

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE



EDITED BY ISAAC KRAMNICK

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Alexis de Tocqueville
DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA



AN ANNOTATED TEXT
BACKGROUNDS

Edited by
ISAAC KRAMNICK
CORNELL UNIVERSITY

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY
New York • London

W. W. Norton & Company has been independent since its founding in 1923, when William Warder Norton and Mary D. Herter Norton first published lectures delivered at the People's Institute, the adult education division of New York City's Cooper Union. The Nortons soon expanded their program beyond the Institute, publishing books by celebrated academics from America and abroad. By mid-century, the two major pillars of Norton's publishing program—trade books and college texts—were firmly established. In the 1950s, the Norton family transferred control of the company to its employees, and today—with a staff of four hundred and a comparable number of trade, college, and professional titles published each year—W. W. Norton & Company stands as the largest and oldest publishing house owned wholly by its employees.

Copyright © 2007 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

The text of this book is composed in Fairfield Medium
with the display set in Bernhard Modern.

Series design by Antonina Krass.
Composition by PennSet, Inc.
Manufacturing by the Courier Companies—Westford Division.
Production manager: Benjamin Reynolds.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Tocqueville, Alexis de, 1805–1859.

[De la démocratie en Amérique. English]

Democracy in America : an annotated text backgrounds interpretations /
Alexis de Tocqueville ; edited by Isaac Kramnick.— 1st ed.

p. cm.—(Norton critical edition)
Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-393-92986-7 (pbk.)

1. United States—Politics and government. 2. United States—Social conditions—To 1865. 3. Democracy—United States. 4. United States—History—1815–1861. I. Kramnick, Isaac. II. Title.
JK216.T713 2008
320.973—dc22

2007027404

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110-0017
www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House,
75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

Introduction

I

Few “Great Books” have been so universally canonized as Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Even fewer have made it into the very heart of a nation’s civic discourse and public culture as has Tocqueville’s study of nineteenth-century America. Tocqueville and his book are everywhere in America: in presidential and congressional speeches; in newspaper editorials and op-ed pieces; in academic symposia, Sunday supplements and sermons; in high school and college classrooms (60,000 copies are sold to college students alone each year); on radio and TV commentary; even unto the use of Tocqueville as a poster boy for charitable giving. United Way chapters across the United States have since 1972 enrolled anyone who donates \$10,000 or more to the giant charity into the “Alexis de Tocqueville Society,” noting in their literature that “Tocqueville’s most important observation was that Americans helped each other in time of need.”¹

One reason Tocqueville is a favorite of the chattering classes is that, as the fabled *New York Times* journalist James Reston observed, “his observations are still as fresh as this morning’s newspapers.”² Moreover, it’s easy for virtually anyone in public life to quote some Tocqueville, since, as the *Washington Post* offered in 1984, “citing Tocqueville is a bit like citing the Bible; you can find about anything in it to support your argument.”³ Not that all who invoke Tocqueville have necessarily read his nearly 900-page book. The humorist Russell Baker, in fact, has suggested that “of all the great unread writers I believe Tocqueville to be the most quoted.”⁴

But many, of course, do read Tocqueville and read him through, convinced that *Democracy in America* is truly a timeless classic. On this there is an amazing consensus uniting liberals and conservatives, as two of the essays below indicate. For the liberal professor and journalist Max Lerner, *Democracy in America* “is the greatest book ever written on America”; for the conservative academic Edward Banfield, it is “the greatest book ever written by anyone about America.”

If imitation is a sign of canonical respect, then Tocqueville has his devoted acolytes, and they have repeated his epic trek across America and like him offered reflections on America. In 1981, the 150th an-

1. United Way, National Alexis de Tocqueville Society Awards brochure.

2. *New York Times*, 2 July 1986.

3. *Washington Post*, 6 November 1984.

4. *New York Times*, 23 November 1976.

niversary of the visit, the journalist Richard Reeves duplicated Tocqueville's trip and offered thoughts about Ronald Reagan's America in his cleverly titled *American Journey: Traveling with Tocqueville in Search of Democracy in America*. Much more ambitious was the TV network C-Span's nine-month traipse across the country in 1997 and 1998 to visit and broadcast live from the exact places on the exact dates that Tocqueville had visited them in his equivalent nine months from May 1831 to February 1832. This produced many hours of television and a book, *Traveling Tocqueville's America*. In the book's preface the network explained its fascination with Tocqueville. It had been shaped by the countless speeches they had broadcast over their first twenty years in which "political figures, presidents and congressmen, liberals and conservatives" all cited Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.⁵ More recently, in 2005, to honor the bicentennial of Tocqueville's birth, Bernard-Henri Lévy, the very embodiment today of "the French intellectual," retraced Tocqueville's journey as well. His *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville* put the nineteenth-century French visitor to Jacksonian America once again at the center of public chatter in the United States and France.

