

# **DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA by Alexis de Tocqueville**

**A paper on this topic presented to Quest**

**Alexis de Tocqueville is considered one of the greatest political scientists and prophets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and perhaps of all time, based on his writing of *Democracy in America*. Every U.S. President from Eisenhower to Obama has quoted Tocqueville during his presidency. The Frenchman's research encompassed traveling 7,000 miles in 9 months through 19 of the 24 states in post-colonial America, as well as Washington D.C. and parts of eastern Canada. He made a point of meeting with people of all stations in life, listening to them express feelings and opinions. He met with prisoners and Presidents.**

**Alexis Charles Henri Clerel, comte de Tocqueville, generally just called Tocqueville, was born in 1805, 16 years after the French Revolution of 1789. In 1835, the same year his first book was published, he married Marie Mottley. He died, childless, on April 16, 1859, of tuberculosis. He was 54 years old.**

**Alexis was tutored and mentored at home in his early years. He finished his secondary school at the College Royale in Metz and studied law at the University of Paris, graduating in 1827. His father Herve, Count of Tocqueville, was a prefect in Metz and close to the Bourbon King Charles the 10<sup>th</sup>. With his father's connections, Alexis was appointed as an apprentice judge at the age of 21.**

**It was here that he met Gustave de Beaumont, a young prosecutor, and they became friends for life. Three years later, Louis-Phillipe took the French throne. Being connected to the former Bourbon court, Tocqueville and Beaumont had little prospect of professional promotion under this new monarchy. So the two men conceived the idea of advancing their careers by going overseas. They told the French Interior Minister they would undertake a study of conditions in the American prisons on behalf of the French government.**

**The minister approved and gave them a sabbatical from their positions. They financed the journey themselves and did study the American penal system. But they also did much more. They left France in April and arrived in Newport, Rhode Island in May 1831. Once in the United States, they planned to see and learn as much about America as they could.**

**Beginning their journey in Newport, the two young adventurers began traveling throughout Eastern United States. They took a steamboat from Newport to New York City, exploring the city and talking to people of all backgrounds.**

**They then traveled by stagecoach throughout the state of New York. In a letter to Tocqueville's mother he wrote, "There are carriages whose suspensions are made entirely out of leather, which proceed along roads as dreadful of those of Lower Brittany. Within a few miles your bones are shattered." For the rest of their journey, the stagecoaches and roads got even worse.**

**The men's first significant stop after New York City was Greenburgh where they talked with the town supervisor. During this conversation, Tocqueville learned about local government.**

**The town supervisor believed that townships were the best form of government to allow local citizens to resolve their concerns with their neighbors.**

**Their next destination was Ossining, where Sing Sing Prison is located. They spent several days discussing its history and the current state of America's penal system.**

**Continuing north to Albany, they met with the governor and the New York state legislature to better understand what role the state legislature had in American government. They also gathered documents and other papers that described the function of a state government.**

**Traveling west, they stopped in the Syracuse and Auburn area where they met Mr. Elam Lynds. Mr. Lynds had been a prison administrator for ten years and was considered the father of the American penal system. A visit to the Auburn prison expanded the men's understanding.**

**Stopping in Canandaigua, they stayed at the home of John Spencer, a lawyer who was very active in state politics. John Spencer would become a major resource for Tocqueville in the years to come. Spencer arranged for the American publication of *Democracy in America*. He later served in the cabinet of President John Tyler. He continued his friendship with Tocqueville for many years, providing support for him in America whenever it was needed.**

**Turning south at Buffalo, the two men traveled by steamboat to Detroit. They were amazed at the miles of forest that lined Lake Erie. Along the way, Tocqueville talked with citizens from Ohio.**

He found out that Ohio was extremely opposed to members of the black race having any rights at all. Tocqueville vehemently opposed this, as he did the treatment of the American Indians. Although America was supposed to promote equality, Tocqueville saw it was equality for white men only.

The steamboat arrived at the small town of Detroit, population 2200. Tocqueville desired to explore the Territory of Michigan, so from Detroit they went to Pontiac, then north on horseback to Saginaw, the last outpost of civilization. An American Indian ran beside them the whole way, though they didn't know who he was. In Saginaw, there were a few log cabins and little or no communications with the outside world. Once a year a boat would stop at Saginaw. Any visitor was an extreme rarity.

