

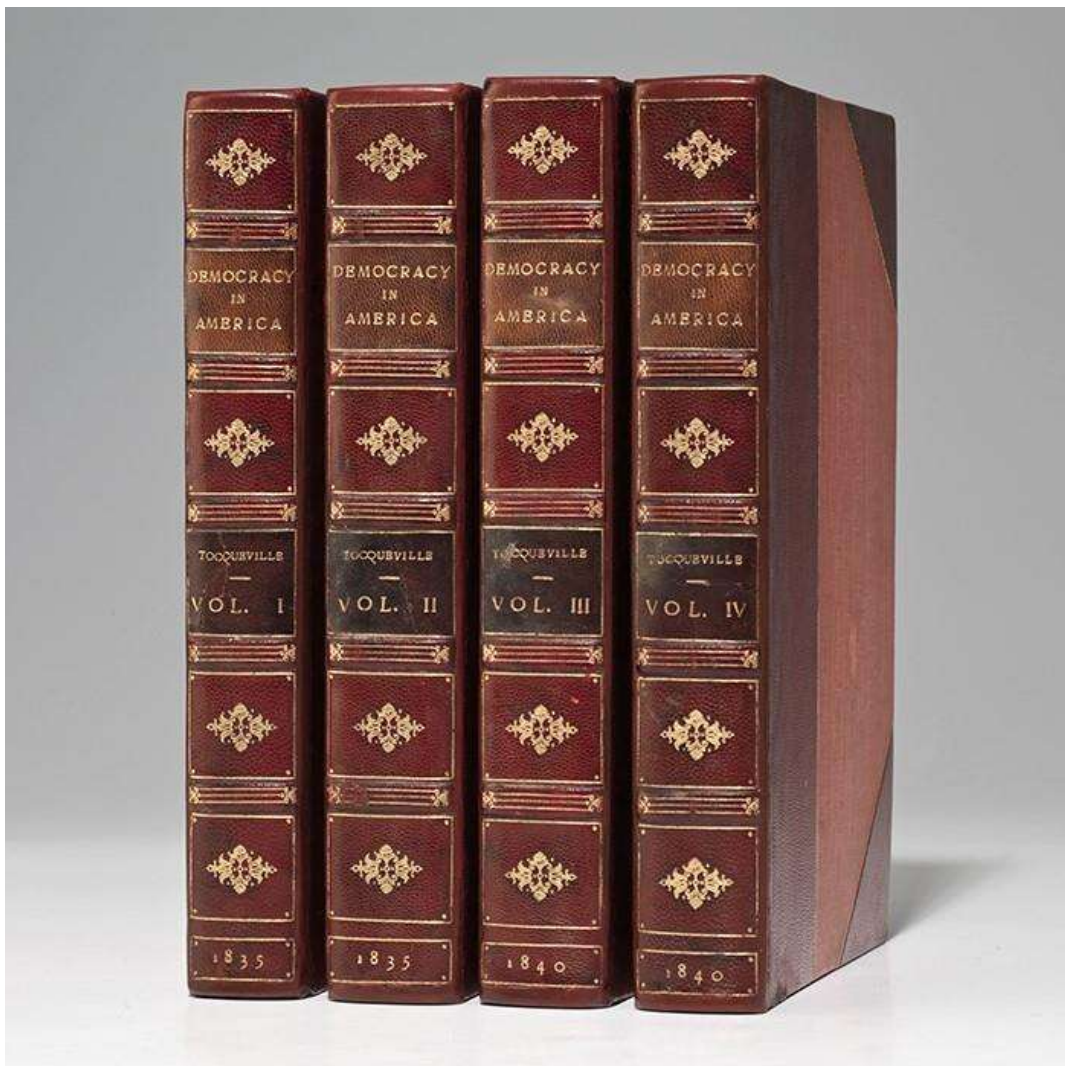
# **"Democracy in America" (1835) by Alexis de Tocqueville (First English editions 1835 & 1840 translated by Henry Reeves): A Canonical Book**

