

Democracy in America

Spring 2020

Von Roll Seminarraum B 202

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The nomination and election of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election took the world by surprise; and throughout his presidency, his administration has sought to push American democracy in unprecedented authoritarian and populist directions. Surprising and unprecedented as it is, what can sociology tell us that might help us understand this recent turn in American politics? This seminar begins with a close examination of the best description and analysis of American political culture ever written: Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. The seminar then examines a number of different authors that Tocqueville inspired: Max Weber, William Kornhauser, David Riesman, Allan Bloom, Robert Bellah, Philip Gorski & Jean Baudrillard. The aim of the seminar is to see what Tocqueville and Tocquevillian inspired sociology can tell us about how to explain, interpret, and attempt to predict contemporary political tendencies, in America and beyond.

Guiding Questions

What is democracy? What are its promises and pitfalls?

What is the relationship between equality and freedom? Equality and despotism?

What are the individual-collective configurations that are particular to democracy? Under what conditions do they promote equality, freedom, despotism, anarchy, individualism, conformity, mediocrity?

What can we understand about general concepts and trends of democracy by studying and comparing particular cases?

What are some general trends, shifts, tendencies in contemporary democracy? Does considering the particularities of the American case – contemporary America or Tocqueville's 19th C America – help us to understand anything about more general democratic transformations?

Learning Objectives

In addition to being about democracy, this is also a class about (particular) cases and (general/generalizable) concepts, trends, theories.

Alexis de Tocqueville knew he was living in a moment of transition, a moment of widespread social upheaval. The democratic and democratizing changes that characterized his time were not reducible to those of the American experience, but he wanted to try to understand something of the general trends and tendencies by examining them in the light of the particulars of the American case, and vice versa.

Likewise, our historical moment feels to many like a moment of some kind of democratic transition, shift. From what? To what? It is hard to say precisely – transitions are not easy to characterize in the middle of them – but we will ask these questions. With Tocqueville as our guide, we will proceed as he did, asking, what is democracy in our age, and what can we learn about its general trends and tendencies in thinking comparatively about the American particularities – those of Tocqueville's mid 19th Century America and those of contemporary America?

Assignments

Mini papers (Democracy in...)

Students will be asked to select a case of democracy to follow throughout the course of the semester, and to think and write about that case in the light of the material we read each week. You can choose to follow contemporary American democracy or another case of democracy that is of interest to you, e.g. contemporary or historical Switzerland, France, Britain, Russia, Venezuela, Arab Spring, Fascist movements in interwar Europe, communist parties, movements or regimes, etc. Anything, it just has to be a case that is of interest to you and it has to have some kind of claim to democracy. Much as Tocqueville thought and wrote about America as a way trying to understand general principles and trends of democracy, you will be asked to follow an empirical case of democracy throughout the semester and consider your case in light of Tocqueville and Tocqueville-inspired scholarship. What do Tocqueville and Tocquevillian scholars reveal about your case of democracy? What does your case reveal about Tocqueville and the scholarship he inspired? You will be asked to write a minimum of 4 mini papers (3-4 pages double spaced) which discuss a concept, theme, argument, idea from that week's readings and then interpret it in the light of the case of democracy you are following. For example you might decide to write a paper on week 7 about "tyranny of the majority"; the first half of the paper should explain Tocqueville's understanding of the concept and the second half should examine the concept in the light of some small piece of evidence – a video, newspaper article, radio interview, etc. – from the case of democracy that you are following. What can we learn about your case in the light of the concept and vice versa?

- 4 (3-4 pages double spaced) papers will be due throughout the course of the semester
- A minimum of two have to be written on Tocqueville's writings, i.e. in the first seven weeks of the class
- Papers have to be turned into me – emailed pdf preferred – **prior** to the beginning of the session that addresses the text you have chosen to write about (you can, however, revise your paper in light of that sessions discussion if you want, but you have to have turned in a paper beforehand in order to do so)
- You are welcome to submit more than 4 papers; in that case the four best scores of the papers you hand in will count toward your final grade

Presentations

Students will also be asked to present in small groups weekly readings on one occasion over the course of the semester. In these presentations you should aim toward engaging with, rather than simply summarizing the weekly readings. We will have all done the readings, the presentations should aim toward helping us to better understand the arguments, their significance, implications, assumptions, shortcomings, etc. You can, but are not required to, draw on empirical examples – short articles, videos, etc., from the cases of democracy you are following and writing about or others.

Attendance and Active Participation

Students are expected to come to every class having read the material and prepared to discuss and ask questions of it.

Class attendance is required. No more than two unexcused absences are permitted, and you should always be in communication with me about any absences.

