

Democracy in America Summary

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The project Tocqueville undertook in writing *Democracy in America* was a highly ambitious one. Having seen the failed attempts at democratic government in his native France, he wanted to study a stable and prosperous democracy to gain insights into how it worked. His studies had led him to conclude that the movement toward democracy and equality of conditions while it had progressed the farthest in America was a universal phenomenon and a permanent historical tendency that could not be stopped. Since this democratic trend was inevitable, Tocqueville wanted to analyze it in order to determine its strengths and dangers so that governments could be formed to reinforce democracy's strengths while counteracting its weaknesses. Therefore, while *Democracy in America* may at times seem to be a rather disorganized collection of observations and thoughts on American democracy, it is possible to gain a coherent sense of the work as a whole by looking at all of Tocqueville's various and sundry remarks through the lens of one paramount theme: the preservation of liberty in the midst of a growing equality of conditions. Volume One, the more optimistic half of the book, focuses mostly on the structure of government and the institutions that help to maintain freedom in American society. Volume Two focuses much more on individuals and the effects of the democratic mentality on the thoughts and mores prevalent in society. Taking the work as a whole, one finds that main problems of a democracy are the following: a disproportionately high portion of power in the legislative branch, an abuse of or lack of love for freedom, an excessive drive for equality, individualism, and materialism. The elements that Tocqueville believes can most successfully combat these dangerous democratic tendencies are: an independent and influential judiciary, a strong executive branch, local self-government, administrative de-centralization, religion, well-educated women, freedom of association, and freedom of the press.

First, let us examine the dangers that Tocqueville sees facing American democracy. Most of the problems lie in societal attitudes and tendencies, but there are a few institutional difficulties as well. The first of these is the preponderance of legislative power. Because the legislature is most directly representative of the will of the people, democracies tend to give it the most power of all the governmental branches. Yet if there are not sufficient checks on this power, it can easily become tyrannical. A related constitutional issue that weakens the independence of the executive and therefore indirectly increases the power of the legislature is the ability of the president to be re-elected. At first glance it is not obvious why this feature of American government weakens the president's power. It would seem, in fact, to increase his influence by allowing him to remain in office longer. The problem is that if the President has hopes of being re-elected, he will lose much of his ability to make independent decisions based on his judgments. Instead, he will have to bow to the whims of the people, constantly trying to make them happy although they may not have the knowledge to judge what the best action for the country as a whole might be. Indirectly, therefore, allowing the President to run for re-election increases the danger of the tyranny of the majority. Another problem with the constitutional organization of American democracy is the direct election of representatives and the short duration of their time in office. These provisions

result in the selection of a mediocre body of representatives as well as in the inability of representatives to act according to their best judgment, since they must constantly be worrying about public opinion. By contrast, the Senate, whose members are elected indirectly and serve longer terms in office, is composed of intelligent and well-educated citizens. Perhaps it will be necessary to switch to a system of indirect election for representatives as well. Otherwise, the laws will continue to be mediocre and often contradictory. If the state of affairs continues, people may tire of the ineptitude of the system and abandon democracy all together.

The overriding but more intangible danger facing democracies is simply their excessive love for equality. In fact, even the institutional problems are really only symptoms of this deeper mindset which all democratic peoples tend to have. The doctrine of the sovereignty of the people and the power of public opinion are corollaries to the idea of equality. If all are equal, then no one person has any basis to claim the right to rule over another. The only just way to run a society, therefore, is to base decisions on the will of the majority. Yet the problem with this idea is that it can quite easily lead to despotism. Despotism can come at the hands of a single person or a multitude. In the case of a democracy, there is a grave danger that the majority will become despotic. If there are no checks on the power of the majority to influence the government, then it will have absolute power and those in the minority will be helpless to resist. Perhaps even more insidious is the sheer moral force that the opinion of the majority has on society. As it has already been noted, if all are equal then no one opinion has greater weight than another. The logical conclusion is that the opinion held by the majority must be the best one. As a result, there is a tendency to abandon freedom of thought in democratic societies. Going against the opinion of the majority is seen as an indirect claim to the superiority of one's own opinion, which is directly contradictory to the principle of equality. This form of tyranny, therefore, can be seen as even worse than past tyrannies which involved great physical coercion and brutality. In a powerful passage in Chapter 7, Tocqueville states, "Formerly tyranny used the clumsy weapons of chains and hangmen; nowadays even despotism, though it seemed to have nothing to learn, has been perfected by civilization. . . . Under the absolute government of a single man, despotism, to reach the soul, clumsily struck at the body, and the soul, escaping from such glows, rose gloriously above it; but in democratic republics that is not at all how tyranny behaves; it leaves the body alone and goes straight for the soul."