North and west of Saginaw, there was nothing but forest and trees, plus rattlesnakes and millions of huge mosquitos! They continued to explore this land of wilderness for two weeks, before returning to Detroit. There, they booked passage on a boat and had a magnificent tour of Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. The boat stopped at Mackinac Island on its way to Green Bay, the turn-around point.

Once back in Detroit they took a boat to Niagara Falls, then crossed the border to Canada. They visited Montreal and Quebec, re-entering the United States at Lake Champlain. They made their way to Boston and Hartford, gathering information about New England. Going on to Philadelphia, they studied many historical papers and continued to talk to citizens of all economic levels.

Leaving Philadelphia by stagecoach, they went south to Baltimore, where they first encountered true segregation. The black race had no rights and were treated as something slightly less than human; something to be bought and sold just like a horse or a cow.

Continuing on to Pittsburgh, the stagecoach had to cross the Allegheny Mountains. The roads were terrible, the stagecoach was terrible, and the entire trip to Pittsburgh was continual misery. Upon arriving in Pittsburgh they thought nothing more they would encounter could be as miserable as the trip they had just completed. They were wrong.

Boarding a steamship in Pittsburgh, they expected to travel comfortably by water all the way to New Orleans. The first stop was to be Louisville, down the Ohio River. However, the Ohio River was blocked by ice 25 miles east of Louisville. The passengers had to disembark and were left to find their own way to Louisville. There were ten of them, now all walking through the snow in the woods and mountains of Kentucky. Fortunately, a wagon eventually came by. All ten piled into the wagon with their luggage. They traveled over roads and trails where few wagons had gone before. Despite getting stuck in the mud, snow, or even big ruts, of which there were many, the wagon driver succeeded in getting them to Louisville.

With the ice still blocking the river, the two companions decided to go overland to Nashville, 175 miles by horseback. The passage included steep descents, large boulders and tree stumps upon the road.

Reaching Nashville, they discovered the river branch they had planned to travel on was also blocked by ice. They had to travel to Memphis in an open air carriage. It was freezing weather all the way.

**The carriage began to fall apart; first its reins, then a wheel, and finally the axle broke. About a third of the way to Memphis, their carriage collapsed. Using logs from the forest, the carriage was patched and limped into Sandy Hook, Tennessee. Tocqueville fell ill after they arrived, and they stayed in the only inn for ten days till he recovered.**

**When the stagecoach from Nashville to Memphis passed by, the two travelers climbed aboard. In Memphis they intended to board a boat for New Orleans. That didn't happen. The Mississippi River was blocked by ice here also. Eight days later, the ice broke and the two weary travelers were finally able to get passage on a steamboat scheduled to go to New Orleans. At last, a comfortable means of travel.**

**Two days out from Memphis, the steamboat grounded itself on a sand bar. It took two days to free the boat, then two more days to reach New Orleans, but they had the good fortune of meeting Sam Houston who was a fellow passenger.**

**They arrived in New Orleans on New Year's Day, originally planning to stay there for two weeks. They spent only three days. Their time had to be cut short, for their goal was to reach Washington while congress was still in session. They traveled on to Columbia, SC. by stagecoach. During this phase of the trip, they were fortunate to be riding with former congressman and Minister of Mexico Joel Roberts Poinsett, the man who introduced the poinsettia to the United States.**

**From Columbia they proceeded to Washington, DC. In Washington they met President Andrew Jackson and former President John Quincy Adams.**

After meeting Jackson, the Frenchman mistakenly thought the Presidency was an office with little power, feeling that Jackson's conversation was that of an old man with little power and little vigor. But this was a 25-year-old lawyer talking to a man who was the leader of ten million Americans and had commanded thousands of men in war.

Tocqueville and Beaumont later observed the American House and Senate in session and took part in the social life of Washington. They appreciated that Washington was a "small town" where political debates could take place free of the pressures of a large city.

Leaving Washington, they took stagecoaches to New York City. There they boarded a ship and returned to France. Back home, the two travelers published a book, primarily written by Beaumont, entitled *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and Its Application in France*. This met their obligation to the French government.

