

# Alexis De Tocqueville Perspective on the Birth and Nature of American Democracy

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

This paper examines the American democratic experience through the lens of Alexis de Tocqueville, a 19th-century French political thinker. Focusing on Tocqueville's observations of American democracy, this study explores how values of liberty, equality, self-government and equality of condition shaped American society. Using a theoretical approach, this study analyses Tocqueville's writings particularly His Magnus opus: Democracy in America, to understand the effects of these values on American Democracy. The qualitative methodology employed to examine historical data and Tocqueville's observations. Tocqueville's analysis and recommendation provide analytical insights into the utility of liberal democracy beyond America to include non-liberal, non-western countries struggling with problems of democratization. This research contributes to knowledge by providing a deeper understanding of the American democratic beginning, experience and its impact on contemporary political theory.

**Keywords:** America, democracy, Tocqueville, liberty, equality.

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## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary democratic theory, Alexis de Tocqueville occupies a significant but obscure corner compared to Jefferson, John Locke, Montesquieu and even Plato and Aristotle. Tocqueville's *Magnus Opus*, Democracy in America, hardly achieved a sustained reference in a serious text on democracy in the last century. Democratic theorists like Robert Dahl, David Held, Joseph Margolis, Arend Lijphart, made little or no reference to Tocqueville in their works. There is one obvious reason for Tocqueville's obscurity in the last century. He was already thirteen years old before Karl Marx was born, and Tocqueville's Democracy in America (in two volumes, 1835 and 1840) preceded Marx's Communist Manifesto (1848) equally by thirteen years. However, by the time The Communist Manifesto was released, the revolutionary theorizing and expectation it exerted eclipsed Tocqueville's theoretical analysis of American democratic beginnings. This is because, compared to Tocqueville's analysis, Marx's revolutionary challenge echoed throughout the universe of underdevelopment, neo-colonial oppression and capitalist exploitation. It was therefore easy to forget about Tocqueville's exposition of American's liberal democracy.

Alexis de Tocqueville is not an obscure theorist, in spite of Marx's significance; the U.S.S.R. the bastion of

communism- collapsed in 1989, and America is championing the cause of democratic mores despite its imperialistic antecedents. This constitutes one reason to go back to what claims make American democracy strong. But much more than this, Tocqueville is worth studying in his own right, in spite of any historical or circumstantial evidence to the contrary. His analysis captured American democratic beginnings and his critique becomes relevant especially when we consider American global ascension. As Cheryl Welch acknowledged:

*Tocqueville texts will exert a magnetic pull on contemporary readers across the political spectrum and across disciplinary boundaries. He attracts, however, not because he delivers a new political science for a world quite new, as he promised in Democracy in America, but because he does not do so, unlike other nineteenth – century social thinkers who strove towards systematic theory or a 'new science'. Tocqueville practiced an idiosyncratic version of cultural studies that is newly compelling world distrustful of world – theoretical dramas. Equally important, Tocqueville's overriding moral preoccupation with the need to preserve both individuality and the capacity for collective*

*political action in a social environment increasingly subject to impersonal 'forces' has appealed powerfully to many constitutions from the mid – twentieth century to the present.*

## Early Life and Service

From Precepts that Tocqueville never forgot which contributed in shaping his mentality, a letter he wrote to Kergolay, his cousin, we understand that he was greatly affected by his father's library:

I do not know if I've ever told you an incident of my youth that left a deep trace in all my life. With an insatiable curiosity, I read books which I found in the library. I piled pell-mell in my mind all sorts of notions and ideas, which usually tend to belong to another age. My life had been so far full of faith that I had never allowed doubts to penetrate my soul until doubts entered as the result of what I read. Suddenly, I felt the sensation similar to people who experienced earthquake feel, when the ground shakes under their feet, their walls around them, their heads on the ceilings, the furniture in their hands, all the nature before their eyes. I was seized by the blackest melancholy, then followed by an extreme distaste for life without knowing it, and I was overwhelmed with confusion and terror when, I realized the path that I am to take in the world and the violent passions that drew me to this state of despair. (Jardin, 1994:63)

