
Tocqueville - the Persistence of a Democratic Republic

How is it that, almost 180 years after it was written, Americans today still read Tocqueville as if it were the most essential piece of American political thought? Maybe it's because it is.

When reading chapters 7 through 10 of Volume 1, Part 2 in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, it is important to realize not only the political ideas that Tocqueville is formulating, but also what he is saying about human nature and its relationship to political America. For a democratic government to be successful, Tocqueville argues, special focus must be placed upon the idea that something beyond the concept of a civic religiosity must exist, and that a political religion of equality and individualism are not enough to sustain democracy. A certain pietas or piety to something greater than a political creed needs to take shape in a democratic government. This piety in America, Tocqueville concludes, belongs to religion, and as long as Americans remain aware of this idea, they will have a very successful and sustainable democracy.

Tocqueville spends Chapters 7 and 8 describing the biggest threat to democracy in America—the omnipotence and tyranny of the majority—and how the political and social uniqueness of America successfully hampers the effects of this tyranny. Tocqueville makes it clear that the issues surrounding Chapter 7 are very delicate indeed, calling the consequences “dire and dangerous” (pg. 237), and even going so far as to say that “there is no freedom of mind in America” (pg. 245). By the time Tocqueville finishes up the chapter by quoting Jefferson on the issue of the tyranny of the legislature, it seems as though America has been given the label of “doomed” by Tocqueville. There is no escape from this tyranny, it seems, and Americans may as well start preparing themselves for a revolution.

But Tocqueville does not stop here. Instead he continues his analysis of America by offering a much more optimistic criticism of why and how America will be able to sustain a democratic government. On this issue Tocqueville is very clear: the mores of America are what make it so unique from other democratic countries. Certain qualities of American political and social life such as the aristocratic nature of lawyers and the influence of the jury help to mitigate the influence of the majority; lawyers provide a counterweight to the effects of democracy by demonstrating a conservative and traditional approach remnant of aristocratic methods, and the responsibility of the jury helps to spread this spirit.

Tocqueville then goes on to explain the principle causes that help to maintain such a successful democracy. Although Tocqueville makes it clear that due respect must be paid to the brilliance of the political and constitutional system that helps to foster democracy in America, he

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seems to be far more interested in what he believes is the true reason behind such a successful democracy—a “democratic, republican Christianity” (pg 275). It is his analysis of religion in America that proves to be the most insightful, and—in several ways—the most influential criticism that Tocqueville has to offer for the people of America. By analyzing the human nature involved in the politics of democratic government, Tocqueville strikes at the heart of the issue. Perhaps no quote sums it up better than the paragraph in the first few pages of his section on the power of religion in America. Here, Tocqueville notes that, just as Aristotle believed that man was by nature a political animal, man is also by nature a religious animal. Although the two may indeed be part of the same nature, however, their separation is key to the success and sustainability of a democratic government. Religion is meant to stand alone in its quest for faith, not upon the shoulders of politics or some civic creed. It is only in this way that democratic countries like America can succeed.

This issue seems to be at the heart of all of Tocqueville. The necessity of a creed beyond the dedication to political equality, a belief in religion to counterweight the chaotic effects of democracy that tore apart Tocqueville’s France—these are the ideas that Democracy in America is concerned with, and this is the way in which Tocqueville is convinced the United States will prosper.

That prosperity, however, is fragile. As Tocqueville points out in Chapter 10, the threats to democracy in America, including the forthcoming slave problem, will never cease to exist. As he notes later in the book, citizens of a democratic republic often times show a remarkable fervor for equality, and if this fervor ever completely overshadows the existing devotion to religion, Tocqueville fears, then the democratic government that he holds as a model for the rest of the world is sure to crumble underneath the pressure of the same fate that doomed his home country.

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