, to understand America, one must start at the beginning – with city government and the modern term of “local control.”

Tocqueville emphasizes that in order to understand a national character of a people group, one must examine the beginning of that society. He notes there is one distinctive characteristic that dominates all others regarding the social state of Anglo-Americans, namely, that it is democratic. He writes, “it has had this [democratic] character since the birth of the colonies; it has it even more in our day” (Vol. I Part 1 Ch. 3). One of the consequences of such a social state according to Tocqueville is that it



...reduces men to preferring equality in servitude to inequality in freedom. It is not that peoples whose social state is democratic naturally scorns freedom; on the contrary, they have an instinctive taste for it. But freedom is not the principal and continuous object of their desire; what they love with an eternal love is equality, they dash toward freedom with a rapid impulse and sudden efforts, and if they miss the goal they resign themselves; but nothing can satisfy them without equality, and they would sooner consent to perish than to lose it (Vol. I Part 1 Ch. 3).

What does love of equality versus love of freedom look like in practice? How can one tell the difference?

### **The dogma of the sovereignty of the people**

It is out of the township that the dogma of the sovereignty of the people emerged according to the author. Consider the following quote:

When one wants to speak of the political laws of the United States, it is always with the dogma of the sovereignty of the people that one must begin...In America, the principle of the sovereignty of the people is not hidden or sterile as in certain nations; it is recognized by mores, proclaimed by laws; it spreads with freedom and reaches its final consequences without obstacle (Vol. I Part 1 Ch. 4).

He writes that this concept was found in America from its inception as it was the “generative principle of most of the English colonies of America” (Vol. I Part 1 Ch. 4). This principle originated in cities and the idea of democracy became dogmatic. He continues, “The American Revolution broke out. The dogma of the sovereignty of the people came out from the township and took hold of the government; all classes committed themselves to its cause; they did combat and they triumphed in its name; it became the law of laws” (Vol. I Part 1 Ch. 4).

Earlier, Tocqueville noted the inevitability of a democratic revolution and therefore the best one can hope for is to instruct democracy. Thus, were the Americans able to instruct democracy? If so, how?

What is the best education for a citizen in a democracy according to Tocqueville? Civic participation. This includes jury duty, joining an association, writing to the local paper, and more.

### **The jury**

Tocqueville argues the jury is the best institution for a country of free people. He begins by defining what a jury is. He writes, “I understand by a jury a certain number of citizens taken at random and temporarily vested with the right to judge” (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 8). Consider the following quotes from Tocqueville regarding juries:

“The jury, and above all the civil jury, serves to give to the minds of all citizens a part of the habits of mind of the judge; and these habits are precisely those that best prepare the people to be free” (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 8).

The jury teaches each man not to recoil before responsibility for his own acts – a virile disposition without which there is no political virtue. It vests in each citizen a sort of magistracy; it makes all feel that they have duties toward society to fulfill and that they enter into its government. In forcing men to occupy themselves with something other than their own affairs, it combats individual selfishness, which is like the blight of societies. The jury serves incredibly to form the judgment and to augment the natural enlightenment of the people. There, in my opinion, is its greatest advantage. One ought to consider it as a school, free of charge



and always open, where each juror comes to be instructed in his rights, where he enters into daily communication with the most instructed and most enlightened members of the elevated classes, where the laws are taught to him in a practical manner and are put within reach of his intelligence by the efforts of the attorneys, the advice of the judge, and the very passions of the parties. I think that the practical intelligence and good political sense of the Americans must principally be attributed to the long use that they have made of the jury in civil matters (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 8).

### **Freedom of the Press**

While not an unabashed proponent of the press, he does prefer the necessity of a free press. Consider the following quote about the press in America. "Freedom of the press makes its power felt not only over political opinions, but also over all opinions of men. It modifies not only laws, but mores...I love it out of consideration for the evils it prevents much more than for the good it does" (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 3).