Assessment

Your final grade will be composed of the following three elements:

- Four Mini papers: 70%
- Presentation: 20%
- Participation: 10%

Weekly Reading Schedule

Week 1: Feb 19th

Introduction

Tocqueville and 19th Century America

Week 2: Feb 26th

Democracy: Universal Tendencies and American Particularities

Tocqueville, Alexis de. 1945 [1835]. *Democracy in America, Vol 1* (heretofore *DiA 1*) (Henry Reeve, Philip Bradley trans). New York: Random House

- “Author’s Preface to the 12th ed.,” pp. ix-x
- “Author’s Introduction,” pp. 3-17

Tocqueville, Alexis de. 1945 [1840]. *Democracy in America, Vol 2* (heretofore *DiA 2*) (Henry Reeve, Philip Bradley trans). New York: Random House

- “Author’s Preface to the 2nd Part” pp. v-vi
- Book 4, Ch. 6 “What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear,” pp. 334-339
- Book 4, Ch. 7 “Continuation of the Preceding Chapters,” pp. 340-348
- Book 4, Ch. 8 “General Survey of the Subject,” pp. 349-352

Week 3: Mar 4th

Origins – Natural, Social, Circumstantial – of Democracy in America

DiA 1

- Ch. 1 “Exterior Form of North America,” pp. 18-26
- Ch. 2 “Origin of the Anglo-Americans, and Importance of this Origin in Relation to Their Future Condition,” pp. 27-47
- Ch. 3 “Social Condition of the Anglo Americans” pp. 48-56
- Ch. 4 “The Principle of Sovereignty of the People of America,” pp. 57-60

Week 4: Mar 11th

Politics and Civil Society

DiA 1

- Ch. 5 “Necessity of Examining the Condition of the States Before That of the Union at Large” (select sections - townships) pp. 61-69
- Ch. 8 “The Federal Constitution” (select sections) pp. 162-179

- Ch. 12 “Political Associations in the United States” pp. 198-205
- Ch. 13 “Government of Democracy in America” (select sections) pp 206-209 & 233-240
- Ch. 14 “What are the Real Advantages Which American Society Derives From a Democratic Government” (select sections) pp. 250-253 & 258-263

DiA 2

- Book 2 Ch. 5-7 pp. 114-128

Week 5: Mar 18th

Markets: Unfettered Production and Consumption

DiA 2

- Book 2 Ch. 10-20 pp. 136-171
- Book 3, Ch. 5 pp. 187-195; Ch. 20 pp. 263-264

Week 6: Mar 25th

Religion, Culture, Education, Character

DiA 1

- Ch. 17 “Principal Causes Which Tend to Maintain the Democratic Republic in the United States” pp. 298-342

DiA 2

- Book 1 Ch. 2 pp. 9-13; Ch. 5 pp. 21-29; Ch. 8 pp. 34-35
- Book 3 Ch. 3-4 pp. 178-186

Week 7: Apr 1st

Freedom and Equality, Individualism and Conformity

DiA 1

- Ch. 15 “Unlimited Power of the Majority in the United States, and its Consequences” pp. 264-280
- Ch. 16 “Causes Which Mitigate the Tyranny of the Majority in the United States” pp. 281-297

DiA 2

- Book 2 Ch. 1-4 pp. 99-114 & Ch. 8-9 pp. 129-135
- Book 4, Ch. 1-5 pp. 304-333

Revisiting Tocqueville in 20th Century America

Week 8: Apr 8th

Politics and Civil Society Revisited

Kornhauser, William. 1959. *The Politics of Mass Society*. New York: Free Press.

- "The Structure of Mass Society." Pp. 74-101

Week 9: Apr 22nd

Character Revisited

Riesman, David. 2001 [1950]. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Beginning Ch. 1 “Some Types of Character and Society” pp. 3-25
- Ch. 9 “Political Persuasions: Indignation and Tolerance” pp. 188-205

- Ch. 10 “Images of Power” pp. 206-224

Week 10: April 29th

Culture Revisited

Bellah, Robert et al. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Ch. 2 “Culture and Character: The Historical Conversation” pp. 27-51
- Conclusion “Transforming American Culture” 275-296

Week 11: May 6th

Education Revisited

Bloom, Allan. 1987. *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. New York: Simon Schuster.

- “Introduction” pp. 26-43
- “The Clean Slate” pp. 47-61
- “Self-Centeredness” pp. 82-88
- “Equality” pp. 88-91
- “Tocqueville on Democratic Intellectual Life” 246-256
- “Conclusion” pp. 380-382

Week 12: May 13th

Religion Revisited

Weber, Max. 1946. “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*; Gerth and Mills (ed). New York: Oxford University Press.

Gorski, Philip. 2017. “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump: A Critical Cultural Sociology.” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 5(3): 338-354.

Week 13: May 20th

Freedom and Equality Revisited

Baudrillard, Jean. 1999 [1986]. *America*. New York: Verso.

- “Utopia Achieved” pp. 75-106
- “The End of U.S. Power?” pp. 107-120

Week 14: May 27th

Democracy Revisited: American Particularities and Universal Tendencies? (Concluding Discussion)