

## Suggested Reading/Discussion Questions

Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*

Despite its overwhelming verbosity, there IS a core theory in *Democracy in America* about the experiment of self-government, one that is intertwined with Tocqueville's vision and normative assessment of human nature. Tocqueville's observations remain central to deliberations among political scientists, both empiricists and theorists—his contribution is timeless and very much alive. In the words of one Tocquevillian scholar, "In Tocqueville's eyes, a truly self-governing democratic society offers a noble prospect, a goal which rises above the apparently inescapable commercialism of modern life. The case for participation in government as a condition for a fully moral life was the case nearest Tocqueville's heart. His writings amount to an anguished protest against the excessive 'privatization' of life and neglect of the value of citizenship."<sup>1</sup> It seems his challenge remains.

In brief, Volume I deals with the dangers of tyranny, the federal division of powers, the constitution, and the importance of law, etc.—in other words, on the effects of institutions and political habits. Volume II deals more with character and the "soul" of Americas.

1. Why is Tocqueville writing this book?
2. How does Tocqueville define & characterize democracy and aristocracy?
3. How does T. understand the relationship between equality and liberty?
4. What is civil society for T.?
5. Is individualism a danger to democracy? How? What political dangers flow from individualism?
6. What is T.'s solution to the pathologies of democracy?
7. What is a civil association? What is a political association? How and why are the two related differently in America?
8. What are the dangers, and benefits, of association to democracy? How can government mitigate the dangers? "If men are to remain civilized or to become civilized, the art of association must develop and improve among them at the same speed as the equality of conditions spreads."
9. What is the relevance of T. for contemporary public life?

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Siedentop, *Tocqueville* (Oxford University Press, 1994), v.