

17.03 Introduction to Political Thought
Lecture Outline: Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* I

I. Background

- A. Personal: 1805-59, nobility, 1831 trip to America, legislator 1839-50
- B. Political context: instability of French politics
 - 1. French Revolution, 1789; Napoleon in power 1799-1814
 - 2. Fall of Napoleon, Bourbon restoration
 - 3. Revolution of 1830: Bourbons deposed, constitutional (July) monarchy
 - 4. 1848: revolutions across Europe; in France, establishment of Second Republic
 - 5. 1851: coup by Napoleon III (nephew of Napoleon I), Second Empire

II. Tocqueville's study of America both sociological and normative

- A. Like Marx, turned away from pure politics to analyze entire social order
- B. View of history: partly determined, ineluctable progress of equality
- C. America as model democratic republic and harbinger of Europe's future, but has peculiar history (no feudalism, no fixed classes, Puritan history)

III. Democratic social conditions and its political consequences

- A. Tocqueville observes democratic social conditions in America
 - 1. No hereditary ranks and distinctions; wealth circulates "with incredible rapidity"
 - 2. Equality of mental endowments
- B. Political consequences of democratic social conditions
 - 1. Equal political rights
 - 2. Popular sovereignty: representative institutions but the interests of the people direct society

IV. Liberty and local institutions

- A. New England township
- B. Administrative decentralization in America and its effects

V. Associations

- A. Types of associations
- B. Role of associations in politics
- C. Relationship between freedom and associations

VI. Strengths and weaknesses of democratic government

- A. Strengths
 - 1. Laws tend toward greatest good of the greatest number
 - a. Rulers don't have interests opposed to those of the people
 - b. The governed are alert and check representatives from deviating from their interests
 - 2. Can draw on people's past experience (including mistakes) in revising laws
 - 3. People have respect for rights and for the law
- B. Weaknesses
 - 1. Inefficacy in achieving its ends due to lack of skill and envy among the people
 - 2. Rulers in democracy are more corruptible than rulers in aristocracy
 - 3. Legislative and administrative instability
 - 4. Tyranny of the majority, democratic despotism ("leaves the body alone and goes straight for the soul")

VII. What can temper tyranny of the majority

- A. Institutions: local self-govt, political and civic associations, judiciary, free press
- B. Mores/Norms: above institutions help foster sense of the common good among the people