
GOV 335M -- TOCQUEVILLE'S DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

University of Texas at Austin, Fall 2023

MWF, 11:00-12:00pm - GAR 3.116

INSTRUCTOR: Antonio Sosa (Mr. Sosa)

OFFICE HOURS: Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 3:00-4:30pm or by appointment

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Course Description

The course will consist in a close reading of the two volumes of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. The purpose of the course is to introduce students to Tocqueville's moderate defense of liberal democracy, the political order founded on the synthesis of liberty and equality. In contrast to the extreme views held in his day--the radical aristocratic view seeing democracy as inherently tyrannical and the radical democratic view seeing democracy as inherently just and well-ordered--Tocqueville's study of America was a qualified vindication of democracy as a political order in which liberty and equality, enlightenment and religion, self-interest and the common good, regard for human greatness and respect for the little guy, could be substantially harmonized, given the right laws and political institutions and, most importantly, the right mores.

In the first volume, we will cover the following topics: (a) Tocqueville's analysis of America's political institutions, particularly at the local level, as they existed in the 1830's, (b) his study of the interplay between American democracy and prominent civil institutions (e.g., political parties, the press), (c) his diagnosis of and prescription for the peculiar democratic ailment he calls "tyranny of the majority," (d) his understanding of the relation between religion and liberty, and (e) his account of the political and social relations between the "three races" that compose the United States and of what those relations portend for the future of American democracy.

In the second volume, we will cover the following topics: (a) Tocqueville's criticism of the diminution of the intellectual horizon of the democratic mind, (b) his argument about how self-interest may be "enlightened" in democratic times, (c) his view of the high status that compassion occupies in democratic times and of how this passion affects the way democratic citizens understand hierarchy and obedience, and (d) his general diagnosis of the deepest problems of democracy and the prospects for liberty, and for the preservation of man's humanity, in democratic times.

In studying Tocqueville, we will learn from a thinker who was both a deep critic *and* unshakeable friend of democracy. Because he understands what humanity gains as well as what it loses in democracy, he is in a position to teach democratic citizens and statesmen—of his time as well as ours—how to protect the gains and attenuate the losses. Guiding his understanding of these gains and losses is the notion, which underlies most of his work, that the equality and material comfort that democracy fosters tend to weaken the human desire to pursue high or noble ends connected with moral duty and intellectual pleasure. And yet there is no going back to aristocracy for Tocqueville, both because the progress of history makes that impossible and the demands of justice make that unreasonable. He therefore makes a great effort throughout his work, and

especially in *Democracy in America*, to show how human beings can be ennobled in democratic times and through democratic means, i.e., without abandoning the principle of equality. The issue is one of unrivalled importance for human happiness. For Tocqueville believes, as we shall see, that the long-term viability of democracy as a political order that is good for man ultimately depends on the ennobling of democratic man. This is the precise sense in which Tocqueville was, as he once said in a letter, a new kind of liberal.

Required Text

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). ISBN: 978-0226805368

Assignments and Grading Breakdown

1. Exams (40%) of grade: you will complete two take-home exams, each worth 25%. Both emphasize writing and both must be legibly handwritten.

To do well on the exams, I would strongly recommend going beyond simply keeping up with the readings; I would recommend taking notes on or at least underlining the most important or striking parts of the readings as you go through them on your own, taking notes in class, participating in class discussions, and studying your notes before the exam. Save for an extra-credit question here or there, the exam questions will cover material we have gone through in class. If you're keeping up with the readings and paying attention in class, nothing in the exams will surprise you.

2. Papers (40%) of grade: there are three papers in total, each of which will be 450-500 words in length (about 2 double-spaced pages) and legibly handwritten. Each paper will be an interpretation of a specific section or theme in *Democracy in America*, chosen by me, that makes an argument about that section or theme. I may ask you to give a defense of your paper in person after I've read it—the defense would consist of a 10-minute interview about the paper in which I ask you to expand upon some of the things you claimed or argued in your paper. The first two papers are worth 10% of your grade. The third is worth 20%.

