Democracy in America – Political Theory

Discussion Colloquium
Sponsored by the Institute for Humane Studies
116 pages


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 1: Equality & Individualism (25 pages)

Volume I, Part I


Volume I, Part II

- Chapter 1, “How One Can Say Strictly That in the United States the People Govern,” page 165.

Volume II, Part I


Volume II, Part II


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

Volume I, Part II


Volume II, Part IV

- Chapter 7, “Continuation of the Preceding Chapters,” pages 666-673.

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 3: Preserving American Democracy I (51 pages)

Volume I, Part II


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 4: Preserving American Democracy II (22 pages)

Volume II, Part II

- Chapter 4, “How the Americans Combat Individualism with Free Institutions,” pages 415-416.
- Chapter 7, “Relations between Civil Associations and Political Associations,” pages 425-426.
• Chapter 8, “How the Americans Combat Individualism by the Doctrine of Self-Interest Well Understood,” pages 426-428.

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.