Alexis de Tocqueville

DEMOCRACY
IN AMERICA

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The truth of this is well known by parties. Consequently, you see them contest the majority wherever they can. When they lack the majority of those who voted, they place it among those who have abstained from voting; and when, even there, the majority escapes them, they find it among those who do not have the right to vote.

In the United States, except for slaves, servants, and the poor provided for by the towns, there is no one who is not a voter and who, as such, does not indirectly contribute to the law. So those who want to attack the laws are reduced to doing conspicuously one of two things; they must either change the opinion of the nation, or trample its will underfoot.

Add to this first reason another more direct and more powerful, that in the United States each person finds a kind of personal interest in having everyone obey the laws; for the one who is not part of the majority today will perhaps be among its ranks tomorrow; and this respect that he now professes for the will of the legislator, he will soon have the occasion to demand for his own will. So, however annoying the law, the inhabitant of the United States submits without trouble, not only as a work of the greatest number, but also as his own; he considers it from the point of view of a contract to which he would have been a party.

So in the United States, you do not see a numerous and always turbulent crowd who, seeing the law as a natural enemy, only looks upon it with fear and suspicion. On the contrary, it is impossible not to see that all classes show a great confidence in the legislation that governs the country and feel a kind of paternal love for it.

I am wrong in saying all classes. In America, since the European scale of powers is reversed, the rich find themselves in a position analogous to that of the poor in Europe; they are the ones who often distrust the law. I have said it elsewhere: the real advantage of democratic government is not to guarantee the interests of all, as has sometimes been claimed, but only to protect those of the greatest number. In the United States, where the poor man governs, the rich have always to fear that he will abuse his power against them.

This disposition of the mind of the rich can produce a muted discontent; but society is not violently troubled by it; for the same reason that prevents the rich man from giving his confidence to the legislator prevents him from defying his commands. He does not make the law, because he is rich; and he does not dare to violate it, because of his wealth. In general, among civilized nations, only those who have nothing to lose revolt. Therefore, if the laws of democracy are not always respectable, they are nearly always respected; for those who generally violate the laws cannot fail to obey the laws that they have made and from which they profit, and the citizens who could have an interest in breaking them are led by character and by position to submit to whatever the will of the legislator is. Moreover, the people, in America, not only obey the law because it is their work, but also because they can change it when by chance it injures them; they submit to it first as an evil that they imposed on themselves, and then as a temporary evil.

Activity That Reigns in All Parts of the Political Body in the United States; Influence That It Exercises on Society

It is more difficult to imagine the political activity that reigns in the United States than the liberty or equality that is found there.—The great movement that constantly agitates the legislatures is only an episode, a prolongation of this universal movement.—Difficulty that the American has occupying himself only with his own affairs.—Political agitation spreads into civil society.—Industrial activity of the Americans coming in part from this cause.—Indirect advantages that society gains from the government of democracy.

When you pass from a free country into another that is not, you are struck by a very extraordinary spectacle: there, everything is activity and movement; here, everything seems calm and immobile. In the one, the only question is improvement and progress; you would say that society, in the other, having gained all good things, aspires only to rest in order to enjoy them. The country that gets so worked up to be happy is, however, generally richer
and more prosperous than the one that seems so satisfied with its lot. And in considering the one and the other, you have difficulty imagining how so many new needs make themselves felt each day in the first, while so few seem to be experienced in the second.\(^2\)

If this remark is applicable to free countries that have retained monarchical form and to those in which aristocracy dominates, it is very much more applicable to democratic republics. There, it is no longer a portion of the people that sets out to improve the state of society; the whole people take charge of this concern. It is a matter of providing for the needs and conveniences not only of a class, but of all classes at the same time.\(^8\)

It is not impossible to imagine the immense liberty that the Americans enjoy. You can also have an idea of their extreme equality, but what you cannot understand, without having already witnessed it, is the political activity that reigns in the United States.

Scarcely have you landed on American soil than you find yourself in the middle of a sort of tumult; a confused clamor arises on all sides; a thousand voices reach your ear at the same time; each one expresses various social needs. Around you, everything stirs: here, the people of a neighborhood have gathered to know if a church should be built; there, some are working on choosing a representative; farther along, the deputies of a district go as fast as they can to the city, in order to see to certain local improvements; in another place, it is the farmers of the village who abandon their fields to go to discuss the plan of a road or of a school. Some citizens assemble for the sole purpose of declaring that [[freemasonry menaces the security of the State]] they disapprove of the government’s course; while others gather to proclaim that the men in office are the fathers of the country. Here are still others who, seeing drunkenness as the principal source of the evils of the State, come to pledge solemnly to give an example of temperance.\(^1\)

The great political movement that constantly agitates American legislatures, the only one that is noticed outside, is only an episode and a sort of prolongation of the universal movement that begins in the lowest ranks of the people and then reaches, one by one, all classes of citizens. You cannot work harder to be happy.

It is difficult to say what place political concerns occupy in the life of a man in the United States. To get involved in the government of society and to talk about it, that is the greatest business and, so to speak, the only pleasure that an American knows. This is seen even in the smallest habits of his life; women themselves often go to public assemblies and, by listening to political speeches, relax from household cares. For them, clubs replace theatrical entertainments to a certain point. An American does not know how to converse, but he discusses; he does not discourse, but he holds forth. He always speaks to you as to an assembly; and if he happens by chance to get excited, he will say: Gentlemen, while addressing his interlocutor.