### **Political Associations**

Tocqueville defined an association as a group which shares the same opinion and cooperates to have that opinion prevail. It too is necessary to "instruct democracy." Consider the following quote:

In our time, freedom of association has become a necessary guarantee against the tyranny of the majority. In the United States, once a party has become dominant, all public power passes into its hands; its particular friends occupy all the posts and all organized forces are at its disposal...The omnipotence of the majority appears to me such a great peril for the American republics that the dangerous means used to limit it seem to me even a good (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 4).

### **What democracy produces**

Consider the following quote on what Tocqueville says democracy produces:

...if it seems to you useful to turn the intellectual and moral activity of man to the necessities of material life and to employ it in producing well being; if reason appears to you to be more profitable to men than genius; if your object is not to create heroic virtues but peaceful habits; if you would rather see vices than crimes, and if you prefer to find fewer great actions on condition that you will encounter fewer enormities; if instead of acting within a brilliant society it is enough for you to live in the midst of a prosperous society; if, finally, the principal object of a government, according to you, is not to give the most force or the most glory possible to the entire body of the nation, but to procure the most well-being for each of the individuals who compose it and to have each avoid the most misery, then equalize conditions and constitute the government of a democracy (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 6).

### **Tyranny of the majority**

Tocqueville was very concerned about what he termed the tyranny of the majority. Consider the following quotes:

What I most reproach in democratic government, as it has been organized in the United States, is not, as many people in Europe claim, its weakness, but on the contrary, its irresistible force. And what is most



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repugnant to me in America is not the extreme freedom that reigns there, it is the lack of a guarantee against tyranny (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 7).

“I do not know any country where, in general, less independence of mind, and genuine freedom of discussion reign than in America” (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 7).

In America the majority draws a formidable circle around thought. Inside those limits, the writer is free; but unhappiness awaits him if he dares to leave them. It is not that he has to fear an auto-da-fe, but he is the butt of mortifications of all kinds and of persecutions every day. A political career is closed to him: he has offended the only power that has the capacity to open it up. Everything is refused him, even glory. Before publishing his opinions, he believed he had partisans; it seems to him that he no longer has any now that he has uncovered himself to all; for those who blame him express themselves openly, and those who think like him, without having his courage, keep silent and move away. He yields, he finally bends under the effort of each day and returns to silence as if he felt remorse for having spoken the truth (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 7).

Princes had so to speak made violence material; democratic republics in our day have rendered it just as intellectual as the human will that it wants to constrain. Under the absolute government of one alone, despotism struck the body crudely, so as to reach the soul; and the soul, escaping from those blows, rose gloriously above it; but in democratic republics, tyranny does not proceed in this way; it leaves the body and goes straight for the soul. The master no longer says to it: You shall think as I do or you shall die; he says: You are free not to think as I do; your life, your goods, everything remains to you; but from this day on, you are a stranger among us. You shall keep your privileges in the city, but they will become useless to you; for if you crave the vote [choice] of your fellow citizens, they will not grant it to you, and if you demand only their esteem, they will still pretend to refuse it to you. You shall remain among men, but you shall lose your rights of humanity. When you approach those like you, they shall flee you as being impure; and those who believe in your innocence, even they shall abandon you, for one would flee them in their turn. Go in peace, I leave you your life, but I leave it to you worse than death (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 7).

This, according to Tocqueville, is why America does not have great writers. He says, “If America has not yet had great writers, we ought not to seek the reasons for this elsewhere: no literary genius exists without freedom of mind, and there is no freedom of mind in America” (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 7).

Further, he considers the same state for politicians in America. He writes, “Among the immense crowd that flocks to a political career in the United States, I have seen few men indeed who show that virile candor, that manly independence of thought, that often distinguished Americans in previous times and that, everywhere it is found, forms the salient feature of great characters” (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 7).

“If freedom is lost in America, one will have to blame the omnipotence of the majority that will have brought minorities to despair and have forced them to make an appeal to material force. One will then see anarchy, but it will have come as a consequence of despotism” (Vol. I Part 2 Ch. 7).

Volume II of *Democracy in America* covers the impact democracy has had on American society including: civil society, habits, ideas, and mores. Now that the author has developed the impact equality of conditions has had on the laws



and structures in a society, he now emphasizes the ubiquitous and ongoing impact this democratizing approach has had on American society.