This first English edition was curated by Stephen A Batman

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## **Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition**

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Translated by Henry Reeve, 1835, 1840



**"SHAPED THE DEVELOPMENT OF FREE INSTITUTIONS IN THE WEST": VERY RARE FIRST EDITIONS IN ENGLISH OF BOTH PARTS OF TOCQUEVILLE'S MASTERPIECE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA*, WITH THE SCARCE FOLDING MAP**

*First editions in English of both parts of Tocqueville's important and influential analysis of American democracy, one of the outstanding intellectual achievements of the 19th century, with the very scarce folding map colored in outline. Handsomely bound by Bayntun. Most rare and important.*

"This is by far the best book ever written about America, and the most penetrating book ever written about democracy. It won instant acclaim, not only in the writer's native France, where Royer-Collard declared: 'Nothing equal to it had appeared since Montesquieu,' but in England, where John Stuart Mill hailed it as 'among the most remarkable productions of our time.' Its central theme is that democracy has become inevitable; that it is, with certain qualifications, desirable; but that it has great potentialities for evil as well as good, depending upon how well it is understood and guided. In the view of de Tocqueville, the greatest danger that threatens democracy is its tendency toward the centralization and concentration of power...

There is revived interest in Tocqueville today because of what seems like the uncanny clairvoyance of his prophecies. For example (this by a Frenchman in 1835): 'There are at the present time two great nations in the world, which started from different points, but seem to tend towards the same end. I allude to the Russians and the Americans... The principal instrument of [America] is liberty; of [Russia] servitude. Their starting point is different, and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems marked by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe' (Hazlitt, 163).

Democracy in America is "the first systematic and empirical study of the effects of political power on modern society" (Nisbet). "One of the most important texts in political literature" (PMM 358), the work originated in a trip commissioned by the French government to study the American penal system in 1831-32. When the first edition of the first part of the work was published in Paris in 1835, "throughout the intellectual circles of western Europe both democracy and America took on a new aspect and a new significance in political speculation" (NYU, 955). Tocqueville "had been impressed, in America, by the success with which the principles of liberty and equality evolved in the Old World had been applied to meet the needs of a new civilization governed by different ideals and different physical conditions... he set down his observations on the American people and the American political scene in *La Démocratie en Amérique*... His conclusions were that the trend of history was irresistibly towards equality; and that the future of France, indeed of the Western world, was bound up with the acceptance of democratic principles, these being the one effective means of avoiding submission to tyranny" (Harvey and Heseltine, 711).

The first part of the work was published in French in 1835 and the second part in 1840; the present English editions were issued in the same years and precede the American editions of each part. Howes T278, 279. Old private library shelf labels on front pastedowns.

TOCQUEVILLE, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Henry Reeve. London: Saunders and Otley, 1835, 1840. Four volumes uniformly bound (each part composed of two volumes). Octavo, contemporary three-quarter red Morocco gilt rebacked with original spines laid down, raised bands, marbled endpapers, top edges gilt. Housed in custom clamshell boxes.

Text generally fresh with only light scattered foxing. Volume I map with expert reinforcement to folds on verso and small closed tear; repair to closed tear on page 31. An exceptional copy, handsomely bound, most scarce complete and with the map.

## Introduction

"*Democracy in America*" stands as one of the most penetrating analyses of American democratic society ever written. Published in two volumes, the first in 1835 and the second in 1840, this masterpiece was authored by Alexis de Tocqueville, a young French aristocrat who traveled to the United States in 1831 ostensibly to study the American prison system. In reality, Tocqueville and his companion Gustave de Beaumont used this official mission as a pretext to conduct a broader investigation of American society, its political institutions, religious character, and economic foundations[1].