II

Alexis de Tocqueville was born on July 29, 1805, to parents who were provincial nobility from Northern France near the Channel coast. Tutored at home until he was fifteen, he spent three years at a lycée before studying law in Paris from ages eighteen to twenty-two. In 1827 Tocqueville was appointed to a minor judicial position at Versailles, where he met Gustave de Beaumont, another judicial functionary, who later, as Tocqueville's close friend, accompanied him to America.

In his legal studies and while working in Versailles, Tocqueville read widely in the classics of European social and political thought as well as in French and English constitutional history. In these years he also saw firsthand the clash of reactionary aristocratic ideals represented by Charles X, the brother of Louis XVI, who had come to the French throne in 1824, with the revolutionary democratic fervor of the 1830 Paris barricades, which led Charles to abdicate. If Tocqueville faulted the excesses of both camps, he was no more a partisan of Louis-Philippe, the Citizen-King, who wrapped himself in the tricolor of the Revolution instead of the Bourbon Lily, and his bourgeois monarchy that followed with its commercial and financial sponsorship.

It was in the context of his studies and the tumultuous interactions of French democratic, aristocratic, and monarchic ideals that Tocqueville came up with the idea of asking the French Ministry of the Interior to send him and Beaumont to America to study prisons and penitentiaries. The Ministry authorized the study but refused to provide funds, which proved no great problem for the two well-connected

5. Anne Bentzel, *Traveling Tocqueville's America: Retracing the 17-State Tour That Inspired Alexis de Tocqueville's political classic Democracy in America* (Baltimore, 1998), p. ix.

young men, who sailed for America on April 2, 1831. They clearly had more in mind than simply a study of prisons. As the twenty-five-year-old Tocqueville and the twenty-eight-year-old Beaumont told friends on their departure, they wanted to write a book on "all the mechanisms of this vast American society" that would, they hoped, be a "great work which would make our reputation some day."⁶ Indeed, it did.

Their journey from Le Havre to Newport, Rhode Island, took five and a half weeks, with their arrival on the 9th of May. They remained in the United States until February 20, 1832, nine and a half months later. They did manage to see America's major prisons, starting with Sing Sing, "up the river" from New York, but that was by no means all they saw. By every conceivable conveyance—coach, canoe, steamer, donkey, and horse—they covered more than 7,000 miles of America, spending 271 days in the United States and 15 in Canada. From Newport and Boston in the East to Wisconsin and Michigan in the West, from Louisiana in the South to Canada in the North, the two Frenchmen traveled with their guns and their notebooks. They were wined and dined by the great and important, and they spent long periods in lonely isolation, sometimes gravely ill. Tocqueville read whatever he could lay his hands on, and the two interviewed presidents and embittered Native Americans. As Beaumont tells it, Tocqueville was always observing, always writing:

Tocqueville . . . when traveling never rested. . . . Rest was foreign to his nature, and whether his body was actively employed or not, his mind was always at work. . . . It never occurred to him to consider an excursion as an amusement, or conversation as relaxation. For Tocqueville the most agreeable conversation was that which was the most useful. The bad day was the day lost or ill-spent. The smallest loss of time was unpleasant to him.⁷

Upon his return to France it took Tocqueville over eight years to write the entire book that would, as he hoped, make his reputation. After he and Beaumont published *Du Système pénitenciaire aux États-unis* in 1833, Tocqueville published his *Democracy in America* in two installments, two volumes as Part I in 1835, and two more volumes as Part II in 1840. He was quickly translated into English by a young English friend, Henry Reeve, whose American editions of *Democracy in America*, published in 1838 and 1841 provide the text for this Norton Critical Edition.

