

Democracy in America Study Guide

Democracy in America by Alexis De Tocqueville

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Plot Summary

"Democracy in America," by Alexis de Tocqueville, was written following a 9-month long exploratory voyage to the United States back in 1830. In the book, the French author analyzes the political and sociological aspects of the American democratic regime and contrasts his findings with the situation of the people living under the aristocratic regimes of France and England. Tocqueville spends a great deal of time praising the political and legal system of the United States as he tries to sell democracy to his contemporaries in Europe. He also uses his writing to warn of the possible downsides of democracy, such as the potential for extending the principle of equality and turn the democratic regime into a tyranny of the majority. "Democracy in America" remains to this day one of the most important books ever written about the democratic system and its consequences.

America's first Europeans sailed from England in the early 17th century to settle in Virginia in the southern part of the country and in New England in the north. The colonies of the South were populated by gold and silver diggers seeking fortune, while those of New England were mostly filled with Puritan refugees seeking to build a new world based on their rigid religious principles. Both colonies built their political and social systems independently from England and eliminated the rules of aristocracy. The principles of sovereignty of the people, equality of conditions, and liberty that grew out of the colonies of New England were used to establish modern democracy of America.

Following the American Revolution, the principles of democracy were written into laws. Governmental power was distributed between the federal level and the States, resulting in a country where government administration was highly centralized, but where the executive power was distributed among States, county and township governments. Local administrations are elected for limited terms and remain under the control of the people.

Peace is an essential component of freedom; since America is protected from potential invaders by two oceans, it has an enormous advantage over the countries of Europe in establishing and maintaining the freedom of the people. The political parties of America compete for power and rely on two free institutions: the free press and the freedom of association. The free press allows the people to stay informed about the ongoing debates and issues. The freedom of association allows minorities of all types to be heard and to exert pressure on the elected.

The Federal Constitution provides a system of checks and balances between the legislative and executive branches of government at every level. A potential danger exists for democracies to extend the principle of equality of conditions to the point where it turns into a despotic regime. However, the American laws and decentralized political power protect the country from turning democracy into a tyranny of the majority. The people of America submit to the laws of their country, because they recognize that more wisdom exists in the opinion of a number of men than in the opinion of a single one.



Democracy is responsible for a number of the differences between the manners and attitudes of the Americans and that of the typical European citizen. Religion plays an essential role in America, because it maintains the moral values necessary to prevent the social grid from falling apart. Religion and politics do not mix, each occupying its own sphere in the public domain. Americans are generally not interested in philosophy or theoretical science, because they are fundamentally materialists and pragmatic. For similar reasons, their literature is limited in scope and is mostly interested in the passions and complications of life that can be shared by a majority of readers.

The principle of equality of conditions is very important to the people of America; however, it also presents a clear danger to democracy as it can be used to take away individual freedom. The participation of the people in the political process is essential to the survival of American democracy, because it allows people to feel their dependence on each other. Materialism and individualism are side effects of the democratic system that helped create a new type of aristocracy based on wealth. However, democracy has positive effects on family relationships and on the mutual respects of the individuals.



Volume 1, Chapter 1-5

Volume 1, Chapter 1-5 Summary and Analysis

"Democracy in America," by Alexis de Tocqueville, was written following a 9-month long exploratory voyage to the United States back in 1830. In the book, the French author analyzes the political and sociological aspects of the American democratic regime and contrasts his findings with the situation of the people living under the aristocratic regimes of France and England. Tocqueville spends a great deal of time praising the political and legal system of the United States as he tries to sell democracy to his contemporaries in Europe. He also uses his writing to warn of the possible downsides of democracy, such as the potential for extending the principle of equality and turn the democratic regime into a tyranny of the majority. "Democracy in America" remains to this day one of the most important books ever written about the democratic system and its consequences.

The first colonies of America were established in Virginia in the early 1600s. Since the sole interest of the men who first settled in southern part of the New World was gold and silver digging and ultimately fortune, the colonies attracted mostly men with low moral values. While these first settlers were later augmented by artisans and peasants, their need to control and protect the huge lands led them to establish slavery. The colonies of the northern part of the New World were originally populated by Puritans, a group of English Protestants advocating religious values closer to the original Christian rituals and creed than the one prevalent in the Church of England. Contrary to the Virginians, these settlers were political refugees seeking to establish a base for developing a society according to their mores ("the whole moral and intellectual states of a people"). The communities of New England set the foundation of a democratic society based on their values and education.

In both hemispheres of America, the settlers organized their communities independently from the English government. England's aim was to improve its own economy with the profits from the precious metal trade of the south. The motherland also saw the radicalism of the Puritans as a possible political threat and elected to allow them to rule the colonies of New England on their own terms rather than have them brewing a revolution at home. This explains why, in the communities of the north, the legislators blended the rigid Biblical code revered by the Puritans and the rules enacted by England's monarchy. The result was a set of laws establishing as a rule the participation of the people in the public affairs. The same laws enforced individual freedom in all matters that related to private affairs and trial by jury. The Puritans' religious principles also played an important role in establishing a system of public education. According to these principles, the "devil" feeds on ignorance and education is the best way to keep the mores of the people under control. In the end, the principle of equality of conditions and wealth among the people was written into the laws of the land.



Ultimately, the democratic laws enacted in New England would prevail as the basis of the developing democratic society in the United States. In both colonies however, the aristocratic divisions that presided over the social divide over most of Europe never had a foothold in America, simply because the conditions for this social classification were absent in the first place. In the southern colonies, merchants, peasants and artisans eventually joined the original gold and silver diggers. There was never any inherent aristocratic privilege, as everything was divided solely between rich landowners and their slaves. Hence, the laws were established to consolidate and protect the social divisions along the line of property. In the northern colonies, people, including immigrants, were respected on the basis of their virtues and intellect. Public education insured that nearly any of the citizens was totally ignorant. Conversely, none was highly educated either, causing greater equality among the people and the absence of any aristocratic element in the society.

After the American Revolution, the sovereignty of the people was coded into laws. Voting qualifications were eradicated and equality of conditions became the chief goal of the people. However, this passion for equality can threaten the principles of democracy and lead to the tyranny of the majority.

In America, power is divided between federal and the states, and the latter is the real authority to the people. State power is further divided between township, county and the state itself. The township (e.g., municipal) government is the original and primary source of self-governance by the people in America. Township government is where people exercise their power most directly. In each township, "selectmen" are elected yearly to perform administrative duties. Any citizen can be elected as a township official and called to perform administrative duties. The decisions of those men are entirely based on the principles that are collectively agreed upon. Any change the elected official makes has to be effected by a vote from the people during a town meeting.

In such a system of government, sovereignty flows upward from the people to the State. Individuals are essentially responsible for their own person and free to do whatever they choose in everything that concerns them. The reason "free" people obey the laws that they themselves enabled is that they see obedience as a necessary means of maintaining the union with their peers. The people see obedience as a guarantee for the private sovereignty and freedom of every citizen. Participation in the political process also improves civic education, as it allows the people to see and understand very clearly the roles and rights of every citizen.

In the same way that people are sovereign, townships are also responsible for everything that is affecting them. At the highest level, the federal power is limited to writing laws pertaining to its own affairs, such as foreign relations, and federal taxes and spending. The townships are ultimately responsible for collecting taxes and redistributing the money as required. In short, the sphere of responsibility of every administrative level of government is limited and each of them is subject to the same laws that they are enacting. In America, as opposed to Europe, men do not obey men - they obey justice and laws. Consequently, police officials are almost invisible in the



United States, as everyone gets involved in catching criminals and bringing them to a court of justice.

Tocqueville deploys his arguments along two main lines. The first of these lines opposes equality of conditions and liberty. Here, the author sees equality of conditions among the people as an historical trend in every nation, and freedom as the ultimate yet elusive social target. Due to its nature, freedom cannot be measured but only "felt" by the people. In Tocqueville's perspective, equality and freedom cannot truly exist without the other. However, the social mechanisms that establish and maintain the equality of conditions tend to eat away at the individual and collective freedoms. Equality is a double-edged sword, as it can both enable freedom and ultimately render the whole enterprise useless. As Tocqueville accurately foresaw, the tension between equality and freedom would come to play a major role in the politics of America. This problem shows up in the various positions of today's political parties. Tocqueville insists that in the end, men would have no use for a government that enforces absolute security and equality of means and wealth if by so doing, this same government was to become the master of an individual's movement and liberty.

The second line of Tocqueville's argumentation opposes religion and politics. The author sees religion as a set of principles that establishes a stable moral order where everything is essentially coded, rigid and decided beforehand. Politics, on the other end, deals with the affairs of the people and is bound to remain forever turbulent and uncertain. In these first few chapters, the author shows that this apparent paradox played an important role in establishing the foundations of democracy. Religion and freedom walked hand in hand, because religion needs the guarantees of freedom as much as freedom cannot function without the mores imposed by religion.



