



READING GUIDE
Alexis de Tocqueville's
Democracy in America

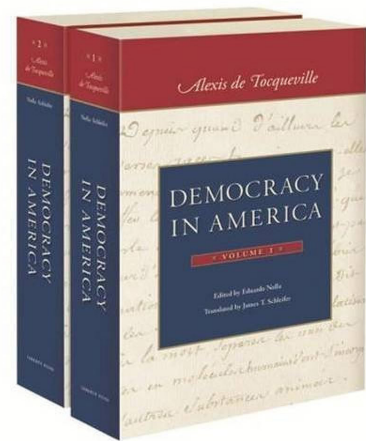
READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC ONE | AUGUST

Alexis de Tocqueville, the Man and His Times

Tocqueville based his classic work describing American political and social culture on observations he made of the United States during an extensive trip through the country between May 1831 and February 1832. He made the trip with his friend, Gustave de Beaumont, in an official capacity studying prison reform in New York and Pennsylvania. Yet the pair were also keenly interested in the career of the young American experiment in republican democracy. Tocqueville and Beaumont went on to produce a co-authored work on American prisons for the French government, in fulfillment of their official commission. Then each wrote separate books of their own, which represented pursuits of their own unique interests in America. Beaumont wrote a novel on American servitude entitled *Marie, Or Slavery in the United States*, which was published in 1835. And Tocqueville wrote his two-volume *Democracy in America*—the first volume was published in 1835, and the second in 1840.



Tocqueville was interested in the fact that America, like France, had undergone a revolution. But unlike France, the United States enjoyed political and social stability since their revolution, along with territorial and economic advancement. France since 1789 had languished under the tyrannies of the Directory, the empire of Napoleon, and the Bourbon restoration of 1815. The French people also suffered under the Reign of Terror, the defeat of Napoleon and the stripping of its European empire by the Congress of Vienna, and the July Revolution of 1830. Tocqueville wanted to see what his French countrymen could learn from Americans' liberal experiment in order that France might break out of cycles of instability, and achieve a democratic order that fostered liberty rather than tyranny.

READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC TWO | AUGUST



Democracy in America
Vol. 1, pp. 3-97

Equality of Conditions and America's National Point of Departure

Tocqueville begins the book in the introduction by immediately advancing the central and unifying point of the work: equality of conditions marked every feature of American politics, religion, economics, and society.

How did Tocqueville understand the meaning of equality of conditions?

How did Tocqueville trace the historical development of equality of conditions?

What was the purpose of Tocqueville's book?

Tocqueville makes a somewhat strange turn from the introduction to the first chapter—he goes straight into a description of American geography. One might imagine that a work of political theory would not include a consideration of geography, but our author thought geography essential to appreciating American democracy.

What was the relation between geography and equality of conditions?

Why did Tocqueville begin his work with such a comprehensive description of the physical features of the United States?

As you read, you will see that Tocqueville has a specific “point of departure.”

What is that, and what did Tocqueville mean by this?

How does Tocqueville's point of departure help you understand more fully the significance of equality of conditions to American culture?

READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC THREE | SEPTEMBER



Democracy in America
Vol. 1, pp. 98-166

Public Spirit and the School of Democracy

Tocqueville understood that in America, democracy begins at the bottom of society, at the most local level, and then works its way up from the townships, to the counties, to the states, and finally to the national levels. Democracy does not filter down from the national government to the local level. Most importantly, people learn the practice of democracy best at the local level, where the issues are immediate, the responsibilities of local leaders relatively small, and the terms of office short. As leaders learn how to represent the interests of the people closest to them, they take their lessons upward as they progress to state, and later national positions of leadership. Thus, democracy moves upward, and elected leaders learn the practice of democracy best at the local level.

How did Tocqueville see this progression from the township to the state level?

When Tocqueville talks about centralization, what does he mean?

How have the townships and counties maintained independence against the threat of administrative centralization?

And how does the patriotism of Americans counter the tendency of centralization in a democracy?

READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC FOUR | SEPTEMBER



Democracy in America
Vol. 1, pp. 167-234, 244-276

Is America a Republic or a Democracy?

Tocqueville was a lawyer and a judge in his native France, as was his travel companion Beaumont. It is no surprise then, that Tocqueville would have special interest in the judicial life of the Americans.

What feature of the American judiciary distinguished it from other countries?

And what was the source of this unique feature?

Finally, how did this feature protect against tyrannical tendencies of a democracy?

We often hear people protest that America is a republic, not a democracy.

As you read Tocqueville's considerations of the Federal Constitution, where do you see monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic styles of governance?

What is the difference between republican governance, and democratic?

What, for Tocqueville, is the litmus test determining whether a government is ultimately democratic?

Finally, when considering the Constitution:

How did it develop, and could it have developed anywhere else but America? Why?

What unique advantages do Americans have in their fitting the Constitution to their particular political and social situation?

READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC FIVE | OCTOBER



Democracy in America
Vol. 1, pp. 277-332, 356-372

The Role of Speech in a Democracy

In this section, we have further consideration on popular sovereignty, but also a discussion on political parties, freedom of the press, voluntary associations, and a collection of issues that people face in the day-to-day administration of American democracy. While it may seem that Tocqueville has a collection here of unrelated matters, there is a coherence here. Remember that equality of conditions, the sovereignty of the people, the unique history and geography of the United States, and the particular habits of American society all work together to bring about the federal structure that Tocqueville described in his writing on the Constitution.

What are the underlying features that bring coherence to this section?

What, for example, does freedom of the press, political parties, and freedom of association have in common?

What would happen if freedom of the press were curtailed—what effect would that have on the influence of political parties?

Tocqueville is very interested in preserving liberty in a democracy. Democracies tend toward a unique kind of tyranny, but this tendency is not inevitable. Hopefully, you have been able to recognize this idea as a recurring theme in *Democracy in America*.

READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC SIX | OCTOBER



Democracy in America
Vol. 1, pp. 375-478

The Dangers Majorities Pose to Freedom in a Democracy

We have seen how Tocqueville applies the term “public spirit” to Americans.

What does public spirit entail?

What function does public spirit serve?

Is public spirit just a sentiment with no material benefit to society, or is public spirit essential somehow in moving the needle away from tyranny and toward freedom?

The theme of majoritarian tyranny is also salient in *Democracy in America*. Most people think of democracy and liberty as synonymous, but not Tocqueville. Democracy tends toward tyranny, but a unique kind of tyranny.

What are the features of democratic tyranny, as opposed to the tyranny one would expect in a monarchy or an oligarchy?

What do Americans in particular have to fear from majoritarian tyranny?

Going back to centralization:

How does majoritarian tyranny relate to administrative centralization?

How does Tocqueville’s earlier discussion of centralization relate to his thoughts on majoritarian tyranny?

How do lawyers contribute to the preservation of liberty in American democracy?

Lastly, Tocqueville is keen on the influence of mores on laws in America.

What are mores and what is their source?

What is the significance of American mores?

TOPIC SEVEN | NOVEMBER



Democracy in America
Vol. 1, pp. 478-582

Liberty, Religion, and Race: Reconciling Paradoxes in American Democracy

In the earlier section, and the beginning of this section, we see Tocqueville describe the influence of religion on American society. Even though the United States had no established church, religion was extremely important to American politics, economics, and society.

How did Tocqueville resolve this paradox?

What was his explanation for the success and indispensability of religion in America?

Earlier, we saw Tocqueville make the observation that the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom were in harmony with one another in America, while they were at odds with one another in his native France.

How do we see that harmony in action in America, particularly with regard to the mores and the laws?

Also, in this section, we see Tocqueville break away from his long discussion on American democracy. He turns to the topic of race, specifically what he calls the “three races in America.”

What are Tocqueville’s prognostications concerning the three races?

What paradox might you see in the way that Tocqueville talks about the necessity of religion to freedom alongside the presence of chattel slavery in the American South?

Does Tocqueville have anything to say about the future of American democracy, half-slave and half-free?

READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC EIGHT | NOV./DEC.



Democracy in America
Vol. 1, pp. 582-656

The Prescient Mind of Alexis de Tocqueville

One of the reasons Tocqueville's book is regarded as a timeless classic is that so many of his observations find expression in our own day, as well as in Jacksonian America.

From what you know of American history between 1835 (the year volume one appeared) and 1865, how would you assess Tocqueville's thought on the strength of republican institutions in America?

Would you agree that Tocqueville was uniquely insightful into American political and social culture? Why, or why not?

Do you think Tocqueville is overrated as a prescient mind, or do you regard Tocqueville as something of a prophet?

Speaking of the prophetic insight, Tocqueville never regarded himself as anything like a prophet. He had a high view of human freedom, and did not believe in inevitabilities, or blind fate.

How did Tocqueville relate divine providence—which he clearly did espouse—and human responsibility?

How did he apply this paradox to the conclusion of volume one?

READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC NINE | JANUARY



Democracy in America
Vol. 2, pp. 697-795

Is There Such a Thing as an “American Mind”?

Tocqueville made the observation that Americans were not a philosophical, but a pragmatic, people. Add to this pragmatism the trait of individualism, and you have the American mind. Americans think for themselves based on their own experiences, and are focused on hands-on knowledge rather than abstract ideas. From here, Tocqueville proceeds to draw contrasts between the Americans and their European counterparts, as well as draw conclusions about religious belief in the United States.

Tocqueville’s understanding of the American mind has contributed to idea among many historians that there is no such thing as an “American mind.”

What is your assessment of Tocqueville’s conclusions?

Is there such a thing as an American mind?

What of pantheism? Assess Tocqueville’s conclusion that pantheism is most attractive to democratic societies.

How does this conclusion fit into Tocqueville’s overall flow of thought?

READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC TEN | FEBRUARY



Democracy in America
Vol. 2, pp. 872-938

Individualism, Associations, and Self-Interest Rightly Understood

One of the salient features of *Democracy in America* is Tocqueville's development of the idea of self-interest rightly understood (SIRU).