His fellow Frenchmen immediately saw the importance of Tocqueville's achievement. The statesman-intellectual Royer-Collard wrote that "since Montesquieu there has been nothing like *Democracy in America*." In his review, reproduced below, Sainte-Beuve insists that "we would have to go back a long way to find a book of scientific and political observations that has so awakened and rewarded the atten-

6. Quoted in James T. Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America* (Chapel Hill, 1980), p. 3.

7. Quoted in Matthew J. Mancini, *Alexis de Tocqueville* (New York, 1994), p. 15.

tion of our philosophers." In another review Rossi wrote: "no impartial reader can fail to admire on each page the purity of form, the subtle power of observation, the shrewd judgment, the ingenuity, the simple, lively style, both assured and gracious His workmanship is exquisite." No wonder, then, that his publisher is said to have told Tocqueville "well, it seems you've written a masterpiece."⁸ In England, the great John Stuart Mill noted in his 1835 review that Tocqueville's work

has at once taken its rank among the most remarkable productions of our time; and is a book with which, both for its facts and its speculations, all who would understand, or who would be called upon to exercise influence over their age, are bound to be familiar. It will contribute to give to the political speculations of our time a new character

Tocqueville had to be particularly pleased with the book's reception in America. As early as 1836 *The North American Review* hailed *Democracy in America* "as by far the most philosophical, ingenious, and instructive, which has been produced in Europe on the subject of America." A year later *The United States Democratic Review* wrote that Tocqueville's book was "decidedly the most remarkable and really valuable work that has ever yet appeared upon this country from the hand of a foreigner." No longer, wrote *The Knickerbocker* in 1838, did America seem "an enigma to all the world for he has put into the hands of the European public a key to our long-concealed mysteries."

III

"The dominant idea in the book," Tocqueville wrote a friend in 1835, in a letter reprinted below, the "idea which embraces all the others" is the "irresistible future" that is democracy, the inevitable and divinely inspired triumph of democratic ideals over aristocratic. The future was set: "society was tending every day more and more towards equality." America has put to rest the fears of intellectuals who ever since Plato had assumed that the word democracy was "synonymous with destruction, spoliation and murder." America proved that in a democratic government and in a society of equals property was "respected, liberty preserved and religion honored." Even if poetry and other elevated productions of the mind might languish in a democracy like America with its "blending of social ranks,"

it yet has a nobility of its own; and that after all it may be God's will to spread a moderate amount of happiness over all men, instead of heaping a large sum upon a few by allowing only a small minority to approach perfection.

What particularly struck Tocqueville, himself then a functionary of the French state, was the absence of public power in America, no clear-cut set of government officials with directive administrative au-

8. Quoted in André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography* (Baltimore, 1998), p. 224.

thority. In letters home he wrote that “in spite of anxiously searching for the government, one can find it nowhere.” There was no army, no taxation, no central government; “the executive power is nothing.” What he found was “the spectacle of a society marching along all alone, without guide or support.” What made it all work was not the administrative state, so familiar to Europeans, but “the cooperation of individual wills.”

Tocqueville worried that a self-governing political system absent the steadying influence of a professional administrative class, let alone the entrenched privileges of traditional elites, might produce a new tyranny, the democratic tyranny of the majority, a concern in *Democracy in America* that has riveted its readers from the 1830s to this day. *The Knickerbocker*, so full of praise for the Frenchman unraveling the American puzzle, faulted his picture of the despotism of public opinion in America, rebuking him for the claim that he knew “no country in which there is so little independence of mind and freedom of discussion, as in America.” John Stuart Mill, whose *On Liberty* later revisited similar themes, insisted in 1840 that Tocqueville’s description of the insignificance of individuals before growing mass tyranny confused the effects of democracy with “the tendencies of modern commercial society.” Some early reviewers and some contemporary scholars wonder whether Tocqueville’s worries were fueled by the narrow circle of elites he talked with and the overly Federalist and Whig orientation of the books and tracts he read while in America. Still, “the tyranny of the majority” remains the signature theme most identified with Tocqueville and his *Democracy in America*.

The text explores aspects of American life that blunt the potential for majority tyranny. The entire legal system, especially the role in politics of lawyers, all schooled in and committed to the importance of precedent and continuity, is a brake on runaway democracy. The spirit of localism, pride in local self-government, as well as the significant role of religion in American social life, far greater, Tocqueville contends, than elsewhere, bring a self-restraint and a suspicion of central government meddling that tempers the likelihood of the tyranny of the majority. By far the most powerful antidote to the potential excesses of democracy that Tocqueville finds in America is the country’s irrepressible “spirit of association.”

“Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition,” Tocqueville writes, “are forever forming associations.” These may be commercial, religious, moral, cultural, or simply fraternal groupings, but, he concludes, “nothing, in my view, deserves more attention” than this American inclination to create voluntary associations. It produces a richly textured intermediate level of associational civil society standing between individuals and the state, inhibiting centralized tyranny just as the nobility and the clergy did under the ancien régime. Schools of civic engagement, mutual trust and obligation, these myriads of social networks and reciprocal communities constitute what the contemporary American scholar Robert Putnam labels a nation’s “social capital.” In his *Bowling Alone: The Collapse*

and Revival of American Community, Putnam anoints Tocqueville “the patron saint of contemporary social capitalists” as he laments the late-twentieth-century decline of the rich associational life that Tocqueville saw as so uniquely American.⁹ No wonder then that contemporary communitarian critics of excessive American individualism and self-centeredness look to Tocqueville as their prophetic voice and to *Democracy in America* as their sacred text.