Volume 1, Chapter 6-13

Volume 1, Chapter 6-13 Summary and Analysis

In the United States, judicial power has the same scope and limitations as elsewhere in the civilized world. This means that courts can only make a decision on special cases and when it is called upon to challenge a specific right. Like any government official, judges are accountable to the laws they are representing. The American judicial system also holds an unusual political power based on the Constitution. A court is allowed to change the Constitution upon which all the rights are founded. A judge can also refuse to apply a law if he the law is deemed unconstitutional. This system of judicial review, allowing the legislature to keep power of the judicial system in check and vice versa, is a safeguard against tyranny. Generally, American justice is made more efficacious by being applied mildly but evenly.

After the American Revolutionary war, the government defined very precisely the powers that belonged to the Federal domain and the States inherited those that were left out. Thus, the States remained the most important source of power to the people. The government also established the Federal Court in order to maintain the balance of power between the Confederation and the States when the rights of the latter were questioned. As a result, the Federal government's power is highly centralized, but its powers remain limited and its administration decentralized.

Despite its enormous size and as America is protected from the rest of the world by two oceans, the United States has no immediate enemy whose conflicting interests could result in an armed conflict. The country doesn't have a unique capital either; the centers of economical and political power are distributed across the States, making popular uprising a highly improbable event. For these reasons, the United States residents can enjoy the blessings of both a small and a big nation. Like in a small nation, the people hold a greater control of their rights and resources; like citizens of a stronger nation, they enjoy a better protection and a high level of security. It would be difficult for a European nation to maintain a similar confederate form of government, divided and united at the same time. This is because, in the European continent, every nation lives under the constant threat of invasion from neighboring states. Therefore, the political elite has to protect its establishment against a people's rebellion.

Political parties are an "evil" but necessary component of a democratic society. Before the American Revolution, there were two great parties in the United States: The Federalist Party, which aimed at restricting the people's power, and the Republican Party, which aimed at extending it. The Federalist Party held power until Jefferson's Republicans were elected, then the Federalist party dissolved by joining the other political factions. The Federalists enabled the governing Republican to incorporate many of their ideas in the Constitution. This helped to tame the negative aspects of democracy. Since then political parties have lost their "greatness" and are only factions in the debates that characterize the American democracy. The "great" political parties,



those that defended principles over private interests, have all but disappeared. The remaining political parties mirror the people's disagreements that they aim to represent. They have much to disagree on shades and details, but little is left to debate on the fundamental issues and principles.

In order to get recognized and elected, political parties of America rely on two important tools of democracy: the printed media and the political associations, both of which are free.

In America, the press is neither stamped nor censored by governing officials. The press is not bound to governmental or political pressures. Tocqueville shows that in a democracy, there seems to be no middle ground for freedom of expression. A democratic system either allows complete freedom of speech and press, or risks annihilating both at the same time. This system of free press is working in America because, in retrospect, the printed media only has a small and somewhat diffuse impact on the people's decisions. Yet the power of the press is second only to the power of the people. No central direction exists for the opinion of the people, as the vast majority of them believe in the same laws they helped to establish in the first place. Contrary to the European press, the American press is generally devoid of in-depth analysis and is limited to a collection of advertisements scattered with superficial reports and discussions.

The right of political association is a concept that sailed from the shores of England along with the first settlers. The immediate advantage of allowing people to associate freely for whatever political purpose they choose is for a government to eliminate secret societies, conspiracies and violent social rebellions. In a democratic system, freedom of association is also a rampart against the tyranny of the majority. By associating with their peers, minorities gain authority and influence against the moral power of the majority through the strength of their number. Political associations have another, indirect advantage: they allow its participants to discover the arguments most susceptible to rally a majority to their cause.

In this section, Tocqueville builds up the argument that he will use systematically throughout his book. The author considers the potential for a tyranny of the majority as the main shortcoming of a democratic society. This kind of tyranny ultimately excludes minorities from power and in so doing, endangers the foundation of democracy itself.

One of the best safeguards against potential tyranny of the majority in the United States is the judicial power. Judges are not elected but rather appointed for a long term. The fact that they are not constantly seeking re-election means that the judges are also more likely to uphold the law of the land; their independence allows them to resist bending to every caprice of the electorate, the way politicians and elected officials often do. On the other end, the inability of the courts to impose penalties makes the whole punishment cycle rather mild, in comparison to the European system. While the author finds that this mildness is more efficient in containing violence and in maintaining unity amongst the people, it also increases the occurrences of relatively mild legislative tyranny.



As provided by the Federal Constitution, the balance between the legislative and executive branches of the government builds another efficient safeguard against tyranny of the majority. Tocqueville argues that in times of peace, the legislature has more power than the president in most areas. The ability of the judicial branches of the government to declare a law unconstitutional also helps in maintaining a basic system of checks and balances. The author hints that the ability for a president to seek re-election for a second term might make him more inclined to give away democratic principles in exchange for the immediate gratification of the whims of the majority.

According to Alexis de Tocqueville, freedom of the press is a sword with two edges: this freedom is an essential tool for maintaining liberty, but it can also inflame the passion of the people into oppressing minority rights. However, the decentralization of the press brought about by its freedom as well as the sheer geographical size of the country, counteracts the potentially harmful consequences of the latter problem. The author applies the same logic when he examines the advantages and dangers of freedom of political association. He points out that what can be seen as an extreme form of freedom in a democracy is, in fact, the best way to counter the dangers of democracy itself. Democracy is protecting itself from its own potential of abuse.



Volume 1, Chapter 14-18

Volume 1, Chapter 14-18 Summary and Analysis

The aristocratic regimes of Europe are typically experts at legislating most efficiently for the good of their country, whereas in comparison, a democratic regime rarely fares better than decent at this task. However, a democracy will not purposely legislate against the good of its majority. If it does, it will likely just as soon correct its course by electing a new administrator. The good of the aristocratic often ends up unintentionally oppressing the people under its governance, whereas a democratic government will enhance the overall conditions of the people it serves, sometimes beyond the original intent of the laws it enacted.

Under a monarchic regime, patriotism is expressed by the pride of the people in the power of their State and hence, their King. However, since political positions and the bulk of the wealth are reserved for the members of an aristocratic minority, this particular sense of patriotism is as volatile as the perceived superiority of the State. In a democracy, the people take special interest in the affairs of its government, as they trust that they are participating in power and its outcome. Hence, the patriotism of the Americans is more akin to cupidity than to a sense of duty or pride.

As a political system, democracy relies on a single principle: The absolute sovereignty of the majority. The majority acquires instant moral authority, in part because its opinion irresistible to every citizen. Part of the reason for this irresistibility is that the people recognize there has to be more intelligence and wisdom in a number of men than in a single individual. The people also instinctively acknowledge that the interest of many is more valuable than that of a privileged few. In reality, according to the author, this does not verify under every circumstance and the majority does not always decide for the best. Yet in America, everyone recognizes the decision and rights of the majority, because even those who are part of a minority hope to one day use this mechanism to its advantage.

Governments typically perish, because they lead their country into a state of anarchy or tyranny. The power of tyranny, whether exercised by a single despot or by a majority of the people in a democracy, does not necessarily require the use of arbitrary power; as arbitrary means may just as well be used for the good of the people without being tyrannical. However, the American democracy gives the majority an absolute power that, in most cases, excludes the use of arbitrary means. Tocqueville argues that this kind of absolute power can in fact, lead to a tyranny worse than that of any despotic governance by a single monarch. For example, under the cover of freedom of expression, Americans have little means of discussing opinions outside the range of those entertained by the majority; freedom of opinion is practically inexistent in the United States. Instead of using brute force the way authoritarian regimes do to coerce and silence the people, the all-powerful democracy use its moral power to simply remove the wish and the will to express a contrary opinion in public.



However, because America is devoid of a unique center of executive power, a democratic government has almost no way to exercise tyrannical authority. The agents in charge of executing the law are distributed among smaller entities such as townships and states, and the central administration has little control over them. Even if an oppressive law was enacted by the central government, it would probably have little effect on the liberty of the people, simply because the law itself would be filtered down by its own means of execution.

In America, lawyers have acquired a unique position in society. These educated individuals are particularly suited for administrative functions because of their ordered habits, their instinct for formalities and their ability to connect ideas that are seemingly incompatible. They are ordinary citizens, yet they are connected to the aristocracy. Their relation to aristocracy is not by birth or by taste like the former, but through their education and personal interest. For these reasons, lawyers are also respected by the people and are often requested to serve in public offices. In a democracy, their qualities (or defaults) serve to counterbalance the spikes in the lawmaking majority's sudden passions, grandiose plans and uncontrollable impatience. They bring reason to the debates through their respect for the old and the traditional; realism through their narrower views of the world; and patience through an often justified procrastination in the course of action. Lawyers turned magistrates also balance the impetuosity of the people by forcing them to be consistent with, and obedient to, their own laws through the power of the Constitution.

