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*Prompt #3-To what extent, if at all, does Tocqueville underestimate the advantages of democracy?*

### How Tocqueville's Ideal Democracy Compares to Reality

In Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, he outlines his view of American democracy and how it compares with the current aristocratic regime in France. Through this, he concludes that if a country is looking to be free and equal, democracy is the best option, but if a country is looking for grandeur and greatness, aristocracy is preferable—though a choice may not be possible due to the global trend towards democracy<sup>1</sup>. However, this opinion is based on claims that are not entirely accurate. After all, Tocqueville is writing through the lens of his current position, as he is a member of the aristocracy writing in the 1830s, so his idea of free and equal is more conservative than what is currently considered free and equal. Generally, Tocqueville overlooks some of the antidemocratic facets of the American case, though some of his core arguments are accurate.

Tocqueville's idea of a free and equal system of government is flawed; his idea of what free and equal means is skewed through the lens of his time and position. Moreover, he also tends to make incorrect claims about how American democracy was crafted, warping his views even further. One of the largest inaccuracies Tocqueville makes is in regards to voting. When outlining his argument on why the people govern the nation, he incorrectly states that “the people appoint both those who make the laws and those who execute them”<sup>2</sup>. He also claims that “The members of both houses have been chosen from the same class and appointed in the same way”<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (Harper & Row, 1966), 245.

<sup>2</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 173.

<sup>3</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 246.

This, put simply, is mostly incorrect. It assumes that all members of the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the President are all directly elected by the people. In fact, only one of the three—the House of Representatives—was directly elected at the time. According to the United States Constitution, the following applies for electing the Senate:

“The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, chosen by the Legislature thereof”<sup>4</sup>

And the President is elected through the following clause:

“Each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors, equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress...The Electors shall meet in their respective States, and vote by Ballot”<sup>5</sup>

Put simply, neither one of these were elected by the general population, for they were elected by state legislatures and by Electors. Moreover, claiming that all people could vote is simply not the case, as by the 1830s, only white men could vote. While this is certainly more representative than aristocracies, it is not by any means the same as what Tocqueville describes. These errors bias Tocqueville’s picture of American democracy towards one of pure democracy instead of the democratic republic the United States is. While the American system of government is certainly more influenced by the people than monarchies were, it is still vital to note that voting rights and the election process of representatives were not as representative as Tocqueville may have alluded to.

While Tocqueville is inaccurate regarding voting and representation, he does accurately note some of the issues with democracy and how democratic systems act. For instance, he notes that democracies can be more inconsistent than an aristocracy, writing: “There is more

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<sup>4</sup> “U.S. Constitution | Constitution Annotated,” Library of Congress, <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/>, Article I, Section 3.

<sup>5</sup> “U.S. Constitution | Constitution Annotated,” Article II, Section 1.

consistency in one man's rule than in of a multitude"<sup>6</sup>. This statement is correct, for one person will have one opinion about a specific topic. If there are many people vying for control, then there are many ideas and opinions that are being presented, which is a staple of democracy. Moreover, Tocqueville writes that the press directly influences the people, which in turn modifies policy<sup>7</sup>. People are highly influenced by what they see, for the information they receive is all they have to work with. With freedom of the press, the press is able to do as it wishes with the ability to modify what information people get and, in turn, their views about a certain matter. Both of these concerns are accurate points to be made about the freedoms given by democracies as well as about how the democratic system of government works. In comparison to aristocracy, there is less consistency and more people to influence the collective opinion through the press.

Tocqueville further argues that democracy is majoritarian rule, and that while this is an issue, it is able to be tempered. Tocqueville states plainly, "The real advantage of democracy is not...to favor the prosperity of all, but only to serve the well-being of the greatest number"<sup>8</sup>. Simply put, the majority decides, and they choose what is best for them. In a system like the United States' system, the majority of voters are mostly able to enforce their will through representation, and they do so in a self-serving manner. However, there are ways to curb the majority's power, one of which is through the judicial system, which Tocqueville discussed at length<sup>9</sup>. According to Article III, Section 1 of the United States Constitution, the judiciary can serve for however long they remain in good behavior, which is usually until they either resign or die.<sup>10</sup> They are directly made to be outside of the wishes and wills of the due to this indefinite term limit, so they are able to act fairly and temper the majority. Tocqueville also argues that

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<sup>6</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 246.

<sup>7</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 180.

<sup>8</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 233.

<sup>9</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 270-6.

<sup>10</sup> "U.S. Constitution | Constitution Annotated," Article III, Section 1.

juries themselves teach people democracy and equity, tempering the tyranny of the majority<sup>11</sup>. These failsafes further assist democracies in being equitable, even when there are structural issues that allow majorities to easily dictate policy.