Alongside and vying with their associational zeal Tocqueville finds nineteenth-century Americans obsessively focused on self, constantly striving, relentlessly driven by personal ambition and a passion for wealth. Tocqueville saw greed and exploitation as central to the enslavement of Southern blacks and to the gradual extermination of the aboriginal American population, which in the revealing parlance of the age he sometimes labeled “savages.” Americans, Tocqueville observed, believed in the equality and brotherhood of all men, yet violated natural law and the laws of humanity by brutalizing Blacks and removing Indians. Nat Turner’s Rebellion, the very year of Tocqueville’s visit to America, convinced him that a cataclysmic war between the races was inevitable in the South, which is evident in his 1835 comment to John Quincy Adams, below, about other slave uprisings.

Tocqueville saw the American Indian as particularly victimized by American acquisitiveness and the “grasping search for gain.” The greed of settlers and their restless urge to subdue and improve “the untouched splendor of America” doomed America’s aboriginal peoples to ultimate extermination. In a moving letter to his mother written on Christmas Day 1831, Tocqueville described how Americans had deceived and humiliated Indians in order to appropriate their land. Unlike the Spanish, the Americans do not as a matter of policy wantonly slaughter all natives, he wrote, but with their manipulative treaties they used ostensibly more civilized and humane legal methods to rid the land of the once proud tribes. “In a hundred years,” he wrote his mother, there will be “not even a single man belonging to the most remarkable of the Indian races.”

IV

His book on America established Tocqueville’s reputation, as he had hoped it would. The year after Volume II appeared he was made a member of the Académie Française, an honor reserved for the forty most eminent artists and intellectuals in all France. It launched him on a career in public affairs as well. In the 1840s and early 1850s Tocqueville was active in French national politics, elected repeatedly to the Chamber of Deputies from the family seat near Cherbourg, and he even served for a short time as France’s foreign minister.

His specialty as a parliamentarian was foreign affairs, and he sought to abolish slavery in France’s colonies even as he supported French colonialism in Algeria, describing it as progressive and civilizing. Dur-

9. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2000), p. 292.

ing the revolutionary upheavals of 1848, Tocqueville denounced the socialist ideas and policies of Louis Blanc in speeches to the Chamber of Deputies. Four years later, he parted company with his former admirer and sponsor Louis Napoleon when that President of the Republic took the title Emperor Napoleon III.

Tocqueville returned to writing after leaving politics and in 1856 published his other remarkable work, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, a study of the emergence of a centralized state in France from the end of the feudal era through the politics of the French Revolution. He died at the age of 54, a victim of tuberculosis, in 1859, the year his friend John Stuart Mill published *On Liberty*, the book so often linked to *Democracy in America*.

It took over a century for Tocqueville's reputation to achieve the prominence it now has in American life. With the exception of Henry Adams, who saw the Frenchman's writings as the "gospel of my private religion,"¹ few paid much attention to him, until there was a bit of notice with the centennial of *Democracy in America* in the 1930s. The Nisbet and Kloppenberg selections below chronicle the spectacular Tocqueville renaissance in America after World War II and during the long cold war. He has never achieved such canonical status in his native France. On college campuses, consensus historians, professors of American Studies, and social scientists who were seeking a unique American civic culture that immunized her against European totalitarianism rediscovered *Democracy in America*, and they assigned it. The text's protean quality and the ease with which its meaning and relevance can be shaped and used across the political spectrum made it available for quotation by all varieties of politicians and pundits. No wonder that the Frenchman's words are more likely to be heard in the American public square today than Jefferson's or Lincoln's, which improbably and paradoxically makes him more than they America's public philosopher.

What better proof of this surprising stature than a survey by the *New York Times* to determine how the trauma of September 11, 2001, had left its mark "on how American history is written and taught" five years later. The only text cited by the many scholars interviewed in September 2006 is *Democracy in America*. A historian explains how he now assigns "Tocqueville's writing about tyranny of the majority in [his] course" to help his students understand why after the attack "civil liberties would take a beating" in America.² Several weeks after the anniversary of 9/11 Tocqueville was still on the American public mind in an even more unexpected setting. In a *New York Times* review of a book on the history of gambling in America, which claimed that 54 million people visited casinos in America in 2004, the reviewer finished with the obligatory Tocqueville quote, even on this esoteric topic. The review ends: "Tocqueville, as always, got it exactly right.