The cultural and political climate surrounding the book's publication was one of tremendous change and uncertainty in Europe. France had experienced the tumultuous aftermath of the French Revolution, followed by Napoleon's rise and fall, the restoration of the monarchy, and the July Revolution of 1830. Against this backdrop of political instability in his homeland, Tocqueville was fascinated by America's successful democratic experiment. He sought to understand why republican representative democracy had flourished in the United States while failing in so many other places, including his native France[1][8].

Tocqueville's motivation stemmed from his recognition that democracy represented an irresistible historical force that was gradually eliminating aristocratic privilege throughout the Western world. Rather than merely lamenting this change as many of his aristocratic peers did, Tocqueville sought to understand democracy's inner workings, its strengths and weaknesses, and how it might be guided toward success rather than descending into tyranny or chaos. His nine-month journey through America, which included visits to major cities, rural areas, and even parts of Canada, provided him with the empirical foundation for what would become his magnum opus[1][2].

## The Author

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) was born into a Norman aristocratic family whose lineage traced back to the Battle of Hastings in 1066. His family background profoundly shaped his worldview; his parents narrowly escaped the guillotine during the French Revolution's Reign of Terror, instilling in him both a wariness of revolutionary excess and a keen interest in political systems that could balance liberty with stability[2].

After completing his education in Metz and Paris, Tocqueville briefly worked as a magistrate but quickly grew dissatisfied with the narrow confines of legal work. His intellectual ambitions led him to seek broader horizons, which he found in his American journey of 1831-1832. This transformative experience provided the material for "Democracy in America," the work that would establish his reputation as a political thinker of the first rank[2].

Tocqueville was not merely a theorist but also a political practitioner. He served as a deputy and occasional advisor to King Louis-Philippe during the July Monarchy, earning recognition at court as the bright jurist who had written insightfully about America. His political foresight was demonstrated in 1848 when he accurately predicted the coming revolution in a speech to the Chamber of Deputies, warning about growing class tensions and resentment of economic inequality[2].

Following the revolution of 1848, Tocqueville served in the Second Republic not out of republican conviction but because, as he put it, he "saw nothing to put in its place." His political career ended with Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état in 1851, after which Tocqueville refused to take an oath of allegiance to the new regime and retired from public life. His final years were devoted to writing, particularly his second masterwork, "The Old Regime and the Revolution" (1856). Always of fragile health, Tocqueville retired to Cannes in 1858 and died there the following year[2].

## **Why this is a Canonical Book**

"Democracy in America" merits inclusion in the canon of essential works on American governance and culture for several compelling reasons. First, it represents the earliest comprehensive analysis of American democracy as a distinct political and social system. Tocqueville's work transcends mere political observation to examine democracy as a complete way of life that fundamentally transforms people's sense of being in the world[12].

Second, the book's enduring relevance stems from its remarkable prescience. Tocqueville identified key features and tensions within American democracy that continue to shape political discourse today. His insights into the potential tyranny of the majority, the danger of democratic despotism, the vital role of civic associations, and the complex relationship between equality and liberty remain startlingly relevant nearly two centuries after their publication[1][8].

Third, "Democracy in America" provides a unique external perspective on American institutions and culture. As a foreigner sympathetic to but not uncritical of American democracy, Tocqueville could perceive patterns and tendencies that might escape native observers. His comparative framework, drawing on his knowledge of European political systems, illuminates distinctive features of American democracy that Americans themselves might take for granted[1][12].

Fourth, the book has profoundly influenced subsequent political thought, not only in America but globally. It has shaped how generations of scholars, politicians, and citizens understand democratic governance and its challenges. The work has become a touchstone for discussions about the nature of democracy, the balance between majority rule and minority rights, and the social conditions necessary for democratic success[4].

Finally, "Democracy in America" exemplifies a rare combination of empirical observation and theoretical insight. Tocqueville's methodology—combining extensive travel, interviews, and firsthand observation with deep historical and philosophical reflection—produced a work that is both richly descriptive and analytically powerful. This approach has made the book an indispensable resource for understanding not just the America of the 1830s but the fundamental dynamics of democratic societies more broadly[12].