Tocqueville then set to work on a broader analysis of American culture and politics. He read his notes, reminisced on his experiences in America, and analyzed the differences of life, philosophy, and political processes between Europe and America. After many drafts, Tocqueville published his first book of *Democracy in America* in 1835. It became the most widely read book in the western world shortly after it was published. Tocqueville became a celebrity and over the next few years received many honors. Five years later he published the second volume of *Democracy in America*.

For nearly two centuries, *Democracy in America* has provided its readers an unparalleled abundance of description, analysis, and prophecy concerning almost every aspect of American society and America's most striking characteristics of democracy, as viewed by Tocqueville 50 years after the U.S. constitution was ratified.

Above all, Tocqueville's concern was for documenting the development of both freedom and democracy. He deemed that the most pervasive myth to dominate American political thinking was equating democracy with liberty and equality with freedom. Even Jefferson and his followers believed in government of the people and for the people, but not by the people.

As Tocqueville was leaving, a most profound transformation was beginning to take place in America. Political control was shifting from an older aristocracy of education, position, and wealth, to "the common man." This led to majority rule and the possibility of the "tyranny of the majority." Tocqueville said, "Nothing strikes me more forcibly than the general equality of conditions among the people. I perceived this equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seemed to be derived."

Tocqueville named five *basic* values he believed were necessary for a society or country to succeed.

- Egalitarianism
- Populism
- Liberty
- Individualism, and
- Laissez-Faire



**Tocqueville's basic understanding of American democracy was that it was and will continue to be successful because of the fundamental belief that all persons are equal and free in America. Each person was the equal of every other person, again, if you were a white male.**

**In America he found the five basic principles generally worked well, when they were functioning simultaneously. This was not happening in many of the European countries.**

**In his travels, Tocqueville soon perceived the general equality of condition among the people, with little disparity in wealth, social status, and power. This primary fact carried through the whole course of American society. Tocqueville soon perceived that the influence of equality extended far beyond the political character and laws of the country; that it was the fundamental basis for American civil society, creating new ways of thinking beyond the European mindset. In America, rich men arose from those who were previously poor and those who were wealthy sometimes ended up losing their wealth.**

**According to Tocqueville, wherever political laws are discussed, the principle of the sovereignty of the people is where we must begin. The American Revolution broke out, and the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people came from the townships, and took possession of the State. Every class was enlisted in the cause, battles were fought and victories obtained for it. It has become the law of laws.**

**On the application of equality relating to municipal bodies, the township, taken as a whole and in relation to the central government, is like an individual. The townships are subordinate to the state only in those interests that exceed the boundaries of a township, such as the building of long roads.**

**In America, not only do municipal bodies exist, but they are kept alive and supported by town spirit. The townships possess two advantages: Independence and Authority.**

**“Its sphere is limited, but within that sphere its actions are unrestrained,” wrote Tocqueville. “The inhabitant of a township is attached to his township because it is independent and free. This cooperation in the township’s affairs insures the people’s attachment to the township’s interests. The sovereignty of the people had become the law of laws.” There was no monarchy dictating the law. However, it was never assumed in the United States that the citizen of a free country has a right to do whatever he pleased. On the contrary, more social restrictions were imposed upon him than anywhere else, even on the township level.**

**Tocqueville wrote that in America, the exercise of authority was divided, in order that the office might be powerful and the officer be insignificant, and that the community should be at once regulated and free. In no country in the world does the law hold so absolute a language as in America. And in no other country is the right of applying it vested in so many hands.**

**Tocqueville described the need for some form of centralization to perform necessary administration. But he wrote, “That which the United States uses is the best of all worlds. It is not the administrative, but the political effects of decentralization that I most admire in America.”**

**Tocqueville also felt that the judicial system of the United States was a wonder of development. It followed the three common principles of a judge:**

- Only pronounce a decision when litigation has arisen.**
- Be conversant only in special cases.**
- Do not act until the case is brought before the court.**

**But the American judge had one other principle which invested him with immense political power. Tocqueville wrote, “The Americans have acknowledged the right of judges to found their decision on the Constitution rather than on the laws.”**