1. Quoted in Michael Kammen, *Alexis de Tocqueville and Democracy in America* (Washington, D.C., 1998), p. 10.

2. *New York Times*, 6 September 2006.

‘Those who live in the midst of democratic fluctuations have always before their eyes the image of chance,’ he wrote, ‘and they end by liking all undertakings in which chance plays a part.’ ”³ What an achievement, this canonic and iconic place in American life, for a visitor who spent nine and a half months in the country!

I would like to thank W. W. Norton’s Carol Bemis and Ann Shin for the idea of this book and Elana Beale for all her wonderful help in putting it together. Thanks also, once again, to Michael Busch for his invaluable assistance and to Susan Tarrow for her splendid translations from French to English.

3. *New York Times*, 6 October 2006.

A Note on the Text

The text reproduced here with no changes is the first American printing of the complete *Democracy in America* in 1841, translated from the French by Henry Reeve. The one exception is that the “American Editor,” John C. Spencer, who added his own notes to the text, wrote prefaces to each of Tocqueville’s two volumes, which have been moved to the Backgrounds section of this Norton Critical Edition. Tocqueville’s footnotes are indicated, as they were then, by various printer’s marks. Henry Reeve’s footnotes are labeled *Translator’s Note*. The notes added by the editor of this Norton Critical Edition are numbered and found at the end of the text.

Contents

Introduction	ix
A Note on the Text	xvii
The Text of <i>Democracy in America</i>	1
Backgrounds	619
TOCQUEVILLE LETTERS	621
To Ernest de Chabrol, New York, 9 June 1831	621
To M. Louis de Kergolay, Yonkers, 20 June 1831	622
To Ernest de Chabrol, Hartford, 7 October 1831	626
To the Countess de Tocqueville, On the Mississippi, 25 December 1831	627
To Eugène Stoffels, Paris, 21 February 1835	628
To Henry Reeve, Paris, 22 March 1837	629
To John Quincy Adams, Paris, 4 December 1837	630
REVIEWS OF <i>DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA</i>	632
Sainte-Beuve • <i>Le Temps</i> , Paris, April 1835	632
Pellegrino Rossi • <i>Revue des deux mondes</i> , July–September 1840	636
John C. Spencer • Preface to 1838 American Edition of <i>Democracy in America</i>	643
• Preface to 1841 American Edition of <i>Democracy</i> <i>in America</i>	646
<i>The North American Review</i> , July 1836	650
<i>The United States Democratic Review</i> , October 1837	659
<i>The Knickerbocker; or The New York Monthly Magazine</i> , September 1838	670
John Stuart Mill • <i>London Review</i> , October 1835	673
• <i>Edinburgh Review</i> , October 1840	683
Interpretations	705
David Riesman • Tocqueville as Ethnographer	707
Max Lerner • Tocqueville and American Civilization	717
Robert Nisbet • Many Tocquevilles	724
James T. Schleifer • From Egoism to Individualism	739
Catherine Zuckert • Not by Preaching: Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in American Democracy	750
Sheldon S. Wolin • Archaism and Modernity	767

Edward C. Banfield • The Illiberal Tocqueville	777
Daniel T. Rodgers • Of Prophets and Prophecy	788
Arthur Schlesinger Jr. • Individualism and Apathy in Tocqueville's <i>Democracy</i>	799
Sean Wilentz • Many Democracies: On Tocqueville and Jacksonian America	809
Henry Steele Commager • Democracy and the Tyranny of the Majority	825
James T. Kloppenberg • Life Everlasting: Tocqueville in America	834
Tamara M. Teale • Tocqueville and American Legal Studies: The Paradox of Liberty and Destruction	848
Selected Bibliography	855

The Text of
DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA



DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA.

BY

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE,
MEMBER OF THE INSTITUTE OF FRANCE, AND OF THE CHAMBER
OF DEPUTIES, ETC., ETC.

TRANSLATED BY HENRY REEVE, ESQ.

WITH AN ORIGINAL PREFACE AND NOTES BY

JOHN C. SPENCER,

COUNSELLOR AT LAW

FOURTH EDITION,
REVISED AND CORRECTED FROM THE EIGHTH PARIS EDITION.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I

NEW YORK:

J. & H. G. LANGLEY, 57 CHATHAM STREET.

PHILADELPHIA:—THOMAS, COWPERTHWAIT, & CO.

BOSTON:—C. C. LITTLE & J. BROWN.

1841.