From the same source, we understand further that, what has been preserved for Tocqueville in that library included the classics of the seventeenth century and translations of ancient authors: many travelogues that gave Tocqueville a lifetime curiosity to know mores and customs of countries around the world. There were also, with the exception of the Encyclopedists, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Buffon, Rousseau, Mably, Raynal. With these authors and more, it is not easy to know what Tocqueville really read, but it is obvious, it was Voltaire and Rousseau, who introduced doubt in his mind, he wrote some years later about, the three great evils of man: "If I were to classify human misery I'd do it in this order: 1. Disease, 2. Death, 3. doubt" In the letter quoted above, Tocqueville is very specific about the date of this crisis: he was sixteen years old, in July 1821 at the beginning of his stay at Metz. This "universal doubt" focused on the social values of the aristocratic world and his discovery of a great problem which will be the center of all his thought: the omnipresent shadow of the French Revolution and the coming of a democracy. Hence, his love of learning history to illuminate this problem. In 1827, he began to have increasingly liberal sympathies as a result of his belief that the decline of the aristocracy was inevitable...this made the aristocracy in Tocqueville to turn henceforth towards the ideal of political liberty which he called democracy. Besnier (1995: 4.)

From archives, we learnt Tocqueville, who despised the July Monarchy (1830–1848), began his political career at the start of the same period, 1830. Thus, he became deputy of the Manche department, a position which he maintained until 1851. Tocqueville was also elected General Counsellor of the Manche in 1842, and became the president of the department's *conseil général* between 1849 and 1851. According to one account, Tocqueville's political position became untenable during this time in the sense that he was mistrusted by both the left and right, and was looking for an excuse to leave France. In 1831, he obtained from the July Monarchy a permission to examine prisons and penitentiaries in America, and proceeded there with his life-long friend Gustave de Beaumont. While Tocqueville did visit some prisons, he travelled widely in America and took extensive notes about his observations and reflections. He returned in less than two years, and published a report, but the real result of his tour was *Democracy in America*, which first appeared in 1835. (Chisholm, Hugh)

## Tocqueville and the Passion for Liberty

I hate and am afraid of mobs because I am naturally an aristocrat. Fundamentally I do not support democracy but I do support liberty legality and respect for individual rights. I detest demagoguery, the chaotic behavior of the populace and their violent and ignorant meddling in public affairs. I don't identify as conservative or revolutionary. My primary passion is liberty. (Besnier, 1995:13). Tocqueville ambition was a successfully implementation of democratic regime in France and the rest of the world. Besnier explained that Tocqueville loved liberty and was afraid of democracy because he knew that the evolution towards democracy was irresistible and that democracy poses a threat to liberty in the sense that it prevents individuals from taking charge of themselves (Besnier, 1995:12). He held that freedom was a universal good, which all people need from birth but forfeit when they give it up. He did however make a distinction amid democratic and aristocratic liberty. According to him the former involves enjoying privileges while the latter is based on everyone inherent right to follow their own path in life. The influence of Rousseau on Tocqueville is evident. Though he is in chains everywhere man is free at birth. A lot of men think they are the masters of people who are slaves just like them. He was argued that man must create himself by liberating himself from the aristocracy which was stifling humanity beforehand. He disagreed with the essentialist theory which held that the aristocracy sought to fix human nature but supported the existentialist thesis: existence comes before essence. In other words, man is offered an endless advancement. Man is defined not by what it is but by what must be (Besnier, 1995:12). We can comprehend historical shifts and how time affects people's lives by doing this and only then can we consider liberty. As soon as he finished writing his book on democracy, Tocqueville himself made the decision to apply his understanding of democracy to his own life. Furthermore, Besnier contended that Tocqueville was not attempting to analyze instruct or clarify for anyone how to experience liberty. The taste of freedom as he quoted him



“don’t ask me to explain this sublime flavor we must experience it for ourselves it naturally enters the heart that God has prepared to receive it. What does it take for people to be free?” (1995:15).

## Tocqueville on America

America is the only country in which it has been possible to witness the natural and tranquil growth of society and where their origin is clearly distinguishable. (Tocqueville, 1956:40).

One of the best accounts of the beginning of the Americans was rendered by Tocqueville in the first chapter of his book: *Democracy in America*. From him, we learnt that, the emigrants who came to America at different periods to occupy the land known today as the United States of America differed from each other in many respects. However, these men shared certain features. They spoke the same language, were born in a country where they had been obliged to put themselves under the protection of laws, their political education had been perfected and they were more conversant with the notion of right and the principles of freedom than any other people of Europe. According to Tocqueville, at the time of the first emigration, the township system, that fruitful germ of free institution was deeply rooted in the habit of the English and with it, the doctrine of sovereignty of the people had been introduced in the bosom of the monarchy of the house of Tudor... (Tocqueville, 1956: 40).