What did Tocqueville mean in distinguishing ordinary self-interest, or selfishness, from SIRU?

Is it possible to elevate the vice of selfishness to the virtue of SIRU?

Does religion have anything to do with SIRU?

Is there a connection between SIRU and voluntary associations?

What about SIRU and public spirit? In other words, how did Tocqueville understand the way that SIRU can contribute to the common good of society?

Do you agree, or is SIRU simply nothing more than base selfishness?

READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC ELEVEN | FEBRUARY



Democracy in America
Vol. 2, pp. 939-971

Work, Wealth, and Religion

Related to SIRU, Tocqueville considered materialism and wealth in America.

What conditions in America uniquely contribute to the quest for material flourishing?

How does the pervasiveness of religion militate against that tendency among Americans to pursue the almighty dollar?

These are central issues in *Democracy in America*, particularly with regard to the role of religion in a society dominated by equality of conditions.

Follow Tocqueville's logic—what would be entailed in a loss of influence of religion in an equal, democratic society?

Work is another important subject here. Americans recognized a profound dignity in work, in contrast to an aristocratic society like France.

What is the connection between SIRU and honest work in America?

What is the connection between the practical American mind and the way Americans work?

TOPIC TWELVE | MARCH



Democracy in America
Vol. 2, pp. 987-1070

The American Family and the Role of Women in American Democracy

At the end of Book III, Chapter 4, Tocqueville wrote, “The more similar conditions become, the more men exhibit this reciprocal disposition for mutual obligation. In democracies, where great services are scarcely accorded, good offices are rendered constantly. It is rare that a man appears devoted to service, but all are willing to help.” This statement is pregnant with ramifications for the nature of democracy because it speaks to how individuals relate themselves to others within society.

How does this statement fit with his doctrine of SIRU?

How does it fit with his earlier observations about religion and religious pluralism in America?

Moving on then to Tocqueville on the family:

How does equality of conditions affect the place women occupy in society?

Did Tocqueville find that American women were more or less equal than their counterparts in Europe?

How do Tocqueville’s thoughts on the family relate to his earlier conclusions about the power of mores in America?

The connective tissue with the subjects of this section, as with most sections in DiA, is equality of conditions.

READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC THIRTEEN | MARCH



Democracy in America
Vol. 2, pp. 1071-1164

Honor, Patriotism, and Pugnacity Among Americans

Americans have always been deeply interested in what foreigners think of them, their culture, their land, and their customs. This is true today, and it was certainly true in Tocqueville's day.

How did Tocqueville assess American patriotism?

In considering how Americans are debating the nature of patriotism and nationalism, are there any points of application that can advance contemporary dialogue in Tocqueville's thoughts on patriotism?

What differences did Tocqueville find between aristocratic and democratic cultures, particular with regard to ambition, manners, and social diversity?

Equality of conditions also contributes to a society's perspective on wealth acquisition.

Does equality of conditions serve as an impetus or an impediment to variety in a democratic society?

READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC FOURTEEN | APRIL



Democracy in America
Vol. 2, pp. 1191-1285

Freedom and Equality of Conditions: Allies or Enemies?

Tocqueville used the term “revolution” throughout *Democracy in America*, but the term is particularly important as he closed the work.

What did Tocqueville mean by “revolution”?

Was the American Revolution the same thing as the French Revolution?

What revolution did Tocqueville think was occurring in his lifetime, both in America and in Europe?

What did he believe would be the result of the revolution?

Tocqueville is often misunderstood as being uncritically admiring of American democracy.

Now that you have read the entirety of the work, what did Tocqueville regard about America’s strengths and weaknesses as a democratic society?

We are moderns, postmoderns even. As moderns, we place a greater emphasis on knowledge and ethics than we do on God and spirituality. This is contrast to the premodern mindset, which generally emphasized God first, then epistemology and ethics.

What has our modern mindset done to the way we think about politics and associations?

How has modernity affected our understanding of freedom, and the distinctions between freedom and democracy?

READING GUIDE

Democracy in America

TOPIC FIFTEEN | MAY



Democracy in America
Vol. 2, pp. 1303-1399

Tocqueville and the American Frontier: A Fortnight in the Wilderness

One of the most fraught topics in US history is the nature and spread of the American frontier. Both Tocqueville and Beaumont had an abiding fascination with the American wilderness. The continent of Europe and the British Isles were covered with human civilization, with isolated islands of wilderness scattered here and there. But the North American continent in 1831 was covered in primeval wilderness, with islands of human civilization scattered here and there. Tocqueville and Beaumont wanted to experience the American wilderness firsthand.

What does this essay contribute to the idea of the American frontier?

Is this essay representative of how Americans thought of the frontier, or is it something of an outlier?

How does reading this essay underscore the nature of historical interpretation?

How does this essay demonstrate the foreignness of the past as compared with our own times?

Also, as you read this essay, look for influences of French Romanticism. The French Romantics emphasized feeling over reason and sublimity over balance in nature. Tocqueville was interested in Romanticism, and specifically in the Romantic thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Do you detect any Romanticism in Tocqueville's writing?



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