## Five Timeless Quotes

1. "The American Republic will endure until the day Congress discovers that it can bribe the public with the public's money."[9]

This prophetic statement speaks directly to our current concerns about fiscal responsibility and the sustainability of government spending. Tocqueville recognized that democratic governments face a unique temptation to win popular support through unsustainable financial promises. In today's context of massive national debt and ongoing debates about entitlement programs, infrastructure spending, and tax policy, this warning resonates powerfully. The quote reminds us that democratic governance requires fiscal discipline and that using public funds to secure political advantage can ultimately undermine the very system it aims to preserve.

2. "I do not know if the people of the United States would vote for superior men if they ran for office, but there can be no doubt that such men do not run."[9]

This observation addresses the perennial question of leadership quality in democracies. Tocqueville identified a paradox that continues to trouble American politics: the democratic process does not necessarily elevate the most capable leaders. In our era of intense political polarization, media scrutiny, and campaign finance demands, many talented individuals avoid public service altogether. The quote challenges us to consider how we might reform our political system to attract and elevate leaders of genuine wisdom and capability rather than merely those skilled at campaigning or fundraising.

3. "Nothing is more wonderful than the art of being free, but nothing is harder to learn how to use than freedom."[9]

This insight captures the fundamental challenge of maintaining a free society. Freedom is not merely the absence of constraint but requires active cultivation and responsible exercise. In contemporary America, where debates rage about the boundaries of free speech, the

responsibilities of citizenship, and the balance between individual rights and collective welfare, Tocqueville's words remind us that freedom is a practice that must be continuously learned and relearned. The quote suggests that liberty's preservation depends not just on constitutional protections but on citizens' capacity to use freedom wisely.

4. "When I refuse to obey an unjust law, I do not contest the right of the majority to command, but I simply appeal from the sovereignty of the people to the sovereignty of mankind."[9]

This profound statement addresses the moral foundations of civil disobedience and the limits of majority rule. It acknowledges that democratic legitimacy, while important, must ultimately be grounded in universal principles of justice. In our current context, where social movements challenge systemic inequities and individuals sometimes feel compelled to resist laws they deem unjust, Tocqueville's formulation offers a framework for principled dissent that respects democratic processes while appealing to higher standards. The quote speaks to ongoing tensions between procedural democracy and substantive justice.

5. "Society will develop a new kind of servitude which covers the surface of society with a network of complicated rules, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate. It does not tyrannise but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd."[9]

This remarkably prescient warning about "soft despotism" anticipates modern concerns about bureaucratic overreach, regulatory complexity, and the subtle erosion of meaningful freedom. Tocqueville foresaw that democratic societies might sacrifice liberty not to obvious tyrants but to an expanding administrative state that gradually diminishes individual agency through a web of rules and procedures. In today's context of growing government complexity, surveillance capabilities, and technocratic governance, this caution about liberty's quiet suffocation rather than its dramatic overthrow remains profoundly relevant.

## **Five Major Ideas**

### **1. The Tyranny of the Majority**

Tocqueville identified a distinctive danger in democratic societies: the potential for the majority to exercise oppressive power over minorities. Unlike traditional tyranny imposed by a single ruler, this form of despotism derives its legitimacy from popular sovereignty itself. Tocqueville observed that in America, this tyranny operated not primarily through legal coercion but through social pressure and conformism. He noted that Americans, theoretically free to speak as they wished, often showed less independence of mind than people in less formally free societies[10].

This insight remains crucial for understanding contemporary challenges to pluralism and free expression. In our polarized political climate, where social media amplifies group conformity and dissenting voices face intense backlash, Tocqueville's warning about majority tyranny helps explain how formal protections for free speech can coexist with powerful informal constraints on acceptable discourse. His analysis reminds us that preserving genuine freedom requires not just legal rights but also cultural norms that tolerate dissent and respect minority viewpoints.