**Tocqueville perceived that the United States was based on the will of the majority, who governed in the name of the people. This majority was generally composed of peaceable citizens, who either by inclination or by interest, sincerely wished for the welfare of their country. But they were surrounded by the incessant agitation of parties, who attempted to gain the people’s cooperation and support.**

**Tocqueville understood that when a large number of people are involved, whether it is a large township or a Presidential election, parties are a necessity. Although united under the same government the people have contradictory interests; they may consequently be in a perpetual state of chaos.**

**In this case, the different factions may more properly be considered as distinct nations rather than of mere parties. Parties are a necessary evil in free governments. There have always been two great divisions:**

- To limit the authority of the people.**
- To extend the authority of the people.**

**These parties stem from men seeking companionship, preferably with those who share their views and interests. Hence America is replete with social organizations, political organizations, and many more societies of every kind. It is the nature of man and even more so in America, where one has the freedom to associate with whomever they choose. But these societies serve another purpose also. When a society speaks in one voice, this carries more weight than the press. When members of a society can meet one another, discuss their views, choose delegates to a central body and promote their views with a single voice, this carries great weight with legislatures and other citizens in how they should consider their votes and their own views. Tocqueville witnessed this throughout his travels.**

**The very essence of democratic government consists in the absolute sovereignty of the majority. The legislature is, of all political institutions, the one most easily swayed by the will of the majority. Therefore, the Americans decided that members of the legislature should be elected by the people directly, and for a very brief term, in order to *not* subject them and their constituents to the daily passions which may come and go in a brief period of time.**

**Tocqueville was very concerned about the potential for the Tyranny of the Majority. While “majority rules” is the law of the land, it also has the potential to face no opposition. It then can run amuck doing whatever it wants to do, to whomever it wants to. Thomas Jefferson said, “The tyranny of the legislature is really the danger most to be feared and will continue so for many years to come. The tyranny of the executive power will come in its turn, but at a more distant period.”**

**Regarding the law, Tocqueville said the profession of law serves to counterbalance the Democracy. After studying America’s laws, he perceived that the authority Americans have entrusted to members of the legal profession, and the influence of these individuals in the government, is the most powerful existing security of democracy. Men who have made a special study of the laws derive from this occupation have certain habits of order, a taste for formalities, and a kind of instinctive regard for the regular connection of ideas.**

**Tocqueville felt that trial by jury was a strength of America. The jury cannot fail to exercise a powerful influence upon the national character. The jury serves all the citizens. With this spirit, it instills a respect for the judged and the notion of right.**

**Tocqueville also wrote about the freedom of the press. He said it does not affect political opinions alone. It extends to all the opinions of men and modifies customs as well as laws.**

**He said it is impossible to obtain the cooperation of any great number of citizens unless you can persuade every man whose help you require, that his private interest obliges him to voluntarily unite his efforts to the efforts of all others.**

**This widespread persuasion, he deemed, can only be done by means of a newspaper. Tocqueville wrote, “To suppose that newspapers only serve to protect freedom would be to diminish their importance. They in fact maintain civilization.”**

**Regarding foreign affairs, Tocqueville declared that at the time of his writing, there were two great nations in the world – America and Russia. All other nations seemed to have reached their limits, and they had only to maintain their power, but these two were still in the act of growth.**

**America struggled against the obstacles of the natural environment. Russia’s adversaries were men. Russia centered all the authority in a single arm. The principal instrument of Russia was servitude. In America, it was freedom.**

**Within his book and elsewhere, Tocqueville proved to be a true prophet of future events. His predictions included:**

- **The rising power of the President, as America became more involved with other nations.**
- **The rise of industry over agriculture.**
- **The continuation of great fortunes being made.**
- **The rise of a ruthless industrial aristocracy, from the robber barons of the 1890's to the technical giants of today.**
- **The explosion of thousands of adequate books written, but few writers of superior ability.**
- **The change of the church becoming less rigid, but still remaining the sub-structure of belief for man.**
- **The historical concentration focusing more on mass movements and less on individual leaders and heroes.**
- **The impending danger of a civil war over slavery.**

**Tocqueville concluded, "It depends on the citizens whether the principle of equality is to lead them to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarianism, to prosperity or wretchedness." Will tyranny of the masses prevail? Or will the American love of equality lead to freedom for all?**