In this section, Tocqueville expands on his view of the potential for tyranny of the majority in a democratic system. The author's analysis shows that the American legislation is generally not as efficient as it could be given its intended purpose. In his view, the aristocratic regimes of Europe are doing a better job at enacting laws that benefit the country as a whole. Yet these regimes rest on principles that are essentially setting the conditions of their own demise by concentrating power and wealth in the hands of a few.

Addressing the European political elite, Alexis de Tocqueville makes it very clear that the goal of a democracy is not to create the most brilliant or artistically elevated societies, akin to the ideals of some aristocratic rulers. Democratic regimes will value social intelligence over individual genius, habits of peace over heroism, prosperity over brilliance, and general well-being over the extraordinary wealth of a few. Compared to any aristocratic government ruled by an elite administration, democracy allows for more powerful governance. The resulting society is thus more energetic and productive overall.



Volume 2, Part 1: Chapter 1-12

Volume 2, Part 1: Chapter 1-12 Summary and Analysis

The population of America is typically oblivious to the developments of philosophy. Politically, the New World has never experienced the complete anarchy or even great social disorders that most of the populations of Europe had to endure during their longer history. Due to the conditions inherent to their isolated situation, combined with the generally accepted principle of equality of the people, Americans are not inclined to accept traditional ideas and principles based on the authority of the intellectual elite; they would rather explain everything through human intelligence and leave out the rest to the realm of religion or unexplainable.

Religion provides the people of America with a set of beliefs that goes without justification or explanation. Religion and politics both occupy their own space in the life of Americans, and neither would dare to cross over the line that separates them. Since a man is almost certainly incapable of understanding everything that exists simply through his own reason, the people of America have to rely on authority of a different sort. Democracy provides an authority of its own, replacing the certitudes of the intellectual or political elite with those of the majority. The logic is that if a majority of people believe that an idea is right, then I cannot be wrong in adopting the same idea for myself. Equality amongst the people triggers innovation as much as it induces intellectual passivity.

Even as it keeps from venturing into the political domain, religion participates in keeping the social effects of egalitarianism on a leash. Materialism and egoism, which are part of the moral consequences of a perceived equality of conditions, are usually condemned as sins by Christian religions. Religion beliefs are based on the same principles that established equality of conditions in the first place. However, Christianity would not survive in a democratic environment if it was to wholly condemn comfort and wealth, since the latter have been proven an essential part of life where people are sovereign. This is why religion in America plays a vital role in moderating the tendency of the people to act with cupidity. For that purpose, Catholicism is especially well suited to the task, because it provides discipline while supporting unity and equality.

The principle of equality has also created an extraordinary sense of perfectibility in the American people. Equality suggests that everything can be improved upon, starting with an individual's own conditions. In America, social and economical progress is seen as having virtually no limit, where growth and wealth can be created at will. This is in sharp contrast with the general opinion of a populace living under aristocratic rules, where everything related to an individual's conditions of living is limited by the conditions at birth.

Religion and the constant drive for personal prosperity seem to be the main barriers to the development of independent arts and science in the United States. However,



democracy itself is not to blame for the virtual absence of either in the American society. The democratic society will come to a point where, once the legislation has clearly established equality as a rule, talent and intellectual power will be considered an efficient way to attain prosperity.

Settlers were not concerned with the theoretical aspects of science, mainly because they were too busy either maintaining and improving their lots or digging for hidden treasures to bother with spending time thinking by themselves. Having the convenience of importing most of their technical knowledge from Europe, the American's only concern was to put it in practice. Democracy itself is a catalyst for constant change; it promotes the spending of energy towards material rather than intellectual tasks. Clearly, immediate gratification appears more profitable to the individual. This presents the democratic society with the obvious danger of forgetting the principles of science. On the other end, democracy does not forbid society from spawning a genius once in awhile. Moreover, the need for greater, less immediate material gratification is driving scientific research for industrial purposes.



Volume 2, Part 1: Chapter 13-21

Volume 2, Part 1: Chapter 13-21 Summary and Analysis

The United States does not produce an important or valuable body of literature on its own. The only kind of literature America produces is of the journalistic type, mainly because this is what the majority is requesting. Americans read either to stay informed, for leisure or for entertainment purposes. The educated individuals read English (European) literature, which has typically little to do with, or say about the American environment. The American writer sees himself as an entrepreneur and writes in order to earn the money necessary to sustain a living.

The youthfulness of the New World, combined with the democratic values and ensuing attitudes, modifies not only the subject of the American literature, but also its source of inspiration. Aristocratic societies make countless intermediaries available between man and God; the aristocratic writer can thus appeal to a number of supernatural forces to explain and drive his subject to countless ends. In a democracy, there are no such intermediaries exists and the supernatural is evicted at the source. The democratic poet sees everyone as equal and is unlikely to take any particular man as a subject to which no one else could identify with. Where aristocrats are busy writing about unique nations and men, the American writer finds poetry in the mundane and manages to include the whole of humankind: The good and bad fortunes, the love, the passions and the doubts that fill the heart of man. The democratic writer might have less to write about, but when he does, he writes about the things that have greater importance to most.

The drawback of this approach to literature and poetry is that whenever the subject expands outside the boundaries of the individual, the American poet will tend to explode the subject out of proportion, and through his imagination make it appear so grand that it becomes useless. American literature is made of the two extremes of the imagination: Either the writer produces delve into the most mundane of subjects, or else it exaggerates its importance and gets lost in the clouds.

The American historian is also affected by the democratic values that he lives in. historians in the United States believe that nations are driven by collective events. He believes that these events are independent of the particulars of the individuals who are part of it. They tend to assign a great cause to every little incident of History, and then elaborate a system to interconnect each of these incidents together. The American historian holds no one in particular responsible for the important events, but rather believes that events are driven by forces that are both independent and irresistible to the masses. The democratic writer assumes that man is powerless and events happen either by Providence or by sheer necessity. It seems indeed a bit of a paradox to deny the free will of man from an historical perspective, when the essence of the society he lives in rests on freedom to decide.



In the first book, Tocqueville's analysis showed that the very nature of the democratic society environment leads Americans to think that everything that is worth explaining around him can be understood through human logic and reason. To the democratic individual, human authority in and by itself is not a valid source of truth. For instance, truth cannot emanate from a King or any other human entity, simply because that person holds power. However, the life span of an individual is too short to allow him to learn everything that should be known about the surrounding world. Tocqueville argues that the democratic individual ends up relying on the only source of reasonable truth that he can substitute to his own reason: The public opinion. Indeed, since the democratic majority is deemed always right, then where a decision needs to be made that individual is just as reasonable to use the opinion of the majority as his own.

The rejection of all external human authority on deciding what is true leads to the acceptance of another, more pervasive form of authority. In other words, the author finds that people often see no reason to make up their own mind on a subject when the majority appears to have already made it for him. This attitude might simplify everyday life, but might also prove quite dangerous. It allows a society to easily slip into oppression and tyranny.



Volume 2, Part 2: Chapter 1-9

Volume 2, Part 2: Chapter 1-9 Summary and Analysis

Tocqueville asserts that even though liberty and equality are intimately linked, they are not to be confounded. For instance, total equality of the people's condition would only be possible in an ideal society where freedom itself is absolute. However, reality is such that no society is ideal. Therefore, in the real world, democracies tend to value equality over liberty. The advantages of an increased equality of social conditions are felt immediately by the people, as in most cases increasing equality means better living conditions and a more even distribution of civil and political rights. On the other end, the dangers posed by the policies that enable a higher equality of social conditions spread over a longer period and the negative outcome might not be easily traced back to its source. Freedom has opposite consequences: The positive effects of liberty are diffused, as freedom is difficult to quantify. Conversely, the negative results of expanded freedom are felt immediately. As a result, the political reflex is for the people to implement equality first in the hope that freedom will follow.

One drawback of equality of social conditions is an increase of individualism. As the people feel they are more equal, they also tend to feel like they more in control of the world that surrounds them. People's individualism leads to isolation that can easily turn into egoism. Isolation increases the danger of tyranny, because it makes the people feel like they do not depend on each other, but rather on the laws and the political power. Tocqueville insists on the importance for the population to exercise its political freedom by participating in the democratic process. Local government allows people to believe depend on each other; democracy counters individualism by insuring that common good is understood as profiting everyone in the community.

Americans' use of political freedom can be found in the civil and political associations that they form. Associations are everywhere in the United States; though freedom of association also exists in England, the power of association is not nearly as widely used in the motherland of the Anglo-Saxon. Political associations combat individualism and egoism by bringing together the feelings and opinions of men who then influence each other. In the political life of America, democratic associations offer an efficient replacement for the powerful individuals of aristocratic regimes.

