



Democracy in America, Volumes I & II

Alexis de Tocqueville

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In 1831 Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont were sent by the French government to the United States to study its prison system. They spent nine months traveling the country, using the study as a pretext to make a broad survey of the economic, political, and religious character of the young nation. In 1835 de Tocqueville published the first of two volumes of *Democracy in America*, in which he examined the democratic revolution. He begins by noting the movement towards equality brought about by the ability of all men to enter the clergy, the abolition of primogeniture, and economic opportunities brought about by the growth of commerce. The first volume

dwells at length on a political analysis of why a democratic republic has succeeded in America, citing separation of church and state, respect for women, and economic mobility as critical factors. The second volume treats civil laws and society in a similar manner. The book is often cited for its insights, such as a concern for the tyranny of the majority, the dangers of individualism, the acrimony over the abolition of slavery, the emergence of the United States and Russia as the dominant world powers, and the rise of an industrial elite. The book has become a classic work at the core of the disciplines of political science, sociology, and history. Harvard professor Harvey C. Mansfield described it as “at once the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America.”

Alexis-Charles-Henri Clérel de Tocqueville (July 29, 1805 – April 16, 1859) was a French diplomat, political scientist, and historian best known for his works *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. Both works analyze the changes in standards of living, social order, and the individual’s relationship to the market and the state with the dispassionate eye of a social scientist. He was from an aristocratic family in Normandy. His parents narrowly escaped execution after the fall of Robespierre and lived in exile in England before returning to France during Napoleon’s reign. After the fall of Napoleon his father became a noble peer and prefect. Alexis was educated at the Fabert School in Metz. Shortly after the July Monarchy of 1830 he left for after a lengthy tour of America to inspect its prisons, after which he produced *Democracy in America*, a lengthy survey and analysis of political and social evolution in the new world, published in 1835 to popular acclaim throughout Europe. Tocqueville was active in French politics from 1830 – 1851, a time of turbulence and regime changes, and served briefly as minister of foreign affairs in 1849 before retiring from political life after Louis Napoleon Bonaparte’s ascension in 1851. He was a classical liberal who valued liberty above all but warned of the dangers of individualism. He advocated for parliamentary government, but he was skeptical of the extremes of democracy, particularly the tyranny of the majority and its tendency to inhibit original thinking. He suffered from tuberculosis and succumbed to the disease in April 1859.