

Democracy in America – Political Theory

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Edited by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Reader Abstract: This reader is designed to introduce students to the political ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville as derived from his observations of the United States. The readings focus on the themes of equality vs. freedom, individualism and self-interest, democracy vs. aristocracy, and the freedom of press, association, and religion. The first two sessions present potential dangers of democracy, and the final two sessions attempt to address the perceived problems.

Session I: Equality & Individualism (25 pages)

Volume I, Part I (4 pages)

Chapter 4, On the Principle of the Sovereignty of the People in America

Volume I, Part II (1 page)

Chapter 1, How One Can Say Strictly That in the United States the People Govern

Volume II, Part I (12 pages)

Chapter 1, On the Philosophic Method of the Americans

Chapter 2, On the Principal Source of Beliefs among Democratic Peoples

Chapter 8, How Equality Suggests to the Americans the Idea of the Indefinite Perfectibility of Man

Volume II, Part II (8 pages)

Chapter 1, Why Democratic Peoples Show a More Ardent and More Lasting Love for Equality than for Freedom

Chapter 2, On Individualism in Democratic Countries

Chapter 3, How Individualism Is Greater at the End of a Democratic Revolution than in Any Other Period

Session Abstract: The readings in this session introduce some of the major points of tension in Tocqueville's observations, particularly the tension between equality and freedom and how the ideas relate to a democratically governed people. These selections also offer contrasts between European democracies and the U.S. democracy. The latter two sections deal with individualism, presenting problems that Tocqueville addresses in the session four selections.

Session II: The Tyranny of the Majority & Soft Despotism (18 pages)

Volume I, Part II (5 pages)

Chapter 7, On the Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States and Its Effects: How the Omnipotence of the Majority in American Increases the Legislative and Administrative Instability That is Natural to Democracies (pages 235-238)

Chapter 8, On What Tempers the Tyranny of the Majority in the United States: Absence of Administrative Centralization (page 250)

Volume II, Part IV (13 pages)

Chapter 6, What Kind of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear

Chapter 7, Continuation of the Preceding Chapters

Session Abstract: The readings of this session deal with the problem of the tyranny of the majority and the unique form of despotism that can potentially arise from majority rule, as contrasted to the form of despotism that can afflict monarchies or aristocracies.

Session III: Preserving American Democracy I (51 pages)

Volume I, Part II (22 pages)

Chapter 2, On Parties in the United States

Chapter 3, On Freedom of the Press in the United States

Chapter 4, On Political Association in the United States

Volume I, Part II (30 pages)

Chapter 6, What Are the Real Advantages That American Society Derives from the Government of Democracy

Chapter 9, On the Principal Causes Tending to Maintain a Democratic Republic in the United States

Session Abstract: These readings offer prerequisites for the preservation of democracy through the political structure. It begins with an assessment of the party system present in the United States at the time and how party distinctions dealt with the tensions between majority rule and popular sovereignty. The subsequent selections present the freedom of the press and association as necessary elements of a successful democracy. The final two readings apply the ideas to the particularities of the United States, with emphasis on the role of religion in politics and culture.

Session IV: Preserving American Democracy II (22 pages)

Volume II, Part II (22 pages)

Chapter 4, How the Americans Combat Individualism with Free Institutions

Chapter 5, On the Use That the Americans Make of Association in Civil Life

Chapter 6, On the Relation between Associations and Newspapers

Chapter 7, Relations between Civil Associations and Political Associations

Chapter 8, How the Americans Combat Individualism by the Doctrine of Self-Interest Well Understood

Chapter 9, How the Americans Apply the Doctrine of Self-Interest Well Understood in the Matter of Religion

Session Abstract: The final session deals with the cultural elements of American democracy that make it more successful than European democracies. In particular are the notions of individualism and self-interest, and how the application of free association helps channel these potentially dangerous human characteristics into something that helps preserve the democratic government of the United States.