The decentralization of the governmental administration has multiplied the number of newspapers in America. Newspapers combine with local political association and keep the elected local officials informed of the needs of the people they serve. Citizens are compelled by law to participate in political associations; the newspapers act as catalysts for the opinions and desires of the people. Though political associations exist at the national level, they are much more efficient in combating isolation and individualism at the local level.



Civil associations are often born out of the local political associations. Civil associations bring together men who seek the benefits of putting together their strengths, ideas and resources in order to better their conditions. Citizens learn the mechanisms of association through participation in political groups, and transfer this knowledge and experience in the civil domain. Both political and civil associations participate in educating the public in the benefits and the mechanisms of exercising their rights to be heard. Associations allow communities to combine their efforts to change their social and economical environment for the better. Even though the unlimited right to associate has potential dangers, limiting the right of association would be detrimental to the democratic society as a whole. Americans learn to use the power of association by using their right to associate freely, making the exercise of this right less dangerous in the process.

According to Alexis de Tocqueville, the future of democracy rests on its ability to maintain the fragile balance between the people's equality of conditions and liberty. His analysis shows that this balance can only be maintained if the conditions of both equality and freedom are "extreme." In a perfect society where the conditions of democracy are ideal, equality and liberty are mirror images of each other and they blend completely into the social environment. In such a perfect world, "no one is different from his fellows, none can exercise a tyrannical power; men will be perfectly free, because they are all entirely equal; they will be all perfectly equal, because they are entirely free." However, the world is such that no perfect environment exists; the people will always have to deal with conditions that prevent absolute equality and absolute freedom.

In Tocqueville's view, equality appears as an immediate danger to democracy, because it can turn society against itself. It should be noted, however, that this threat is not specific to America; in fact, he always concludes that America has solved the problem of balancing equality and liberty by extending and securing the realm of both to an unprecedented level through its legislation. The United States laws are able to counter the negative effects of equality by making sure that the principle of liberty remains secured and untouched. In this regard, the free press and the freedom of the political association are very important safeguards to liberty in America.



Volume 2, Part 2: Chapter 10-20

Volume 2, Part 2: Chapter 10-20 Summary and Analysis

Comfort is defined as a state of mental ease akin to physical and mental numbness. However, comfort is a habit of the American people who has developed into a dominant passion across the nation. The reason is that people either thrive for an ever-greater comfort, or they live in fear of losing the comfort that they already have. Americans do not necessarily seek exclusive comfort, as the aristocrats do, but everyone in America seeks it one way or another.

The general desire for comfort and the little pleasures of life protects society from the great excesses that plague the aristocratic societies. Since people are only concerned with indulging their need for immediate and orderly comfort, they exercise moral self-restraint and will rarely allow themselves to sink into the disordered and immoral satisfaction of excessive pleasures. The love of comfort dominates their every action.

Comfort and other earthly pleasures are easily satisfied with material objects. The desire for a more immediate gratification is what led the people of America to respond to the industrial calling rather than to the agricultural. Industries produce goods and profits rapidly, while agriculture requires years of hard and dedicated work before yielding a profit. This is why, despite the huge lands of America, agriculture remains a minor enterprise nationwide.

The quick development of industries in the United States has led to an increase in the division of labor. Workmen in industrial workplaces are restricted to simpler and more repetitive tasks. From the workmen's point of view, this organization of work imposes limits on the workers' ability to change and improve their conditions. On the other end, the owners and administrators of these industries can continually expand their intelligence of the markets and improve the efficiency of their enterprise. This separation between the workmen and their masters has created the conditions for the birth of a new aristocracy based on money. However, major differences exist between the classic aristocracy, which is based on a combination of assumed birth, education and wealth rights, and the American aristocracy, which is the product of the division of labor. In a typical aristocratic regime, the aristocrats were intimately linked together. They shared either family relationships or common interests that were not necessarily material. The masters of industrial America share nothing as such. The same masters are not bonded by duty to their workmen, which can be replaced at will, whereas the aristocrats and peasants are linked together by a strong sense of duty.

Volume 2, Part 3: Chapter 1-13

Volume 2, Part 3: Chapter 1-13 Summary and Analysis

Democracy influences human relationships as much as it affects the citizens' political and social points of view. Equality of conditions means that there are no a priori prejudices. Whenever they meet, Americans neither seek nor avoid a direct exchange of ideas and opinions. They are generally friendly to each other. The economic aristocracy that America spawned seems to have no direct effect on the social manners of the Americans. This is due in part to the fact that the economical rank of an individual cannot be distinguished immediately. The economic class of an individual may confer him several material privileges, but no rights are attached to those privileges.

Within their own country, Americans behave in a very respectful manner with their peers. The institutions of the United States tend to bring together people of all ranks. The citizens of the New World see their equality as a mutual advantage when time comes to undertake collective projects. However, the same Americans tend to behave quite differently whenever they meet with strangers outside of their borders. They become very suspicious of the world that surrounds them and consider social interaction as a threat. They scrutinize every aspect of the conversation as if looking for a hidden affront. When they are traveling, Americans have a tendency to surround themselves with all the material signs of the higher ranked aristocrats; they behave as if, while boasting their own country's equality of conditions, they secretly regretted the absence of ranking privileges associated with aristocracy.

In the United States, workers constantly struggle with their masters for higher wages. There seems to be a definite tendency to slowly raise the relative wages of the workers in democratic countries. Rising wages means that the workers do not depend on their employers. The working class, like every other social class, is constantly in motion in the United States and the workers will eventually gain the upper hand. However, the industrial aristocracy created by the American economy is sometimes forcing workers to accept much lower rates than those that prevail in other areas of society.

The family structure is another important aspect of life that is affected by the pervasive democratic principles of society. Under an aristocratic regime, privileges are set at birth and individuals cannot stray from the rules, rights and limitations of their own rank. Aristocratic children are born in a specific family rank; they are submitted to the authority of their father and the oldest child has automatic privileges over his siblings. In America however, young men are given complete freedom as soon as they reach adolescence. All the siblings are equal under the laws that govern America. The authority of the father is limited and few if any formalities govern the relationship between a father and his children. This lack of rigidity in the family relationship increases the level of natural intimacy, affection and trust between family members. Democracy tightens the social ties as it loosens the social bonds.



Under aristocratic regimes, women are brought up to ignore their social surrounding and to submit to the authority. The democratic principles lead the American woman to stay independent and informed about her environment and the vices of society. The American wife and mother has a better judgment overall and her influence on the family's moral values and habits is increased accordingly. The American woman comes to marriage well prepared and aware of the consequences and responsibilities that are attached to it. Partly because of its Puritans roots, the institution of marriage imposes very strict rules on the married American woman, especially in America. She is responsible for maintaining the societal order that is at the root of the American society.

Equality of conditions among the people effectively reinforces the moral values that they share. Shared moral attitudes and values make it difficult for a man to enter an illicit or immoral relationship. For instance, it is complicated for a man to convince a woman she is loved if he cannot follow up with a promise of marriage. Short-term relationships are less frequent in a democratic country where moral values are shared evenly. Since democratic people enter marriage of their own free will, they also divorce less frequently.

In Europe, women are flattered and praised by the men, but they are not generally considered their equals. In fact, the European women are more akin to objects that need to be seduced in order to be possessed. In America, women are respected for what they are: different yet equal to the men. The difference between men and women lies mainly in their social duties, but no social ranks is associated with this difference. The prosperity of the American society can be attributed to the superiority of the American woman.

In this section, Tocqueville praises democracy as having a beneficial effect on the moral values and general attitude of the people. His praise sometimes borders the surrealistic, considering that he often avoids analyzing the limitations of the democratic values in society. For instance, the author spends a few chapters discussing the condition of women in America, yet he totally ignores the fact that their political situation is not fundamentally different from the situation that prevailed in aristocratic societies. For instance, though women had been allowed to stand for election by the Federal Constitution since 1788, they were not allowed to vote in the United States until 1920.

Tocqueville views women as pillars of the peaceful order of the American society. He says that though the institution of marriage, the mothers and wives of America are able to keep the moral values of the family members safe. The author attributes this strength to the religious upbringing of the American woman; religion allows them to use the strong values of liberty and independence to the advantage of the family structure. This is in sharp contrast with the situation in aristocratic societies where the family structures and moral values are described as constantly decaying.

Tocqueville provides an important clue to the different approaches to equality of sexes. While Europeans typically hold two opposite views on women, as they are either considered entirely different from men, or else totally equal and similar beings, the American woman is considered equal but different and occupying her own sphere of

power. Tocqueville argues that when it comes to human beings, total equality is just as disrespectful and degrading as total difference. The American woman's independence and power, and her ability to act as a catalyst for social order, is an outcome of the American respect for differences.