Moreover, the emigrants who settle on the shore of New England and who now extend their influence ... over the whole American world belonged to the independent classes of their native country. These settlers were intellectuals who received good moral and education and were also, known for their talents even in Europe. They belonged to the English sect, the austerity of whose principles had acquired for them, the name of Puritans. When they were persecuted by the government of England and were not comfortable with the habits of the society, the Puritans left their country in search of a better place where they could live according to their own opinion and worship God in freedom. Puritanism was less a political than religious doctrine. No sooner had they landed on the coast of what is today called America than they constituted a society by subscribing to the Mayflower Compact:

IN THE NAME OF GOD. AMEN. We, whose names underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread sovereign Lord King James, \$s. \$c., Having undertaken for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and the honor of our king and country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia; Do by these presents solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politick, for better ordering and preservation, and furtherance of the ends aforesaid: and by virtue hereof do enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions,

and offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience..... (Tocqueville, 1956: 43).

This happened in 1620, and was followed by many emigrants who came and joined the first settlers. A democracy much more perfect than the Athenian popular rule started in full. The general principles in the modern constitutions which were alien even to Europe of the seventeenth century: The intervention of people in public affairs, the free voting of taxes, the personal liberty, rule of law, equality, and trial by jury were all recognized and established by the laws of the first settlers of New World. Tocqueville, alluding to religion and liberty, argued that all this was made possible by the two different elements which, in other places have been in frequent hostility which in America have been admirably incorporated and combined with one another: Equality and liberty.

The people of every nation have ideals that characterize their political life, but according to Bryce, Americans are a special case (1920:20), their ideals have remarkably endured. Throughout their history, they hang to the same set of values: liberty, equality, self-government which is rooted in the European heritage of the first settlers. Later immigrants adopted these ideals as each new generation of Americans has discovered, there is no fixed way to live without these principles. This heritage found expression in the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1776, followed by the declaration of independence from England and the writing of the constitution. These ideals continue to endure even at the birth of the American Republic when they were put into the Declaration of the Independence and the constitution.

### a. Liberty.

The declarations that people are entitled to life liberty and the pursuit of happiness and we hold these truths to be self-evident and all men are created equal (Jefferson) are echoed in the declaration of independence. According to Patterson (2005:75), liberty is the idea that people are free to act and think however they please as long as, they don’t violate the rights and liberties of others. The idea of liberty at the time the constitution was drafted (1787) was to shield citizens from unjustified government meddling in their personal affairs. But for instance the first amendment outlines a series of measures that prohibit Congress from passing legislation that restricts the free exercise of religion or that establishes it or that restricts the freedom of speech or the press or that restricts the people’s ability to peacefully assemble and petition the government for a remedy of their grievances. Patterson (2005:75) Recent accomplishments include civil liberties which are fundamental freedoms that people enjoy and that the government cannot restrict and civil rights which are the rights and privileges that Americans have simply by virtue of being citizens. Along with the right to vote and the prohibition of discrimination in employment and education the government must safeguard the freedoms of speech and religion. To understand the importance in America, let’s turn to History. With widespread social and





economic equality, democracy spread throughout the American frontier. For the fact that slavery was a social and economic institution especially in the eleven Southern states, numerous organizations were founded to support the exodus of Black Americans to places where they would be treated more equally and freely. The character of society had not changed much by the time Tocqueville visited America in 1800.

## **b. Equality.**

The idea of equality is complicated. Patterson defines equality as the belief that every person has the same moral value legal standing and political voice (2005: G-4). Egalitarians whose name comes from the French word “égalité” may accept that each person is unique and even recognize that people are born with different abilities opportunities and characteristics. Therefore, equality does not imply sameness or identity rather it can take many different forms including equality of (living) conditions political equality, social equality, gender equality, racial equality, and moral equality. As Tocqueville clarified, Equality of conditions includes all aspects of peoples well-being including wages personal autonomy material possessions work and even political opportunities. Tocqueville argued that equality is the driving force behind democracy, though it can also lead to uniformity and mediocrity. As he stated “the hatred men bear to privileges become nearer and less considerable...” (1935:6). Critics like Boesche (1983:123) affirmed that Tocqueville feared that the passion for liberty might lead to a new kind of despotism.

## **c. Self-government**

According to Patterson, self-government is the idea that the people are the rightful owners and ultimate source of power, in actuality this is a majority rule system of government (2005: G-10). As implied by the opening line of the constitution “We the people”, this merely states that the people of the United States have the authority to govern themselves. Alluding to that Abraham Lincoln popular speech at Gettysburg in 1863 where declared that democracy is the government of the people by the people and for the people Abraham. Tocqueville went on to explain that the spirit of equality liberty and self-government persisted even after England colonized America (1956: 44–45). As if their loyalty was solely owed to God they (Americans) consistently exercised their sovereignty by appointing their magistrates establishing peace regulations and passing laws. The preservation of morality and order in the community was the legislators’ top priority. American colonies developed economically and enjoyed a high degree of liberty and self-government. Due in large part to the religious freedom they were enjoying the colonies became increasingly diverse and different from other European nations as emigrants from various European nations including Germans Scots French Protestants and others joined over time.