## **2. The Importance of Civil Associations**

One of Tocqueville's most influential observations concerns the vital role of voluntary associations in American democracy. He marveled at Americans' propensity to form associations for all manner of purposes, from literary societies to temperance leagues to business ventures. These associations, he argued, served as schools of democratic citizenship, teaching cooperation, compromise, and self-governance while preventing both government overreach and atomistic individualism[1].

This insight speaks directly to contemporary concerns about declining civic engagement, social fragmentation, and the erosion of social capital. As traditional community organizations have weakened and Americans increasingly retreat into private or virtual spaces, Tocqueville's emphasis on associational life highlights what may be lost: not just pleasant social connections but the very infrastructure of democratic citizenship. His analysis suggests that revitalizing civil society may be essential for addressing democratic dysfunction.

## **3. Religion as a Foundation for Democracy**

Tocqueville was struck by the paradoxical strength of religion in America despite its separation from government. Unlike in France, where church and state were entangled and religious sentiment was weakening, America's religious vitality coexisted with and even supported its democratic institutions. Religion, Tocqueville argued, provided moral boundaries for democratic freedom, encouraged civic engagement, and fostered habits of self-restraint necessary for self-government[1].

This analysis remains relevant to debates about religion's role in public life. Tocqueville's insight that separation of church and state could strengthen rather than weaken both institutions offers a middle path between theocracy and militant secularism. His recognition that democracy requires certain moral foundations, which religion can help sustain, speaks to ongoing questions about the cultural prerequisites for democratic success and the sources of shared values in pluralistic societies.

## **4. The Democratic Revolution as a Historical Force**

Tocqueville understood democracy not merely as a set of political institutions but as a comprehensive social transformation driven by the inexorable advance of equality of conditions. He viewed this democratic revolution as a "providential fact" reshaping all aspects of society,

from family relations to cultural production to economic organization. While not deterministic about democracy's triumph, he recognized its powerful momentum as a historical force[1].

This framework helps us understand contemporary global developments, including both democratic advances and authoritarian reactions. Tocqueville's insight that democracy represents not just a political choice but a profound social transformation explains why democratic transitions are often turbulent and why authoritarian regimes struggle to contain democratic aspirations despite their repressive capacity. His perspective encourages us to view current democratic challenges within a longer historical arc.

## **5. The Danger of Democratic Despotism**

Perhaps Tocqueville's most prescient warning concerns what he called "soft despotism"—a novel form of tyranny unique to democratic ages. Unlike traditional despotism, this new servitude would not terrorize but infantilize; it would cover society "with a network of small, complicated rules" that reduce citizens to "a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd." This administrative despotism would maintain the forms of democracy while hollowing out its substance[9].

This analysis anticipates contemporary concerns about technocracy, the administrative state, and the concentration of power in executive agencies. As government grows more complex and remote from ordinary citizens, Tocqueville's warning about liberty's quiet erosion through bureaucratic management rather than overt repression becomes increasingly relevant. His insight challenges us to consider how democratic accountability might be preserved in an age of administrative complexity and technical specialization.

# **Three Major Controversies**

## **1. Tocqueville's Ambivalence About Equality**

A significant controversy surrounding "Democracy in America" concerns Tocqueville's complex and sometimes contradictory attitude toward equality. While he accepted equality's advance as inevitable and in many ways desirable, he also expressed profound concerns about its potential consequences. He worried that democratic equality might produce conformism, materialism, and a preoccupation with petty comforts at the expense of higher aspirations. Critics from the left have seized on these passages to portray Tocqueville as fundamentally aristocratic in his sensibilities and suspicious of genuine popular empowerment[1][10].

Conversely, some progressive interpreters have emphasized Tocqueville's recognition that formal political equality in America coexisted with profound social and economic inequalities, particularly regarding race and gender. His analysis of American democracy's limitations in these respects has been used to critique narrow conceptions of democracy that focus exclusively on electoral procedures while ignoring substantive inequalities. This tension in Tocqueville's



thought—between accepting equality's advance and fearing its consequences—continues to generate scholarly debate and political controversy.