Volume 2, Part 3: Chapter 14-26

Volume 2, Part 3: Chapter 14-26 Summary and Analysis

The citizens of America acquired manners and social habits that are quite different from their European counterparts. Americans generally behave in a very similar way, which seems to be just another civil effect of the general equality of conditions that the American people wrote into the laws of their country. While Americans interact with strangers much more casually than Europeans living under aristocratic regimes, they also display many small variations of manners. Citizens of the United States seem to interpret these small differences as an expression of individuality and pride.

In America, every aspect of society is in constant movement. Laws keep changing, opinions vary, and fortunes bloom and disappear like the seasons on Earth. Money drives every action of the American man, as he gets richer not through war or political maneuvers, but through peaceful trading and manufacturing. In the end, wealth alone is not a strong enough criterion to elevate an individual over the mass of other, similar men. In a democratic society, social changes seem like endless variations of the same, monotonous reality.

Thanks to the principle of equality, Americans all share a similar education as well as equivalent initial conditions. This allows them to be at once ambitious and refrained. They seek fortune, but only within a narrow range. This is why few excessive fortunes exist in America.

The United States are unlikely to ever host a great social revolution. Revolutions are usually the result of a people's desire to either maintain or abolish social and economic inequalities. However, democracy has no inequality so great that it would warrant the endangerment of the people's comfort. The very poor people are a minority and their condition can always be considered temporary. The extremely rich people are a minority that holds neither power nor privilege due to their fortune. The vast majority of the American population stands in the middle and is too busy with their daily occupation to bother with theoretical revolutionary ideas. The only source of great inequality is between races, and the difference and tension between blacks and whites is a potential cradle for a great American revolution.

Wars are very similar to revolutions and the democratic people want neither. However, even in democratic countries, the military tends to seek war as a way to promote its members to higher, more powerful ranks. In times of peace, the quality of the military tends to degrade as only inferior men join the army. Conversely, when wars break out and are prolonged, the overall quality of the army improves. The army of a democratic country forms a separate nation, with its own wants and needs, independent of the people the army was hired to defend. This situation places the democratic nation under the constant threat of the men it armed. As any despot would readily admit that,



because it is arming the government with increased powers, war is still the surest and fastest way to destroy liberty. Hence the dilemma faced by every nation: The only solution to the military threat is to diminish its size, but few nations can effectively afford this remedy without sacrificing their security. Yet as trade expands and the condition of men becomes more uniform, wars will become rare events and civil wars even more rare.

In this section, Tocqueville asserts that democratic societies are less likely to wage wars, because the latter threaten their personal comfort, property, and security. The author is mainly referring to internal wars, or revolutions, as the absence of common borders with possible belligerent countries makes it unlikely for the United States to get involved in a typical war against an external enemy. On the other end, he warns that democracy fosters a set of fixed social conditions that once accepted by the majority, become very difficult to modify. This attitude could make it difficult for the society to progress, as Americans society may "end up by being too unalterably fixed with the same institutions, prejudices, and mores, so that mankind will stop progressing and will dig itself in." Here, the author is somehow assuming that revolutions (or wars) are a necessary mechanism of social change; it would be easy to show that this argument has been defeated by History and that changes and progress is indeed better served by democracy than by revolutions.



Volume 2, Part 4: Chapter 1-8

Volume 2, Part 4: Chapter 1-8 Summary and Analysis

The citizens of the United States have a tendency to believe that anarchy is lurking at every corner and would immediately replace their democratic government, should the latter fail at maintaining law and order. Alexis de Tocqueville maintains that anarchy should in fact, be the least of their concern; the threat of a despotic government is much more real than its anarchic counterpart. Too much emphasis on equality leads to servitude, which can easily turn the government into a tyrannical power. The problem of equality of conditions is that too much of it leads individuals to lose their relative importance in their environment. The individual's rights and freedom get lost in the crowd.

The threat of a despotic government is made even greater in democratic societies, because the power of a government ran by the people is almost unlimited. Indeed, the citizens of America see only advantages in enlarging the power of a government that they see as run by them. Democratic governments have a natural tendency to become more centralized as they evolve. This is a direct consequence of the combination of individualism and materialism. Indeed, individuals who do not experience the bond that they have with their peers will instinctively seek greater equality and will amplify the smallest differences. In seeking a greater uniformity, the democratic people will tend to centralize power in the hand of their government.

In America however, the people experienced freedom extensively before they were able to taste true equality of conditions. They have therefore, developed the political instincts that are necessary to counter their natural tendency toward equality. Education also plays an important role in the process of protecting the freedom of men, because culture and knowledge always increases people's independence. Yet like the democracy it implemented, America is not immune to despotism.

Of course, it might still be possible for a single man could manage to convince the people of America that his love for equality is so great that he should have all the power he needs to provide to everyone's interests and needs at once. However, this is not the greatest danger faced by the democratic society. As men seeking equality become more alike, they tend to be absorbed by their immediate material comfort and security. The possibility remains for a despotic regime to concentrate all the political powers in one instance of government in order to subject every citizen to the rules that maintain uniformity. This type of tyranny would take away, though somewhat gently, the free will of all the people and their liberty. It remains to be seen how the people will handle the growing trend toward equality while maintaining their freedom.

Tocqueville's "Democracy in America" closes with a renewed focus on the dangers of democracy, this time from a slightly different angle. Having "sold" democracy and its advantages to European aristocracy, he now concentrates on reaffirming his warning



about the potential for a democratic despotism. Democratic tyranny differs from monarchical tyranny, because it involves the majority of the people instead of a single, easily identifiable figure of power. His whole argument is somewhat difficult to demonstrate, since to this day no democratic government has provided a clear example of what widespread democratic despotism could look like. The reader is left to imagine an oppressive society similar to the one described in George Orwell's "1984," yet without Big Brother. However, if enacted, the potentially despotic powers of democracy to which Tocqueville refers would spread to every level of society without exception; its effect would involve constant surveillance and degradation of the human character; the same powers would also apply a relatively mild but pervasive form of repression to minorities.

Tocqueville also asserts that such a despotic democratic regime could turn out to be substantially more oppressive than its dictatorial counterpart. Every citizen is part of several minorities (such as racial, cultural and political); since the majority can exert tyranny its corresponding minority, a democratic despotism would make everyone an oppressor as well as an oppressed. In Tocqueville's analysis, materialism and individualism participate in concert to allow democratic despotism. Ultimately, such a regime would not torment its citizens, but it would instead insure a material comfort while creating a social environment that leaves no sphere to exercise individual freedom. An example of such this self-imposed form of tyranny, applied to the everyday life of Americans, can be found in the first volume; Tocqueville mentions that in America, no actual freedom of opinion exists, because no place exist to express an opinion that goes against the majority's point of view.

Tocqueville's closing argument is a reminder that while democratic despotism remains a real and constant threat to any democratic society, Americans are protected by the mechanisms of freedom that its people have written into laws: freedom of the press, freedom of association and religion, a highly decentralized governmental power and an independent judiciary.

"Democracy in America" closes by stating that "[t]he nations of our time cannot prevent the conditions of men from becoming equal; but it depends upon themselves whether the principle of equality is to lead them to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarism, to prosperity or wretchedness."



Characters

The President

The President of the United States is the head of the executive branch of the federal government. His role is to enforce the national laws written by Congress. The powers of the President are defined by the Federal Constitution. The President of the United States is the commander-in-chief of the army; he has the power to either sign into law or veto the bills passed by both house of Congress, to grant pardons and reprieves, and to make treaties and appoint federal officers, ambassadors and judges with consent of the Congress. The President of the United States is an elected official and is subject to the laws of the country.

In Tocqueville's "Democracy in America", the President of the United States is a political instance that has almost monarchical powers, but the extent of this power is limited, because it can only be applied in a few circumstances. For instance, Tocqueville correctly noted that the power of the presidency increases dramatically in case of war. The author considers it a flaw to allow a President to be re-elected, because it increases his dependency on the whims of the people. Andrew Jackson, who was president during Tocqueville's tour of America (1829-37), is also known as the founder of the modern Democratic Party - an organization that the author insists is by no mean a "great" political party.

American Lawyers

When Tocqueville uses the term "lawyer", he refers to its generic definition as a person learned in the law and licensed to practice it. In a democracy, lawyers have acquired a unique position in society. These educated individuals are particularly suited for administrative functions because of their ordered habits, their instinct for formalities and their ability to connect ideas that are seemingly incompatible. They are ordinary citizens, yet they are connected to the aristocracy. Their relation to aristocracy is not by birth or by taste like the former, but through their education and personal interest. For these reasons, lawyers are also respected by the people and are often requested to serve in public offices. In a democracy, their qualities (or defaults) serve to counterbalance the spikes in the lawmaking majority's sudden passions, grandiose plans and uncontrollable impatience. "In America there are neither nobles nor men of letters, and the people distrust the wealthy. Therefore, the lawyers form the political upper class and the most intellectual section of society. Consequently they only stand to lose from any innovation; this adds an interest in conservation to their natural taste for order."

