

Olivier Berg

### Is de Tocqueville an optimist or a pessimist about the prospects for democracy?

In this essay, I argue that de Tocqueville is a cautious optimist about the prospects for democracy. He argues for inevitability and superiority of democracy, but he is anxious about the social and psychological consequences of democracy. But, though he sees problems arising from the increased salience of democracy, he also proposes solutions for these problems. First, I will explain that he thinks that democracy is inevitable, and that his book *Democracy in America* serves as an exploration of how the negative effects of political power in democracies can be mitigated. Then, I will outline some of his concerns with regard to the negative sides of democracy. He is afraid of the tyranny of the majority, both in the sense that the majority can oppress the minority through elections and the creation of laws, but also the psychological side where people start self-censoring and being 'politically correct' to fit into the majority. Furthermore, he is also anxious about other psychological effects of democracy such as the increased individualism, obsession over money, and constant comparison with others. Finally, I will argue that he is still optimistic about democracy and outline some of his solutions to the problems he observed as he believes that decentralization, civil associations, religion and 'self-interest well understood' can combat the problems he diagnosed.

#### *Democracy in America*

In the introduction of *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville argues that the rise of democracy is inevitable. First, he argues that the spread of equality is a 'providential fact' (Vol. 1, Author's Introduction). He shows that throughout history, the aristocracy has become more and more equal with the poorer masses. The foundation of the clergy, the salience of civil laws, and the rise of the bourgeoisie were all processes which raised the people to the level of nobles. De Tocqueville views this effect as an historical trend driven by economic changes which will lead to the inevitable rise of democracy.

He, because of this, does not think that we can resist the inevitable rise of democracy. The question becomes then whether de Tocqueville believes that this change will be positive or negative. He acknowledges that democracy can increase human dignity, equality, and social mobility. He says that he is 'full of tears and of hopes', that he sees 'great perils and great remedies' (Vol. 1, Author's Introduction). Clearly, he believes that democracy can be positive, but only if moderated correctly.

This, I think, is the purpose of his book. He is attempting to educate the French aristocracy on how to moderate democratic excesses. He, as he was from France, understood how bad democracy could work. During the French Revolution, the

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Explain concepts better.

democratic regime had some very bad effects. His aim was to find out how freedom could be protected against political power. For this, he travelled to America as the democracy in the United States could be classified as much 'gentler', and it seemed to get around many of the problems that the French had – we would call it 'liberal democracy' today.

#### *Tyranny of the majority*

To understand de Tocqueville's cautious optimism about democracy, it is first necessary to look at his criticisms against democracy. His first criticism is the tyranny of the majority. It is important to distinguish between two different versions of the tyranny of the majority. The first one is just that in a democracy, the will of the majority prevails. Elections and laws are decided by the majority who are then able to suppress the minority. And this power is not tempered by a class of educated elites as in an aristocratic system (Vol. 1, Part 2, Chapter 7).

The second way the tyranny of the majority works is more psychological. He explains this further in the second volume of *Democracy of America*. De Tocqueville warns of intellectual despotism: people self-censor to avoid the disapproval of the majority. This discourages independent thinking and can be seen today as 'political correctness'. As a result, although Americans have freedom of speech, de Tocqueville argues, they do not really use it. The rise in equality is at odds with liberty. Equality leads to the intellectual tendency to uniformity, reducing the freedom for independent thought and critical thinking.

Although the first problem can be addressed somewhat successfully, the second one is more difficult. De Tocqueville argues that France was not successful in limiting the power of the majority because it was too centralized. The United States had a highly decentralized system which limited the reach of the central government, and which prevented the majority from oppressing the minority. He particularly praises townships, the smallest unit of local government in the United States, as they decentralize power and foster civic culture and they 'are to liberty what primary schools are to science' (Vol. 1, Part 1, Chapter 5). And he highlights how the American legal system is good at restraining popular passions (Vol. 1, Part 2, Chapter 8). However, the second issue is more difficult to solve though he does say that it can be mitigated with religion and civil associations.

#### *Psychological effects*

In the second volume in particular, de Tocqueville focuses on the psychological effects that democracy has on its citizens. Here I will focus on a few of these. He argues that

democracy makes people more individualistic, materialistic, and restless. And he argues that 'self-interest well understood' is the guiding principle for behaviour in a democratic society.

As societies transition from aristocratic to democratic values, the orientation of individuals also changes. Aristocratic societies are grounded in hierarchy, duty, and honour, fostering a strong sense of place, tradition, and collective responsibility. In contrast, democratic societies, emphasizing equality and mobility, weaken traditional bonds and promote a sense of autonomy. This transition leads, in de Tocqueville's view, to a rise in individualism. Citizens in democracies become preoccupied with their personal affairs and well-being. They become more materialistic and get obsessed with making money.

Furthermore, because of the increase in equality they also become restless. When inequality is large, differences between people are not as tangible. But when people are more equal, small differences between people become much more important. As a result, people become restless and always compare themselves to others (Vol. 2, Part 2).

Luckily, de Tocqueville does not only diagnose these problems, he also shows solutions. He argues that 'self-interest well understood' can combat the individualism which results from democracy. The idea is that Americans have a form of enlightened self-interest in which individuals recognize that promoting the common good ultimately serves their own interests. For example, volunteering, voting, or obeying the law can all be understood as actions that ultimately benefit oneself by contributing to the common good. This way, society does not have to rely on more aristocratic virtues but can rely on people's self-interested behaviour.

Lastly, de Tocqueville also believed that civil associations could combat this individualism. They foster habits of cooperation and civic responsibility. And they provide individuals with a sense of dignity that mitigates the isolating effects of individualism. This also makes him a strong advocate for religion and decentralized local government (Vol. 2, Part 2, Chapter 5).

In conclusion, de Tocqueville should be seen as a cautious optimist about democracy. He believes that the increased democratization is inevitable and with his book he tries to educate the reader how to deal with the excesses of democracy. He does not romanticize democracy, in fact, he is very critical of democracy and diagnoses its potential dangers, from the tyranny of the majority to more psychological effects of democracy such as individualism and restlessness. However, he believes that these can be somewhat overcome through decentralized government such as townships, civil

associations, religion, and 'self-interest well understood'. This way, he tries to solve the problem of how to balance between equality and liberty, two values which, according to de Tocqueville, are at odds with each other. Therefore, he is optimistic that democracy, which he sees as superior to other forms of government such as aristocracy, can be successful.

**Bibliography**

Alexis de Tocqueville *Democracy in America*.