Two other side-effects of equality both of which also increase the likelihood of despotism are individualism and materialism. As Tocqueville points out, "individualism is of democratic origin, and threatens to grow as conditions get more equal." The reason for this phenomenon is that equality tends to make people's interests focus in on themselves. There are no societal bonds or duties as there are in an aristocracy which link people together and force them to realize their dependence on one another. Individualism can contribute to the growth of despotism because if citizens become too individualistic they will not bother to fulfill their civic duties or exercise their freedom. Materialism results from a passion for equality because people think that they ought to be able to have as much wealth as everyone else. Indirectly, materialism also comes from the philosophical tendency fostered by democracies to disdain lofty ideas or thoughts of eternity. The effect of materialism is that people may be so absorbed in their personal pursuit of wealth that they neglect to use their political freedom. Further, people may actually willingly abandon their freedom in order to have a benevolent despotism which can provide an orderly society and ensure material prosperity.

Fortunately, however, Tocqueville does recognize the existence of institutions which can help to preserve liberty even in the midst of these despotic tendencies. Constitutionally, the independent judiciary, with the power of judicial review, is extremely important. Because it can proclaim certain laws unconstitutional, the Supreme Court provides practically the only check on the tyranny of the majority. Judges are appointed, not elected, and they serve life terms, giving them a great deal of independence to make the decisions that they think best without needing to worry excessively about public opinion. A related beneficial institution in the American system is the jury. While juries may not always be the best means of attaining justice, they serve a very positive political function of forcing the citizens to think about other people's affairs and educating them in the use of their freedom. For these reasons, Tocqueville believes that the jury system is "one of the most effective means of popular education" (Chapter 8). Much like the jury system, the administrative decentralization which allows for local self-government is absolutely crucial as a means to keep liberty alive by allowing the citizens to exercise it frequently. The existence of local liberties is one of the most significant differences between America and France. Tocqueville attributes the failure of the French Revolution mainly to the overwhelming administrative centralization which took away the citizens' ability to exercise their freedom, making them lose a taste for it and forget how to exercise it.

Non-institutional factors which help to maintain freedom in the United States are the right of association, the freedom of the press, and most importantly religion. Associations are an excellent tool to combat individualism and to allow people to exercise their freedom by taking a part in politics. The press is intimately connected to associations in that associations need a means of communicating with their members and also a means of spreading their message to the public as a whole. In America, religion is much more than another type of association and is highly beneficial both politically and societally. Religion teaches people how to use their freedom well. Since the government provides no absolute standards, it is necessary that religion provide some moral boundaries. As Tocqueville remarks, "Despotism may be able to do without faith, but freedom cannot. . . . How could a society escape destruction if, when political ties are relaxed, moral ties are not tightened? And what can be done with a people master of itself if it is not subject to God?" (Chapter 9). By bringing people together in a community of common belief, religion also combats individualism. Furthermore, religion is practically the only means of counteracting the materialistic tendencies of democratic peoples. Religion turns peoples minds beyond the physical, material aspects of life to the immortal and eternal. So strongly does Tocqueville see the necessity for such a force in democratic society that he warns society's leaders not to try to disturb the people's faith, for fear that "the soul may for a moment be found empty of faith and love of physical pleasures come and spread and fill all."

One can clearly see that most, if not all, of the divergent strands of Democracy in America come together when examining the relationship between freedom and equality in society. Above all, Tocqueville has a passionate love for liberty and is concerned to point out the dangerous trends that threaten to destroy it as well as the means by which it can be preserved. In the last few lines of the book, Tocqueville writes, "The nations of our day cannot prevent conditions of equality from spreading in their midst. But it depends upon themselves whether equality is to lead to servitude or freedom, knowledge or barbarism, prosperity or wretchedness." Tocqueville's hope

is that through the insights he has communicated in this work, humanity will be better able direct themselves toward freedom, knowledge and prosperity.