Lawyers bring reason to the debates though their respect for the old and the traditional; realism through their narrower views of the world; and patience through an often justified procrastination in the course of action. Lawyers turned magistrates also balance the impetuosity of the people by forcing them to be consistent with, and



obedient to, their own laws through the power of the Constitution. However, lawyers represent a danger to democracy itself: "It must not be forgotten, also, that, if [the lawyers] prize freedom much, they generally value legality still more: They are less afraid of tyranny than of arbitrary power; and provided the legislature undertakes of itself to deprive men of their independence, they are not dissatisfied."

American Writers

According to the author of "Democracy in America," back in the early 19th century, the United States had been unable to produce an important or valuable body of literature on its own. The only kind of literature America produced is of the journalistic type, mainly because this is what the majority is requesting. Americans read either to stay informed, for leisure or for entertainment purposes. The educated individuals read English (European) literature, which has typically little to do with, or say about the American environment. The American writer sees himself as an entrepreneur and writes in order to earn the money necessary to sustain a living.

The youthfulness of the New World, combined with the democratic values and ensuing attitudes, modifies not only the subject of the American literature, but also its source of inspiration. Aristocratic societies make countless intermediaries available between man and God; the aristocratic writer can thus appeal to a number of supernatural forces to explain and drive his subject to countless ends. In a democracy, there are no such intermediaries exists and the supernatural is evicted at the source. The democratic poet sees everyone as equal and is unlikely to take any particular man as a subject to which no one else could identify with. Where aristocrats are busy writing about unique nations and men, the American writer finds poetry in the mundane and manages to include the whole of humankind: The good and bad fortunes, the love, the passions and the doubts that fill the heart of man. The democratic writer might have less to write about, but when he does, he writes about the things that have greater importance to most. American literature is made of the two extremes of the imagination: Either the writer delves into the most mundane of subjects, or else it exaggerates its importance and gets lost in the clouds.

The Puritans

Puritans were members of religious groups that rejected the Reformation of the Church of England. The Puritans immigrated to America with the intent to form communities that were closer the original Christian doctrine and worship. Though their morals were very strict, they established communities in New England based on the concepts of liberty and equality. Though the influence of the Puritans as a political and cultural force had vanished by the time of his American tour, Tocqueville asserts that the Puritans' moral values and independence were the basis of the American democracy.

Puritans believed that the words of the Bible were the basis of culture. They interpreted the Bible literally, especially regarding the roles of men and women in the community.



The Puritans believed that God was the supreme authority over human affairs; they insisted that individual and corporate entities had to follow the teaching of the Bible down to the smallest detail. Like Calvin, they believed that Christ was the only head of the Church and opposed monarchy for that reason.

The American Woman

Tocqueville views women as pillars of the peaceful order of the American society. He says that though the institution of marriage, the mothers and wives of America are able to keep the moral values of the family members safe. The author attributes this strength to the religious upbringing of the American woman; religion allows them to use the strong values of liberty and independence to the advantage of the family structure. This is in sharp contrast with the situation in aristocratic societies where the family structures and moral values are described as constantly decaying.

The author also provides an important clue to the different approaches to equality of the sexes. While Europeans typically hold two opposite views on women, as they are either considered entirely different from men, or else totally equal and similar beings, the American woman is considered equal but different and occupying her own sphere of power. Tocqueville argues that when it comes to human beings, total equality is just as disrespectful and degrading as total difference. The American woman's independence and power, and her ability to act as a catalyst for social order, is an outcome of the American respect for differences.

The American Citizen

The American citizen is a resident of the United States who has the right to fully participate in the political process of his country. American citizens elect and are represented by officials at every level of the government. According to Tocqueville, the American citizen enjoys an unprecedented level of liberty and equality.

Aristocrats

Aristocrats are people who profit from aristocracy. Aristocracy is a form of government ran by a limited number of individuals chosen among noble families. Aristocrats are the only persons allowed to compete for, and hold a position of power. The rights and ranks of the aristocrats are determined at birth; hence, aristocracy is essentially a hereditary form of government. When Tocqueville refers to aristocracy, he means either monarchy or one of its hybrid forms. France, the author's home country, had been the host of several great wars and revolutions, but none of those was able to get rid of the power of aristocracy. Alexis de Tocqueville was himself an aristocrat, although his rank was relatively low in the scale of France's aristocracy.



Europeans

Alexis de Tocqueville generally uses "Europeans" in a rather restrictive fashion, mainly to distinguish Americans from their European counterparts living either in France or Britain. In "Democracy in America," Europeans are usually assumed to be living under the rules of aristocratic regimes.

Elected Officials

Elected officials are representative of the people occupying a position of political responsibility in the government. Any citizen of the United States can be elected as an official. Elected officials have the responsibility to apply the law and to respect it. They are elected for a limited term and cannot modify the laws without prior approbation by the people.

The Selectmen

Selectmen ("select(ed) men") are officials elected as part of an executive board to run the legislative affairs of a township in New England.



Objects/Places

Virginia appears in non-fiction

Virginia is the name of the first English colony established on the southern side of North America in the early 1600's. Virginia was first populated by gold miners and fortune seekers. These settlers were mostly men with low moral values. Their number was later augmented by artisans and peasants, but their need to control and protect the huge lands led them to establish slavery.

New England appears in non-fiction

New England is the name of the first English colony established in 1620, on the northern side of the United States. New England designates a region located in the northeastern corner of the United States and includes what is known today as the states of Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut. New England was first populated by Puritan refugees who sought to form new communities based on the original Christian moral values, doctrine and worship. The region was the first to declare its ambitions of independence toward the British motherland, yet it opposed the war of 1812 against England. Tocqueville describes New England as the cradle of democracy in America.

American Laws appears in non-fiction

Laws are a set of rules of conduct established by the government to maintain stability and justice. In the United States, laws were originally derived from the common law of the system of English law. However, the supreme law of the land is the Federal Constitution. The Constitution clearly circumscribes the boundaries of the jurisdiction of federal law and the laws in the fifty U.S. states and territories.

The Constitution appears in non-fiction

Generally speaking, a constitution is a document that codifies a system of governance; it establishes the rules and principles of an autonomous political entity. The Constitution of the United States (or Federal Constitution) establishes the structure, procedures, powers and duties of the government of the country. It was first adopted on September 17, 1787 by the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and later ratified by conventions in each state in the name of "the People." Through its first ten amendments, otherwise known as the Bill of Rights (1791), the Constitution of the United States guarantees a set of basic rights to the people.

In Tocqueville's view, the Federal Constitution protects both the rights of the people and the mechanisms of democracy through a system of checks and balances. This system



allows judicial oversight of local power by enabling a judge to declare a law invalid when it is found to contradict the principles or the letter of the Constitution. By declaring the Constitution the supreme law of the land, the United States managed to write into law the sovereignty of its people and the extent of the people's power.

The Military appears in non-fiction

The military refers to the members of a national army. As a separate entity, the military tends to seek war even when the majority of the people wishes for peace. The military seeks war as a way to promote its members to higher, more powerful ranks. In times of peace, the quality of the military tends to degrade as only inferior men join the army. Conversely, when wars break out and are prolonged, the overall quality of the army improves. In "Democracy in America," the army is seen as a separate entity that reacts to events differently than the general population. The army of a democratic country forms a separate nation, with its own wants and needs, independent of the people the army was hired to defend. This situation places the democratic nation under the constant threat of the men it armed. As any despot would readily admit, war is still the surest and fastest way to destroy liberty, because it is arming the government with increased powers. Hence the dilemma faced by every nation: The only solution to the military threat is to diminish its size, but few nations can effectively afford this remedy without sacrificing their security.

The Press appears in non-fiction

The press (or printed media) refers to every type of journal or publication that is available to the public in America. In the 1830's, the press was the only form of media available to the people of the United States in the United States. The press enjoys unlimited freedom, and this liberty participates in keeping the political power in check. It allows the public to be informed of the political and civil actions of their government and it relays the opinions of the multiple political and civic associations. Tocqueville identifies the importance of the power of the press as second only to that of the people.

Political Associations appears in non-fiction

In Tocqueville's view of democracy, the right of association is a pillar of the power of the people. The Federal Constitution of the United States grants people the right to assemble and petition the government. This right is inherited from the British laws and it allows individuals to freely associate for whatever purpose they see fit. Freedom of association is not limited to the political world, but the latter essential to democracy and leads to civic associations. Associations inherit the right to free speech, free assembly and free exercise of religion that are granted to every citizen of the United States.



