

**Democracy in America and the Individual**

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Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, takes a look at the growth of the United States as a democratically ruled nation. It was released in two volumes, the first in 1835 and the second in 1840, and is considered to be a very important look concerning democratic political thought. Tocqueville gives his prospects to what may be the future of America may hold; remarkably enough, many of his prophecies have come to pass. He notes the crucial role of "individualism" as a key component to what makes America unique to the rest of the world. He considers the negative attributes that individualism offers society and gives some recommendations to the reader on how to combat these dangers. The largest of the dangers for Tocqueville are materialism, greed, lack of culture and disconnecting from politics. Tocqueville provides a rather persuasive account of the democratic America, and it must be taken into consideration, just how harmful it can be when equality and liberty are not balanced carefully.

In Alexis de Tocqueville's view, it is absolutely essential for a country's citizens to be actively engaged in most, if not all, political matters. Political involvement comes from many different types of associations, both internal and external from one's government, and are the main defense in protecting the rights of the people (Tocqueville 2002: 581). When the population no longer is involved with political matters, it is highly likely that some form of tyranny will follow. A major precursor to this tyranny is individualism.

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines individualism as "a social theory favoring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control." Tocqueville's definition of individualism is a little bit more thorough: "Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself" (Tocqueville 2002: 574).

Having being raised in an aristocratic family in France, compares the government structures that he is more familiar with, aristocracy, and juxtaposes it to the democracy found in America. This is likely why individualism seems so important to his work, as the concept is not only foreign to him, but arguably new to the world. Individualism does not exist in an aristocratic society and has no reason to want to, for people in an aristocratic society are much more likely to find bonds and connections with people they associate amongst or with relatives from past or future generations (Tocqueville 2002: 575).

A major problem of individualism is as follows: because it stresses upon the individual to see himself/herself as unique, different and new to the world. It stresses that in order to maintain this uniqueness, people must separate themselves from their families, communities, and country and focus a major portion of one's energy on oneself. By doing this, people are less engaged with society as a whole, and thus less interested in how the society is being operated, as far as the society operates at least slightly in one's favour. This will cause government to act, not in the interest of the majority, but in the interest of those who seek its power. The country may function like a democracy, but it will be ruled for a minority of people who likely also subscribe to individualism and thus will use their power to benefit their own needs.

Tocqueville claims that Americans can combat the effects of individualism by the use of free institutions (Tocqueville 2002: 577). These include, local government, voluntary associations, newspapers and political parties. Local governments deal with smaller issues than dealt in the centralized arena, but are nevertheless important to the citizens that the local government affects, arguably more important, as the local government deals with concerns that have a larger and more direct impact on these peoples lives (Tocqueville 2002: 579). So, in local government, people are brought together in order to help one another.

Voluntary associations are seen as a great tool in allowing people to become engaged in government. In America, around the time of Tocqueville's journey, there was a plethora of associations citizens could partake, his examples include: religious, moral, serious, futile, extensive, restricted, enormous or diminutive. Associations provide sources of entertainment, education, religion, etc. (Tocqueville 2002: 581).

Tocqueville sees newspapers as a valuable device to combat individualism. With a newspaper, it is very possible to address current affairs in a simple and efficient manner. It allows information relating to politics, issues, etc. to be absorbed using the same thoughts and ideas, which helps to promote an association between a country's people. However, Tocqueville suggests that it is pivotal that newspapers are free and distinct from the government (Tocqueville 2002: 587). Freedom of the press helps advocate independent thought that is not censored from the state. Once, the state gains control off the press, it is quite possible for the country to fall to

despotism, which Tocqueville deems as unacceptable, "Despotism therefore appears to me peculiarly to be dreaded in democratic ages" (Tocqueville 2002: 773).

Since in America, where equality is stressed as strongly as it is, it is very hard for individuals, if not impossible, to exert their power in a meaningful way. This is where political parties comes into play, a collection of people with similar values, come together and use their collective power to make policies that better suit the country. Also, since America is so big, it only makes logical sense, especially in the 1800s, that political parties be formed to provide some efficiency, in an already inefficient democratic system. Lastly, a political party system allows for some consistency for the population. Instead of 100s of candidates offering essentially the same policies, and agendas, they merge into a political party that offers the public with one consistent voice.

Greed and materialism are two examples of negative side-effects of individualism. America, a country that had been founded largely by poor immigrants who now live in a land where it is possible to rise up in class, has caused a deep desire for wealth and small physical gratifications. Sometimes, in an attempt to maintain equality, it is very common for someone to strive to achieve luxuries similar to their neighbours (Tocqueville 2002: 602). As opposed to aristocratic societies, where wealthy families are not concerned about the possibility of entering poverty, for Americans, it is a constant fear. This may be why, Americans, with all their prosperity, are generally unhappier compared to nations of lesser wealth (Tocqueville 2002: 605).

Tocqueville discerns that religion is the best practical solution to counter greed and materialism. Religion teaches its followers to care less about physical indulgences and to respect and love their families, communities, etc. (Tocqueville 2002: 604). On top of this, Tocqueville credits America with not having a state religion, as a free society should.

Arguably the greatest concern for Tocqueville is that a democracy such as America may be prone to become a democratic despotic state, that a state ruled by a government who holds absolute power, and is one that would rule it in an oppressive way. Tocqueville would not expect America to be ruled cruelly, rather it would be ruled in a manner that is degrading (Tocqueville 2002: 769). The state would control many aspects of its inhabitants lives, and to use his analogy, the state becomes the shepherd and the citizens become a flock of timid and

industrious animals (Tocqueville 2002: 771). The best way to prevent this from happening is to make sure people continue to stay involved in politics.

*Democracy in America* is an attempt, by Alexis de Tocqueville, to explain the American democratic state. In the time it was written, it provided Europeans with evidence that the American form of democracy was to someday be commonplace worldwide. It details both the positive and negative attributes that concern democracy. Individualism being a critical component of America's democracy, has the power to dismantle the freedoms and liberties, and replace them with exploitation and abuse. For Tocqueville, if a democratic state is ever to function properly and for a prolonged period of time, its citizens must remain consistently connected with each other and its laws and policies.

### **References**

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