## **2. The Question of American Exceptionalism**

Another major controversy concerns Tocqueville's contribution to the idea of American exceptionalism. Some readers have interpreted "Democracy in America" as fundamentally celebrating American uniqueness and superiority, pointing to Tocqueville's emphasis on distinctive American traits like religiosity, associational vigor, and practical intelligence. This interpretation has been embraced by those who see America as having a special democratic mission or exemplary status among nations[8].

However, other scholars emphasize that Tocqueville viewed America not as exceptional in the sense of being exempt from historical patterns, but rather as experiencing first what would eventually transform all modern societies. From this perspective, America was exceptional only in being further along the democratic path that all nations would eventually travel. Critics also note that Tocqueville was quite critical of many aspects of American society, including its intellectual conformism, racial injustice, and materialistic tendencies. The January 6, 2021 riot at the Capitol has further complicated claims about American democratic exceptionalism, leading some to question whether Tocqueville's analysis needs fundamental revision[8].

## **3. Tocqueville's Treatment of Race and Slavery**

Perhaps the most significant controversy surrounding "Democracy in America" concerns Tocqueville's treatment of race and slavery. While he was unequivocally opposed to slavery on moral grounds, some critics argue that his analysis failed to fully reckon with how central racial oppression was to the American democratic project. They contend that by treating slavery as a contradiction or exception to American democracy rather than as fundamentally constitutive of it, Tocqueville perpetuated a sanitized view of American institutions[11].

Others defend Tocqueville's approach, noting that he devoted significant attention to the plight of both enslaved Africans and Native Americans, predicting that the former would eventually achieve formal freedom while pessimistically (and accurately) foreseeing the latter's continued displacement and marginalization. They argue that his analysis of how white supremacy would persist even after slavery's abolition was remarkably prescient. This controversy reflects broader debates about how to understand the relationship between America's democratic ideals and its history of racial exclusion and oppression—a tension that remains unresolved in contemporary American politics[11].

## **In Closing**

Civic-minded Americans should read "Democracy in America" because it offers an unparalleled mirror through which to view both the enduring strengths and persistent challenges of the

American democratic experiment. Nearly two centuries after its publication, Tocqueville's masterwork continues to illuminate fundamental questions about democratic governance, civic culture, and the complex relationship between equality and liberty that remain at the heart of American political life[4][12].

In our current moment of democratic fragility, when trust in institutions has eroded and polarization threatens the basic functioning of government, Tocqueville's analysis provides valuable perspective. His insights into democracy's vulnerabilities—from the tyranny of the majority to the danger of soft despotism—help us recognize threats that might otherwise remain invisible precisely because they emerge from democracy's own tendencies rather than external forces[7][11].

Equally important, Tocqueville's appreciation for democracy's strengths offers resources for democratic renewal. His emphasis on the importance of civic associations, local self-government, and religious and moral foundations reminds us that democracy requires more than just formal institutions; it depends on cultural practices and social bonds that must be actively cultivated[11][12].

Perhaps most valuable is Tocqueville's fundamental stance toward democracy: neither uncritically celebratory nor dismissively cynical, but engaged, clear-eyed, and committed to making democracy work despite its inherent tensions and contradictions. At a time when some Americans are tempted by authoritarian alternatives while others embrace an idealized vision of democracy that ignores its practical challenges, Tocqueville's balanced assessment offers a model of democratic citizenship that is both realistic and hopeful[11][12].

Finally, reading "Democracy in America" connects contemporary Americans to a conversation about democratic governance that spans generations. It reminds us that the questions we face—about majority rule and minority rights, about centralization and local control, about individualism and community—are not entirely new but have been grappled with throughout our history. This historical consciousness can provide both humility about the persistence of democratic challenges and confidence that such challenges can be met with wisdom, creativity, and commitment to democratic values[4][12].

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