Courts appears in non-fiction

In the United States, the courts have jurisdiction over disputes with some connection to their territory. Cases are heard before and evidence is presented in a trial court. If one of the litigants is unsatisfied with the decision of the lower court, the decision may be taken up on appeal to a higher court. In the United States, courts have the power to review the actions of public sector bodies in terms of their constitutionality. In some instances, it is also possible to review the constitutionality of the law itself. This process is called "judicial review" and participates in maintaining a system of checks and balances that is essential to democracy.

Congress appears in non-fiction

The United States Congress is the legislature of the federal government of the United States. It consists of a Senate and House of Representatives. The Constitution vests all legislative power in the Congress.

Senate appears in non-fiction

The senate is a deliberative body of the government. The United States Senate is one of the two chambers of the bicameral United States Congress, the other being the House of Representatives. It is known informally as the "upper house."



Themes

Tyranny of the Majority

In a democracy, tyranny of the majority happens when a legislative body enacts laws that favor the rights of a majority of the electorate and in so doing, diminish the rights of the corresponding minority. The potential for democratic tyranny can be found at every level of government: Municipal, county, state, or country. It can also be enacted by any kind of political majority based on religion, culture, race, wealth, language. Tyranny of the majority can happen even where and when not intended. Tocqueville argues that democracy is a self-correcting political system that can usually fix its own flaws, if enough time has passed and enough political pressure is applied by minorities.

Democratic tyranny is a vice of democracy that cannot be easily avoided. However, the mechanisms of democracy in America allows for an unprecedented degree of self-correction. Many of the constitutional and legal barriers to potential tyranny of the majority in America were originally created by Federalist James Madison and later incorporated in the Constitution. Madison, like Aristotle before him, mainly feared that tyranny of the majority would lead to the expropriation of the wealthier landowners of the South. In "Democracy in America", Tocqueville praises Madison but barely hints at particular outcomes of tyranny of the majority.

The Impact of Democracy on Art Literature and Philosophy

Many of Tocqueville's arguments revolve around the effect of democracy on the crafts valued by the aristocracy. This insistence on the part of the author is because Tocqueville was himself part of France's aristocracy, and because his overall goal was to sell democracy to the ruling regime. One of the main arguments of the aristocrats for clinging to power was that by legislating with great intelligence, they were able to elevate the societies that they ruled upon. However, "elevating" society meant that the common people - who could admire but not aspire to the level of their rulers - had to suffer to attain an idealistic State of "greatness" was irrelevant to this idealistic regime. The aristocracy holds such intellectual crafts as art, literature and philosophy to have higher value for the good of people than material comfort and peace. To the aristocrats, democracy constitutes a threat that turns their values upside down.

The author believed that History was heading irrevocably towards greater equality of conditions of the people and democracy. Tocqueville does not try to disprove the devaluation of the aristocratic ideals brought by democracy. However, he does defuse the argument by concluding that the "great" intellectual crafts of man are not condemned, but simply displaced in the scale of values. The outcome of democracy, he insists, is a society where people live generally better, and where ideals can thrive in their own sphere without interfering with the peace and well-being of the people.



Materialism, which is inherent to democracy, conspires in devaluating the traditional trade of the artisans. Under an aristocratic regime, artisans can elevate themselves to the higher class by creating greater pieces of art and literature. By doing so, they can entice the admiration and respect of the aristocrats, which in turn leads them to a better social position. Under a democratic regime, the artisans tend to become manufacturers of cheaper, more immediate "goods" that can be produced and consumed at a greater rate. The value of a product of democratic "art" lies strictly in its resulting economic value. Thus, the products of arts and literature in America are produced in enormous quantity at the expense of quality.

The same reasoning applies to the cheapening of philosophy. Undoubtedly, meditation and introspection are time-consuming tasks and are not considered very "productive," at least from a pragmatic point of view. Democracy forces thinkers to keep their feet on the ground, so to speak, and concentrate on solving the immediate difficulties of everyday life. It comes as no surprise to Tocqueville that America (at least until the 1830's) did not to produce great philosophers, influential writers and geniuses in art. However, the author also knew that America was, at the time of his writing, a very young nation. As time progressed, and as America continued to produce a deluge of popular, mediocre products, the democratic society was bound to deliver more influential and valuable pieces of art equal to the output of any aristocratic society. One again, the extreme freedom of democracy serves to counter its negative side.

Equality and Freedom

The future of democracy rests on the fragile balance between the people's equality of conditions and liberty. Tocqueville's analysis shows that this balance can only be maintained if the conditions of both equality and freedom are "extreme." In a perfect society where the conditions of democracy are ideal, equality and liberty are mirror images of each other and blend completely into the social environment. In such a perfect world, "no one is different from his fellows, none can exercise a tyrannical power; men will be perfectly free, because they are all entirely equal; and they will be all perfectly equal, because they are entirely free." However, the world is such that no perfect environment exists and the people will always have to deal with conditions that prevent absolute equality and absolute freedom.

Both concepts of equality and freedom are ambivalent. Tocqueville never makes this ambivalence very clear through his arguments, and the result is sometimes confusing. Equality of conditions even the odds for everyone, but it applies whether or not freedom is involved. Under an imaginary extreme despotic regime, where no freedom exists at all, everyone can be still be called "equal" since their collective condition is the same and everyone is unable to do anything freely. In other words, slaves enjoy perfect equality of conditions among slaves. Freedom is also a dangerous concept, because it can easily be manipulated. In a perfectly bland world, where nothing is left to do or say, then freedom is no more useful than a high performance racecar in the middle of the jungle. Tocqueville shows that equality tends to reduce the social conditions where

freedom can have practical applications, making it an even more difficult concept to apply.

In Tocqueville's view, equality constitutes an immediate danger to democracy, because it can turn society against itself. It should be noted, however, that this threat is not specific to America; in fact, he always concludes that America has solved the problem of balancing equality and liberty by extending and securing the realm of both to an unprecedented level through its legislation. The United States laws are able to counter the negative effects of equality by making sure that the principle of liberty remains secured and untouched.

Style

Perspective

Alexis de Tocqueville is an important French historian and political theorist of the mid-nineteenth century. He was born in Paris in 1805, the son of a royalist who worked as an administrator in various cities before being appointed as the prefect (mayor) of Versailles in 1826. Raised by a fervent Catholic mother, Alexis studied philosophy and law and eventually became an apprentice magistrate (judge) in the court of Versailles. He believed that France's aristocratic regime was on the decline and destined to be replaced by a more democratic form of government. In 1830, the French government sent him, along with his friend and collaborator Gustave de Beaumont, on a 9 months study trip to America in order to report on the nation's ongoing reform of the penal system, and its possible application to the French society. According to various notes taken from his personal journal, it appears that Tocqueville's primary interest in visiting the United States was never the prison system of his host country, but the mechanisms of its working democracy.

After publishing his official report, Tocqueville set out to write "Democracy in America", an exhaustive analysis of the democratic society established in the New World. As a member of the French aristocracy with a liberal frame of mind, his main objective was to compare the political and historical contexts of the successful democratic regime of the United States with those leading to the failure of the French Revolution's attempt to accomplish a similar goal.

The resulting volumes were an immediate success at home and abroad. He was elected to the French Academy in 1841. Following the Revolution of 1848, he was elected as a member of the Constituent Assembly following the Revolution of 1848. He participated in the writing of the Constitution of the Second Republic, but in the aftermath of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to power, he was briefly imprisoned and subsequently barred from public life. He continued to write about the French history leading to the Revolution of 1789. He died of tuberculosis in April of 1859.

"Democracy in America" was written in two volumes, published five years apart. The resulting document is the most important written account of the impact of democracy in America. Despite being over 170 years old, this dense chronicle is filled with anecdotes and analysis that withstood the test of time. Many of the pages of "Democracy in America" read like they could just as well been written yesterday, style notwithstanding. The reader may find that many of Tocqueville's statements and insights dwarf most of the contemporary political commentaries in comparison. Tocqueville's political and philosophical ideas, upon which "Democracy in America" is based, became the foundation of the "liberal" point of view in American politics, but he is often quoted by politicians of every party.



The book is a fascinating introduction to the many possibilities of democracy as a political system in general, and as applied to America in particular. Tocqueville often links the American people's outlook on social and political matters to the settlers' religious roots. The first volume provides the basis of Tocqueville's point of view, a mix of praises and warnings about democracy in the United States. The second volume reads more like a collection of essays on the impact of democracy on the character of the people and on the political choices that they make.

"Democracy in America" is an outsider's view on the promises and dangers of the developing social and political environment of the United States. It remains to this day an outstanding piece of literature. It's required reading to anyone who is interested in learning how the United States and its citizens came to be what they are now and the dangers that lurk in the dark corners of democracy.

