

Politics in the Democratic Age: Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*

A great democratic revolution is taking place in our midst; everybody sees it, but by no means everybody judges it in the same way. Some think it a new thing and, supposing it an accident, hope that they can still check it; others think it irresistible, because it seems to them the most continuous, ancient, and permanent tendency known to history.

—Author's Introduction

I. WHO WAS TOCQUEVILLE?

- A. **Biography:** Born to a Norman aristocratic family in 1805. Came to the United States on a French government mission in 1831 with his friend Gustave de Beaumont to survey and report on American prisons. Stayed two years, and in 1835 published Vol. 1 of *Democracy in America*, in which he developed a comprehensive social theory about the coming "democratic age." Vol. 2 published in 1840. Died of tuberculosis in 1859.



B. **Significance**

1. **First Modern Sociologist:** Although generally considered the first sociologist, he could be considered the first and perhaps most insightful *cultural anthropologist*.
2. **Relevant and Credible Today:** Unlike many nineteenth century social theorists who have been questioned to a greater or lesser extent (Weber, Durkheim, Comte) Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* remains one of the most insightful works available on the social effects of equality of conditions in the modern world.
3. **Tocqueville offers an account of who we are and how we got here:** He gives us
 - a. **History: Genealogy** of democratic society
 - b. **Anthropology: Psychology** of the "democratic soul"

II. *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA*: THE HISTORICAL MOVEMENT FROM ARISTOCRACY TO DEMOCRACY

- A. **Theme:** The world is inexorably moving from a fixed condition of social hierarchy (the "Aristocratic Age") to fluid conditions of social equality (The "Democratic Age"). The political task is how to manage this change...
- B. **Purpose:** Explain the coming world of equality of social conditions to European elites with the goal of "educating" democracy (p. 12). Tocqueville sees America as uniquely

and exceptionally positioned for the coming age of equality because it lacks the aristocratic past of Europe and Asia. From its Puritan founding, Tocqueville contends, America embraced a theologically grounded egalitarianism that had never existed in Europe. As a result, America's example offers Europe unique insights into the consequences of equality of social conditions for societies and individuals.

C. Defining the Terms: Social Conditions and Human Types

	The "Aristocratic Age"	The "Democratic Age"
Social Structure	Hierarchical Chain of obligation binds persons to those above and below them in the social structure	Egalitarian Links between persons (faith, family, community) are broken and dissolve
Basic Social Unit	Family (name matters)	The "Individual"
Social Mobility	Minimal	High
Currency	Honor	Money
Cardinal Value	Virtue	Self-Interest
Difference	Primordial	Leveling of Difference
Historical Example	<i>Periclean Athens, medieval Europe, pre-Revolutionary France</i>	<i>The United States</i>

D. The Political Problem: How are we to contend with the democratic age? How do we manage the transition from aristocratic world to conditions of social equality?

	Aristocracy (Inequality)	Transition (Modernity)	Democracy (Equality)
The One	King	→	The State
The Few	Nobles/Aristocrats	→	? (but note role of public opinion)
The Many	The People	→	Citizens

A new political science is needed for a world itself quite new.

E. The Choice—Equality in Freedom or Equality in Servitude: Tocqueville worries that a completely democratic society will isolate people from each other and level the entire society under one centralized power.

I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest. Mankind, for him, consists in his children and personal friends. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, they are near enough, but he does not notice them. He touches them but feels nothing. He exists in and for himself. . .

F. Amelioration in the Democratic Age: Mediating Institutions (Civic Associations, Religion, the Family and the Jury System), which are artifacts of the Aristocratic Age, must be preserved and strengthened.

I have tried to see not differently but further than any party; while they are busy with tomorrow, I have wished to consider the whole future.

—Author's Introduction