While Tocqueville does argue that there are problems and solutions with the democratic way of governing, he argues that aristocratic institutions such as families do not exist, which is simply not the case. In fact, he states that in America, “privileges of birth never existed and...wealth brings its possessor no peculiar right”<sup>12</sup>, which is not true. The existence of a family intrinsically lends itself to privileges and status, especially for those more well-off than others. In line with this, Tocqueville also contradicts himself regarding the power of money and private interests multiple times. For instance, when introducing how governance works in the United States, he argues that the people have the power, and that nothing can stop their wishes<sup>13</sup>. This alone would not be cause for concern, as it does not contradict his point. However, two pages later, Tocqueville then argues that “Private interest, which always plays the greatest part in political passions, is there more skillfully concealed beneath the veil of public interest”<sup>14</sup>. Instead of following his points regarding power distribution, Tocqueville instead changes his position, arguing that private interests are in fact the most important players in politics instead of the people themselves. Moreover, this also lies in direct contradiction to a statement four pages later, dictating that “one may say that the wealthy classes...are almost entirely outside politics”<sup>15</sup>. These conflicting views confuse the overall position and present that money is both important and unimportant in politics, which hinders the overall argument.

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<sup>11</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 272.

<sup>12</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 567.

<sup>13</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 173.

<sup>14</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 175.

<sup>15</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 179.

Another issue Tocqueville overlooks is the position and power of despotism in American democracy. While discussing the possibility of despotism, Tocqueville dismisses it, arguing that the habits of freedom are too much for it to overcome<sup>16</sup>. However, Tocqueville himself contradicts this statement seventeen pages later, arguing that if freedom is ever lost, it will be due to despotism and the omnipotence of the majority<sup>17</sup>. Tocqueville again argues that the United States is both vulnerable and not vulnerable to despotism, claiming that if democracy falls, it will be due to despotism, but despotism will likely never happen because of the habits of freedom. However, other philosophers disagree with Tocqueville, namely Plato in *The Republic*. Plato argues that democracy gives power to the one who is the best at obtaining it rather than the one who is best suited for this<sup>18</sup>. Plato further argues that a democratic system of governance will lead to despotism due to the favoring of people who are good at obtaining power rather than the ones who will yield it. Thus, Tocqueville is again idealistic about democracy, claiming that it could never fall to despotism while there are arguments, including ones that he makes, that despotism is a major threat to democracy.

In contrast to Tocqueville's contradictory arguments regarding wealth and despotism, he has a clear and direct argument for the freedom of assembly and associations in a democracy. Simply put, he argues that "No countries need associations more—to prevent either despotism of parties or the arbitrary rule of a prince—than those with a democratic social state"<sup>19</sup>. Tocqueville is strongly in favor of associations, and he argues that it is used to ensure against tyranny of the majority, and thus despotism as a whole. He also describes associations as means of expressing opinions and trying to implement change, as well as a place for general discussion. In this

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<sup>16</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 243.

<sup>17</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 260.

<sup>18</sup> Alan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd ed., 1968, 168.

<sup>19</sup> de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 192.

context, associations—especially political-oriented associations—wield immense power over politics, adding a further check by the people on the government. Tocqueville’s ideas are reflected in other writings, most prominently in Robert Putnam’s article “Bowling Alone”. Generally, Putnam argues that associations are vital for democracy, as they encourage social trust, assist in conflict resolution, and allow for communication networks to be established<sup>20</sup>. Putnam’s argument fits neatly into the broader idea Tocqueville proposes: associational life yields a positive effect for democracies as a whole, so the decline of associations in turn makes democracies less effective. Hence, Tocqueville is correct when regarding associational life, and later scholars’ writings supplement this claim.

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville gives a slightly skewed opinion favoring American-style democracy, emphasizing its freedoms and equality. However, he overvalues its freedom and sees American democracy as fully free and fully equal, when in fact it is a bit more complex. This does not detract from his points on associational life or his arguments about the flaws of a democratic way of governance. While democracy is majoritarian, it is vital to inspect who the whole is—whether that be an entire population or just white men. Associational life is vital and can prevent despots, but democracy is also made to favor those who can best get power, not those who can use it the best. It is also vital to inspect Tocqueville’s ideas from the view of a 1830s French aristocrat, which gives way for a more positive view of American representation and democracy, for any voting was scarce under an aristocracy. Thus, some inaccuracies may be able to be explained using that lens, though that does not negate their inaccuracy.

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<sup>20</sup> Robert D Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (1995): 65–78, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1995.0002>, 66.

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