In certain countries, the inhabitant accepts only with a kind of repugnance the political rights that the law grants him; dealing with common interests seems to rob him of his time, and he loves to enclose himself within a narrow egoism exactly limited by four ditches topped by hedges.

In contrast, from the moment when the American would be reduced to attending only to his own affairs, half of his existence would be taken away

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\(^2\) In the margin: "<# What is even much more surprising is that often [v: sometimes] the people who do nothing to improve their lot, find themselves as satisfied with their destiny as the people who stir themselves to make theirs better. The second wonders that one can be so happy in the midst of so much misery; and the first, that one can go to so much trouble to become happy. #>"\(^a\)

\(^a\) In the margin: "<#A European would be very unhappy if you forced him to pursue well-being with so much effort. It is difficult to believe that men are happy when they make so much effort to become happier. It is the story of the rich tradesman who dies of boredom when he is forced to abandon his business. #>"

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\(^1\) Temperance societies are associations whose members pledge to abstain from strong liquor. At the time of my visit to the United States, temperance societies already counted more than 270,000 members, and their effect had been to diminish, in the state of Pennsylvania alone, the consumption of strong liquors by 500,000 gallons annually.

\(^b\) See chapter V of this part (p. 365) and Écrits sur le système pénitentiaire en France et à l’étranger (OC. IV, 1), pp. 327–28, appendix VII of Système pénitentiaire.
from him; he would feel an immense emptiness in his days, and he would become unbelievably unhappy.  

I am persuaded that if despotism ever succeeds in becoming established in America, it will have even more difficulties overcoming the habits that liberty has engendered than surmounting the love of liberty itself.

This constantly recurring agitation that the government of democracy has introduced into the political world passes afterward into civil society. Everything considered, I do not know if that is not the greatest advantage of democratic government, and I praise it much more for what it causes to be done than for what it does.

Incontestably the people often direct public affairs very badly; but the people cannot get involved in public affairs without having the circle of their ideas expand, and without seeing their minds emerge from their ordinary routine. The common man who is called to the government of society conceives a certain esteem for himself. Since he is then a power, very enlightened minds put themselves in the service of his. People speak to him constantly in order to gain his support, and by seeking to deceive him in a thousand different ways, they enlighten him. In politics, he takes part in enterprises that he did not conceive, but that give him a general taste for enterprises. Every day new improvements to make common property are pointed out to him, and he feels the desire to improve his personal property arise. Perhaps he is neither more virtuous nor more happy, but he is more enlightened and more active than his predecessors. I do not doubt that democratic institutions, joined with the physical nature of the country, are the cause, not direct, as so many people say, but indirect of the prodigious movement of industry that is noticed in the United States. It is not the laws that give birth to it, but the people learn to produce it by making the law.

2. The same fact was already observed in Rome under the first Caesars. Montesquieu remarks somewhere that nothing equaled the despair of certain Roman citizens who, after the agitations of a political existence, returned suddenly to the calm of private life.


4. In the margin: "Superiority of the strength of the people which is worth more than the government. It is difficult to make the people listen to reason, but when they hear it, they advance toward reason with a much stronger step and with a much more powerful effort. Criminal investigation in America. Smuggling."

5. The manuscript adds: "in a way unknowingly."
What do you ask of society and its government? We must understand one another.

Do you want to give the human spirit a certain nobility, a generous fashion of envisioning the things of this world? Do you want to inspire in men a sort of contempt for material goods? Do you desire to bring about or to maintain profound convictions and prepare great devotions?

Is it a matter for you of polishing mores, of elevating manners, of making the arts shine? Do you want poetry, fame, and glory?

Do you claim to organize a people in a way to act strongly on all others? Do you intend it to attempt great undertakings, and, whatever the result of its efforts, to leave an immense trace in history?

If such, in your view, is the principal object that men must propose for themselves in society, do not opt for the government of democracy; it would not lead you surely to the goal.

But if it seems useful to you to divert the intellectual and moral activity of man toward the necessities of material life, and to use it to produce well-being; if reason appears to you more profitable to men than genius; if your object is not to create heroic virtues, but peaceful habits; if you like to see vices more than crimes, and prefer to find fewer great actions, on the condition of encountering fewer cases of heinous crimes; if, instead of acting within the bosom of a brilliant society, it is enough for you to live in the midst of a prosperous society; if, finally, in your view, the principal object of a government is not to give the entire body of the nation the most strength or the most glory possible, but to provide for each of the individuals that make up the society the most well-being and to avoid the most misery; then equalize conditions and constitute the government of democracy.f

If there is no more time to make a choice, and a force superior to men is already carrying you, without consulting your desires, toward one of these two governments, seek at least to derive from it all the good that it can do; and knowing its good instincts, as well as its bad inclinations, endeavor to limit the effect of the second and to develop the first.g

f. See appendix V of this edition, particularly pp. 1369–71.

g. Note in the manuscript at the end of the chapter: "#Perhaps, in place of these generalities, it would be better to develop this single idea that if the government of democracy is not favorable to the first part of the picture, it has the advantage of serving the well-being of the greatest number.

"Perhaps put all this at the end of the advantages of democracy like a kind of summary.#"