## **Equality of Condition**

In his Introduction to Democracy in America Tocqueville told us the new things he saw while in the United States nothing more strongly affected him than the

overall equality of people’s circumstances. (1956:26). Tocqueville was also quick to point out that France and the rest of Europe were seeing advancement in the same trend toward equality. I said. The most consistent oldest and most enduring trend in history is the great democratic revolution that is occurring among us as all men can see. Tocqueville (1956:26). In fact he discussed the development of nobility and the division of rights between masses and the elite in his introduction detailing the history of Europe. He described how social equality has occurred in recent centuries how nobility’s power has waned and how the common citizen now has more rights privileges and power than the aristocracy. The French Revolution and the resistance to kings and emperors were the topics of his discussion. Prior to writing his book in 1835, *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville observed that almost every major event that had occurred in the preceding seven centuries had aided and prolonged the movement toward equality of condition. For example, the development of firearms made the vassal and the noble equal in the battlefield (ibid). All classes were able to access the same information, thanks to the printing art. Even the growth of post offices aided in the advancement of equality. The post office brought knowledge and information to both the palace gate and the cottage door he stated (1956:26). Many new avenues for financial success were made possible by the discovery of America also known as the New World. Consider both the global population shift from rural to urban areas and the socialist and communist movements of the 20th century.

Urbanization and governmental socialism two, contemporary movements hasten the process of equalizing conditions. In an aristocratic each wealthy aristocrat is the head of a permanent and obligatory association made up of all those who are dependent upon him or whom he subordinates to the enactment of his plans, we speak of equality of conditions when the members are independent of one another and none are subservient to one another (1957:199). In democratic societies the social relationship between an employer and his employees is characterized by the independence of the members, unlike in the past when the two were dependent or/and subservient to one another they are now social partners in a joint venture. The gap between the two has shrunk as a result of the consistent increase in worker wages relative to employer profits making social conditions more equal between them. As a democratic condition, social equality does not imply that all people are created equal in every way including wealth income and social standing. It also does not call for a general leveling of society where all people are reduced to the same level. It is true that social inequality and class distinctions are unavoidable in a democracy based on individual liberty. People are free to choose and partake in any legal profession or activity they like which leads to social inequality. The fact that they apply their vastly different skills and talents to these jobs and activities leads to social inequality. The intellectual gifts come straight from God and man is powerless to stop their unequal distribution. (Tocqueville, 1956: 54).

This does not imply that social disparities among individuals are compatible with democracy. Instead they



endanger the democratic ideal of equal access to the political system. Disparities in wealth and income lead to differences in political influence a commentator claims. The ability to influence political campaigns and lobbying is made possible by economic power that comes from wealth. Tocqueville argues that the equality of conditions principle implies and demands that society not be divided into a hereditary aristocracy or nobility (with special privileges) and the common people as was the case in France prior to the start of the revolution. In order to maintain a spirit of equality society must not be divided into extremes such as, the very rich and the very poor, the elite and the peasantry, the educated and the illiterate, or those who are separated from one another by a significant gap in opportunities and living standards. The hallmark of early American society was the lack of such a circumstance which was known as the general equality of conditions.

## Effects of Equality of Condition

Tocqueville believed that equality of conditions was a necessary and desirable aspect of democracy but it could also be a danger to a thriving democracy. According to his observations the first effect was the populations gradual sterilization of all social differences including class regional local and associative. Naturally this is the outcome of the social diversity that was supported by the leveling of ranks in the society that existed during the middle Ages and the centuries preceding the French Revolution. The centralization of power is the second effect which is closely associated with the first; because the homogenous mass of people is what left over after the population social barriers have been removed. Therefore, the central government is the only means by which this undifferentiated mass can express its desires. As a result, there is a connection between social equality and the concentration of power. Loving equality or convincing men that you love it, is the most important—indeed the only—condition needed to successfully centralize the ultimate authority in a democratic society. As a result, the once-complex science of despotism is essentially reduced to a single principle. (Tocqueville, 1956:301). Lower literary and artistic standards are the third consequence of egalitarianisms combination with centralization, according to him nobody can write or do anything that will be praised when people share the same opinions. This kind of circumstance will lead to a public perception that despises excellence and superiority and only finds fetish in the things that all men are perceived to share. (Tocqueville, 1956:48). Next is tyranny of the majority, the fourth consequence of equality of conditions. In the United States if a person or party is harmed to whom can he turn for redress? If it is public opinion the majority is represented if it is the legislative branch, it represents the majority and implicitly obeys it, if it is the executive branch it is appointed by the majority and acts as a passive instrument in its hands. The public force includes the ability to hear court cases and in some states the majority even elects judges. (Ibid). He did however distinguish between arbitrary power and tyranny. According to him tyranny can be exercised through the law itself in which case it is not arbitrary tyranny on the other hand can be exercised for the