Consider the following quotes by Tocqueville:

### **The Philosophic Method of the Americans**

I think there is no country in the civilized world where they are less occupied with philosophy than the United States. The Americans have no philosophic school of their own, and they worry very little about all those that divide Europe; they hardly know their names...in most of the operations of the mind, each American calls only on the individual effort of his reason. America is therefore the one country in the world where the precepts of Descartes are least studied and best followed... (Vol. II Part 1 Ch. 1).

I think that democratic peoples have a natural taste for freedom; left to themselves they seek it, they love it, and they will see themselves parted from it only with sorrow. But for equality they have an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion; they want equality in freedom, and, if they cannot get it, they still want it in slavery. They will tolerate poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not tolerate aristocracy (Vol. II Part 2 Ch. 2).

### **Soft despotism**

Tocqueville uses the term “soft despotism” to refer to democracy as it is found in the United States of America. Consider the following quotes:

“It seems to me that if despotism came to be established in the democratic nations of our day, it would have other characteristics: it would be more extensive and milder, and it would degrade men without tormenting them” (Vol. II Part 4 Ch. 6).

Above these an immense tutelary power is elevated, which alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyments and watching over their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like that, it had for its object to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary, it seeks only to keep them fixed irrevocably in childhood; it likes citizens to enjoy themselves provided that they think only of enjoying themselves. It willingly works for their happiness; but it wants to be the unique agent and sole arbiter of that; it provides for their security, foresees and secures their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, regulates their estates, divides their inheritances; can it not take away from them entirely the trouble of thinking and the pain of living? (Vol. II Part 4 Ch. 6).

Thus, after taking each individual by turns in its powerful hands and kneading him as it likes, the sovereign extends its arms over society as a whole; it covers its surface with a network of small, complicated, painstaking, uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot clear a way to surpass the crowd; it does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and directs them; it rarely forces one to act, but it constantly opposes itself to one's acting; it does not destroy, it prevents things from being born; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes, and finally



reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd (Vol. II Part 4 Ch. 6).

One might say that sovereigns in our time seek only to make great things with men. I should want them to think a little more of making great men; to attach less value to the work and more to the worker, and to remember constantly that a nation cannot long remain strong when each man in it is individually weak, and that neither social forms nor political schemes have yet been found that can make a people energetic by composing it of pusillanimous and soft citizens (Vol. II Part 4 Ch. 7).

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What kind of a work does *Democracy in America* seem to be? Is it history like Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*? Is it political philosophy like Machiavelli's *The Prince*? Or is it something new?
2. How does Tocqueville's method compare with that of other authors?
3. Why does Tocqueville title his work *Democracy in America* rather than "American Democracy?"
4. What does Tocqueville mean in his Introduction when he says there is a need to "instruct democracy?" Why does democracy need instruction?
5. What are the primary advantages and disadvantages of democracy, on Tocqueville's view?
6. What role does equality of condition play in the formation of the American spirit?
7. How does Tocqueville speak of political parties, freedom of the press, and political associations? Are they related on his view? How do they help us to understand American political life?
8. Which is worse, according to Tocqueville, the tyranny of the majority or the unrestrained liberty of association? Why?
9. How do voluntary associations prevent tyranny from increasing as equality increases?
10. What would produce tyranny? Could democracy produce despotism, according to Tocqueville?
11. What must aristocratic countries do in a democratic age, according to Tocqueville?
12. Why does Tocqueville maintain that a new political science is needed for our democratic age? What is the new political science? Has human nature changed?
13. What does Tocqueville mean by tyranny of the majority?





14. To what extent is such tyranny the result of laws or mores?
15. What does Tocqueville mean by mores?
16. How prominent a danger is such tyranny today?
17. Why does Tocqueville say that Americans are more attached to equality than liberty?
18. What is the doctrine of self-interest and what role does it play in American democratic life?
19. What is "soft despotism," and is it better or worse than other forms of despotism?
20. Is it better to live under a tyranny or within a country that has soft despotism permeating it?