3. Class participation (20%) of grade: active participation in class plus regular attendance. Please come to class having done the assigned reading and ready and eager to comment and ask questions. If you never speak up in class and never ask questions, your participation grade will suffer. Because paying attention in class is a big part of your participation grade, laptops and tablets are prohibited in my classroom. On certain days, I may decide to give a pop quiz on the assigned reading. These quizzes will affect your participation grade, for better or for worse. Your class participation grade will also be affected by absences. Barring a serious illness or incident related to your welfare or that of a family member, you should attend every class.

Reading Schedule: the readings for each date indicate what you need to have read *by* that date.

- August 21** General introduction to the class
Going through the syllabus
- 23 **Tocqueville's on the origins and political structure of the United States**
Democracy in America, Vol I, Part I, Introduction, pp. 3-15
Tocqueville's basic themes
- 25 Same reading continued
- 28 *Democracy in America*, Vol I, Part I, Chapters 1-3, pp. 19-53
American "point of origin" and the "social state"
First Paper Due (on Introduction to *Democracy in America*)
- 30 Same reading continued
- September**
- 1 *Democracy in America*, Vol I, Part I, Chapters 4-5, pp. 53-93
The sovereignty of the people and the American township
- 4 Same reading continued
- 6 *Democracy in America*, Vol I, Part I, Chapters 6-8, pp. 93-113
The structure and powers of the federal government
- 8 *Democracy in America*, Vol I, Part I, Chapters 6-8, pp. 113-161
The structure and powers of the federal government (continued)
- 11 Same reading continued
- 13 Review of the whole of Volume I, Part I
- 15 **Tocqueville on the political mores of the United States**
Democracy in America, Volume I, Part II, Chapters 1-4, pp. 165-186
People, parties, and the press
- 18 Continued
- 20 *Democracy in America*, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 5, pp. 187-220
The character of government in democratic societies
- 22 Continued
- 25 *Democracy in America*, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 6, pp. 220-235
Rights and laws
- 27 Continued

- 29 *Democracy in America*, Volume I, Part II, Chapters 7-8, pp. 235-264
 The rule of the majority and its problems
- October**
- 2 Continued
 Second Paper Due (on anything in Vol. I, Part II, Chapters 7-8)
- 4 *Democracy in America*, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 9, pp. 264-302
 The accidental, legal, and moral conditions of a well-ordered democracy
- 6 Continued
- 9 *Democracy in America*, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 10, pp. 302-348
- 11 *Democracy in America*, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 10, pp. 348-379
 The problems of race in the United States
- 13 *Democracy in America*, Volume I, Part II, Chapter 10, pp. 379-396
 First Take-Home Exam Emailed to Students
- 16 Review of the whole of Volume I, Part II
 First Take-Home Exam Due
- 18 **Tocqueville on intellectual movement in the United States**
 Democracy in America, Volume II, Part I, Chapters 1-7, pp. 399-426
- 20 *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Part I, Chapters 8-14, pp. 426-450
- 23 *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Part I, Chapters 15-21, pp. 450-476
- 25 Review of the whole of Volume II, Part I
- 27 **Tocqueville on the sentiments of Americans**
 Democracy in America, Volume II, Part II, Chapters 1-7, pp. 479-500
- 30 *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Part II, Chapters 8-20, pp. 500-532
- November**
- 1 Review of the whole of Volume II, Part II
- 3 **Tocqueville on “mores properly so-called”**
 Democracy in America, Volume II, Part III, Chapters 1-7, pp. 535-557
- 6 *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Part III, Chapters 8-17, pp. 558-588
- 8 *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Part III, Chapters 18-20, pp. 589-606
- 10 *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Part III, Chapters 21-26, pp. 606-635

- 13 Review of the whole of Volume II, Part III
Third Paper Due (on anything in Vol. II)
- 15 **Tocqueville on democratic despotism and the future of democracy**
Democracy in America, Volume II, Part IV, Chapters 1-4, pp. 639-650
- 17 *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Part IV, Chapters 5-8, pp. 651-676
- 20-25 **Thanksgiving Break**
- 27 Comparison between Volume II, Part IV, Chapters 6-8 and Tocqueville's 1830 Letter to Stoffels on "the fate of civilized man"
- 29 Review of the whole of Volume II, Part IV
Second Take-Home Exam emailed to students
- December**
- 1 Catch-up class or general review
Second Take-Home Exam Due
- 4 Catch-up class or general review
- Final Exams 7-9 & 11**