benefit of the public in which case it is tyrannical. Tyranny typically uses arbitrary means but it can also do without them, if necessary. Additionally, he stated, I am aware of no nation where there is as little philosophical freedom and genuine freedom of speech as America. Tocqueville (1956:117). According to him this phenomenon is known as the tyranny of the majority. In America individual freedom of thought only exists as long as the majority has not formed its own. Afterwards, all opposing opinions must stop and all debates must be dropped. Egalitarianism reaches deeper into the specifics of life and leaves no way out. Rejection rather than physical punishment serves as its sanction. You may keep your civil rights but they will be of no use to you because you will never be elected by your fellow citizens if you ask for their support and they will treat you with contempt if you do so. You will still live among people but you won't have access to human rights.

Your fellow creatures will reject you as an unclean creature and even those who think you are innocent will leave you so they won't be rejected in return. (1956:118). It is unacceptable for society to impose restrictions on individual liberty through the moral coercion of public opinion rather than law. Individuality must not be sacrificed on the altar of equality which should not be elevated to the status of an idol. Although both are undoubtedly necessary and fundamental to societal happiness individuality—the ability to be unique—has a legitimate claim to priority and pride in a democracy. Tocqueville argues that the individual is a subject in all matters pertaining to the obligations that citizens have towards one another, he is free and solely accountable to God for his own affairs. The adage everyone is the best and sole judge of his own private interest thus emerges. Furthermore, society has no authority to dictate a man's behavior unless it is detrimental to the common good or the good requires his assistance. (1956:58). Democracy is useless without respect for each person's uniqueness and freedom of dissent. Man must prioritize his individuality over the need for equality with other members of society because he is first and foremost an individual human being. Therefore, equality must coexist with respect for each person's freedom and individuality in order for a democracy to last.

Additionally, he maintained that democratization might result in individualism rather than egotism. Individualism in his opinion is a problem that grows in proportion to the equality of conditions. He claimed that in aristocracies every individual in a society—from peasants to kings—is a link in a chain of duty. As a result, each has strong ties to a number of people from various social classes. As a result, each of them perceives a man beneath himself whose cooperation he may claim and a man above himself whose patronage he needs. This implies that they forget themselves far too frequently according to Tocqueville. On the other hand, in democracies people tend to forget about the past and the future and are increasingly inclined to think of themselves as self-made men meaning they have no obligations to anyone and no one owes them anything and that they are in complete control of their own lives. All community members from the peasant to the king have



been arranged in a chain by the aristocracy, democracy breaks this chain at every link. (1956:104).

## CONCLUSION

It is a providential fact that the equality principle developed gradually. It applies to everyone. It is resilient consistently avoids human intervention and all events and men contribute to its advancement. Tocqueville (1956:35). The democratic wind that blew across the world was providential and inevitable as Tocqueville was the first modern thinker to clearly state that. Even in his home country of France, democracy had not yet been established when he made this prophecy in the early 1800s following his trip to America. What he called the irresistible revolution was then sweeping through France. Additionally, he emphasized that. This is so that we can find the indisputable evidence of Gods will, to try to stifle democracy would be to oppose Gods will. Tocqueville (1956:30). Since Tocqueville lived in the nineteenth century he witnessed the advancements of the twenty-first century according to one commentator. His prophecy has partially materialized today; democratization is both universal and non-irresistible. Monarchies one-party systems and military coups are no longer acceptable. Though some analysts have lost faith in the consolidation of popular rule in certain countries due to the crisis-ridden democratic experience in these nations, democracy, as of now, it is still the best universally accepted system of government. He didn't only While analyzing American Democracy, Tocqueville did not only see threats to democratization but also suggested political liberty expressed in in the freedom of press, freedom of association, rule of law and decentralization are bulwarks against despotism, individualism and tyranny of majority which are obstacles to democratic growth in any country. (Olaoye E.O. 2001: 1). Tocqueville's Political liberty is the only solution to Francophone West African countries chocked with democratization issues Olaoye E.O.

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