Tone

Tocqueville's approach to the complex subject of democracy is unapologetically subjective. The author never tries to hide that the ideas and opinions that he develop into an in-depth analysis are solely his. Hence, sentences often begin with the subjective first person: "I believe that...", "I am convinced...", "I think...", etc. The author typically uses long sentences interlocking ideas and facts. These sentences are assembled in relatively short paragraphs consisting of three or four sentences each. Paragraphs usually build on the previous paragraph's argument. Chapters run a few pages each.

In its original French version, the 750 page long document uses a dense, almost aristocratic writing style to convey the depth of its content; the resulting translation, while not literal, may well appear convoluted and somewhat tortuous to the uninitiated. Tocqueville was a lawyer and a judge himself; not surprisingly, "Democracy in America" generally reads like a detailed and substantiated Court opinion. This is not a book for the faint of heart or the casual reader. The abridged editions typically shield the readers from the lengthy discussions comparing the different French political regimes with the American institutions. Tocqueville practices a somewhat primitive form of analytical science, which is concerned with explaining evidence, actions and reactions through a pre-established theoretical grid. He never attempts to give a neutral description of his observations, but instead he tries to come up with an explanation of the conditions that led to the facts and impressions that he collected.

Throughout his book, Alexis de Tocqueville shows his deep love and respect for America, both for what it accomplished politically and socially, and for what he foresaw as the United States' future accomplishments. He was a foreign admirer, yet not a blind one, and he consistently reminded the reader of the dangers inherent to democracy. "Democracy in America" was written primarily for a European readership; the goal of the book was to show that democracy was indeed a workable political regime and that it was not endangering the ruling aristocracy as much as anticipated by the aristocrats. For this reason, the author spends a great deal of time pointing out the United States'



idiosyncrasies that made the American form of democracy possible. The underlying reasoning is that, while the democratic principles cannot be changed without threatening its very foundation, some fine-tuning in the actual implementation of democracy might be required for it to work in countries where aristocratic regimes have been in place for a long time.

Structure

The complete edition of "Democracy in America" was originally published in two volumes. Volume I spans 18 chapters separated in two Parts; Volume II is divided in four Parts and extends over 75 chapters. Several English translations of "Democracy in America" exist: Henry Reeve (1838, now in the public domain), P. Bradley (1945), George Lawrence (1966) and H. C. Mansfield and D. Winthrop (2000). Several single volume "abridged" editions, based on the original translation of 1838, are also available. The quotes below refer to the popular 'mentor' edition of Tocqueville's work, edited and abridged by Richard D. Heffner (1956).

Volume I is an overview of the early history of America and of the effects of democracy on the development of that country. The first part of the volume analyzes the historical conditions of the birth of politics in America as well as the character and cultural background of the Anglo-Saxon settlers; the second part examines the present (i.e., 1830's) political context of the United States, the Constitution and the legal system that resulted from the Revolution. It also goes over the promises and threats that democracy brings to the American society as a whole.

Volume II is a series of essays that delve even deeper into the conditions of democracy and its effect on the people. These essays also provide an in-depth coverage of the problems and expectations of democracy in America. The author expands his ideas and often compares the situation in the democratic United States with the monarchies of France and England. In volume II, Tocqueville covers the influence of democracy on the intellectual life and social life of the typical American, and the emotional, ideological and political impact of the sovereignty of the people. Volume II concludes by looking at the potential for democratic despotism and stating that the legal mechanisms in place in America are the best way to protect the country from sinking into social tyranny.

The organization of the book may appear quite confusing at first, especially to the Anglo-Saxon reader. This is in part because Tocqueville insists on constantly analyzing the facts and evidence that he is reporting, as he is reporting them. The other reason is of course, the author's intended readership: The members of the French aristocracy and their sympathizers. While the French language allows embedding sentences and the interlocking of ideas with almost no loss of clarity, the English language usually suffers and loses some of its efficiency by trying the same syntactic manipulations. Yet the structure of "Democracy in America" is driven by a very clear goal from which the author never strays. The resulting book is a masterpiece in its own "genre" and is well worth the effort.



Quotes

"The entire man is, so to speak, to be seen in the cradle of the child." Chapter 1, p. 39

"The Anglo-Americans are the first nation who, having been exposed to this formidable alternative, have been happy enough to escape the dominion of absolute power. They have been allowed by their circumstances, their origin, their intelligence, and especially by their morals, to establish and maintain the sovereignty of the people." Chapter 2, p. 55

"It profits me but little, after all, that a vigilant authority always protects the tranquility of my pleasures and constantly averts all dangers from my path, without care of concern, if this same authority is the absolute master of my liberty and my life, and if it so monopolizes movement and live, that when it languishes everything languishes around it, and that when it sleeps everything must sleep, and that when it dies the state itself must perish." Chapter 5, p. 68

"But such is the admirable position of the New World, that man has no other enemy than himself; and that, in order to be happy and to be free, he has only to determine that he will be so." Chap. 7, p. 87

"Next to hating their enemies, men are most inclined to flatter them." Chap. 8, p. 91

"Thus it is, in the vast complications of human laws, that extreme liberty sometimes corrects the abuses of liberty, and extreme democracy obviates the dangers of democracy." Chap. 10, p. 100

"When I see that the rights and the means of absolute command are conferred on any power whatever, be it called a people or a king, an aristocracy or a democracy, a monarchy or a republic, I say there is the germ of tyranny, and I seek to live elsewhere, under other laws." Chap. 12, p. 115

"It must not be forgotten, also, that, if [the lawyers] prize freedom much, they generally value legality still more: they are less afraid of tyranny than of arbitrary power; and provided the legislature undertakes of itself to deprive men of their independence, they are not dissatisfied." Chap. 13, p. 124

"Our means of intellectual intercourse unite the remotest part of the earth; and men cannot remain strangers to each other, or be ignorant of what is taking place in any corner of the globe." Chap 15, p. 142

"In the United States, the majority undertakes to supply a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own." Chap. 16, p. 148

"One of the most ordinary weaknesses of the human intellect is to seek to reconcile contrary principles, and to purchase peace at the expense of logic." Chap 17, p. 156



"[P]ermanent inequality of conditions leads men to confine themselves to the arrogant and sterile research of abstract truths, whilst the social condition and the institutions of democracy prepare them to seek the immediate and useful practical results of the sciences." Chap. 20, p. 168

"In America, the independence of woman is irrevocably lost in the bonds of matrimony. If an unmarried woman is less constrained there than elsewhere, a wife is subjected to stricter obligations." Chap. 39, p. 235

"After all, and in spite of all precautions, a large army amidst a democratic people will always be a source of great danger; the most effectual means of diminishing that danger would be to reduce the army, but this is a remedy which all nations are not able to apply." Chap. 49, p. 280



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the relationship between religion and democracy. Is the former necessary to maintain the latter, as Tocqueville asserts? Is it true that religion and politics can live in separate spheres and not influence each other?

Are there benefits to an aristocratic regime over a democratic government? Are there remnants of aristocracy in modern America? Discuss whether the political, economical or intellectual elite ended up replacing the aristocrats of old Europe in today's America?

Tocqueville is well-known for having foreseen some of the major problems facing democracy and America. Did the author forget some essential problems linked to democracy? Name a few of them.

Back in 1830, America had never been involved in an armed conflict outside its own frontiers. Does the past (and ongoing) involvement of the United States in wars overseas change anything to what the book has to say about democracy as a whole, and America in particular?

For all practical purpose, Tocqueville's democracy only involved men. Does the incorporation of women in the political and social life of America changes anything to the mechanisms of a democratic society? Give examples of the social and political changes that happened since the principle of equality of "men" has been explicitly extended to women.

Try to find examples of some Tocqueville's statements that could be repeated today without losing their value. Give a few examples of the statements that you think would no longer apply.

Discuss if today's growing environmental problems and dwindling natural resources threaten the foundation of democracy. Name the principles of American democracy that seem to be threatened by the current environmental situation.

Tocqueville mentions that Americans often hold opinions they know for being neither right nor wrong, but simply because they are held by the majority. How much of this is true (or false)? Discuss the consequences of accepting as valid the public opinion. How many of your own political opinions are based on facts, experience or meditation, and how many are simply the result of accepting the majority's opinion?

Which, between equality and liberty, is most important to maintaining democracy? Which one is more important to you as an individual?

Discuss examples of a tyranny of the majority. Give a few examples of "minorities" which you are part of. Expand on the treatment of your minority by the American society.

Is knowledge of politics necessary to civil life in America? Do you feel like you need to have an opinion on everything?

In America, the people rely on political representatives to make laws. Discuss how citizens like you can decide on what is right and what is wrong when it comes to lawmaking. Discuss whether a more direct form of democracy would be possible or beneficial to the American people.