

# PHILOSOPHY OF ECONOMICS & POLITICS

## LECTURE 2: TOCQUEVILLE

DATE **15 OCTOBER 2018**

LECTURER **JULIAN REISS**



# Today's agenda

- \* Today we are going to look at a single book:
  - \* Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*
- \* Before that I am first going to talk about Tocqueville, the man, ...
- \* ... the historical context...
- \* ... and explain why it's worth reading a nearly 200 year-old book today (and for this module)

# Alexis de Tocqueville

- \* French diplomat, **political scientist**, and historian
- \* **1805–59** (friends with **John Stuart Mill**)
- \* Born into an old Norman **aristocratic family**  
(members of which fought at Hastings in 1066)
- \* Family suffered greatly in the **French Revolution**
- \* Lived in a **period of transition: aristocracy** had been destroyed, but **democracy** not yet established
- \* Read **Voltaire**, **Rousseau**, and **Montesquieu**



# Alexis de Tocqueville

- \* He thus rejected any '**absolute truths**' – which characterises his attitude in *Democracy in America*
- \* Studied **law** and began a legal career in 1827 as apprentice judge
- \* **Travelled to America twice** in the early 1830s
- \* His **political career** started in 1839 in the '**July Monarchy**'
- \* During the February **1848 Revolution**, member of the **Constituent Assembly** of 1848

# Why read Tocqueville today?

- \* Major work in the history of political thought, a founding text of **classical liberalism**
- \* According to Jon Elster, Tocqueville was **the world's 'first social scientist'**
- \* His accounts of the **American political system** and **democracy** more generally continue to be highly insightful
- \* For us: he clearly described a '**capitalist**' system and its relation to democracy



# Tocqueville's *Idées Mères*

- \* Increasing **equality of conditions** defining characteristic of the modern times; advancement of democracy there was to stay
- \* **Democracy raise challenges:** book describes these and possible remedies
- \* **No set of political institutions is ideal/superior** to all others – they need to fit the society in which they operate
- \* Central concern: **How preserve freedom in the age of democracy?**
- \* **Mores, laws, and circumstances** are all responsible for the success of a polity
- \* **The future is not determined** and, at least in part, of our own making



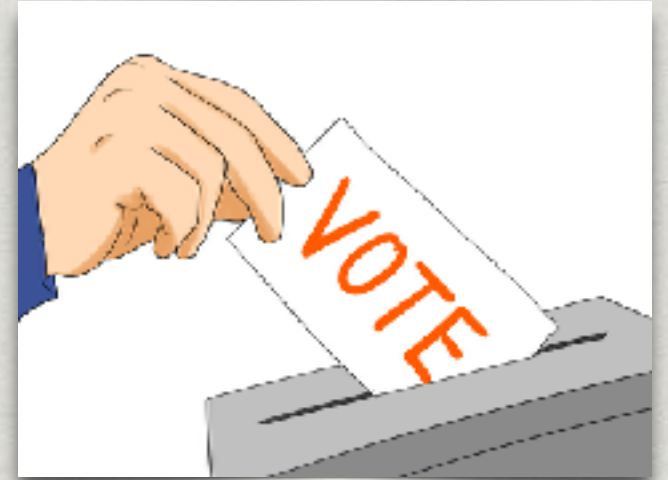
# What did Tocqueville mean by...



## \* Equality?

- \* Often used interchangeably with democracy
- \* For Tocqueville, equality didn't mean so much sameness (or equality of *outcome*) as absence of obstacles to social advancement (such as caste laws or customs): **equality of conditions**
- \* Equality was therefore pretty much equivalent to **social mobility**
- \* In the U.S. this was promoted by inheritance laws
- \* He did, however, observe a large number of types of equalities of outcome in the U.S.: of fortune, of minds, social, moral, political

# What did Tocqueville mean by...



- \* **Democracy?**

- \* Distinguished a **social** and a **political** meaning
- \* Socially, it was essentially equivalent to **equality of conditions**
- \* Politically, the term referred to a **set of laws** or institutions:
  - \* **Sovereignty of people**
  - \* **Majority rule**
  - \* (And:) **Political rights for all citizens**
  - \* **Government based on the true will of its citizens**
- \* One major problem of his contemporary France was that its political democracy lagged behind its social democracy



# What did Tocqueville mean by...



- \* **Liberty?**

- \* In DA, Tocqueville distinguished **two aspects** of social life were especially worth preserving
  - \* **Passive:** ‘Institutional’ liberties in the forms of (constitutionally guaranteed) rights such as the rights to vote, to associate, to assemble, freedom of the press, freedom of speech etc. (**‘freedom in law’/‘free institutions’**)
  - \* **Active:** These remain mere *formal* liberties unless filled with *substance*; people have to act in accordance with freedom (**‘freedom in mores/behaviours’**)
- \* NB: Don’t mix up active/passive with negative/positive!



# A fundamental tension

- \* In a social democracy individuals have two passions: one for **equality** and one for **liberty**
- \* However, their **passion for equality is stronger**; if necessary, they would trade equality for freedom and prefer a more equal despotic society to a freer but unequal one
- \* Therefore, the central challenge for him is the **preservation of freedom in a democracy**



# Threats: Democratic materialism

- \* Tocqueville observed 3 main threats to liberty in democracies
  - \* **Materialism;**
  - \* **Individualism;** and
  - \* **Centralisation**
- \* Materialism threatens liberty by encouraging:
  - \* Excessive orderliness;
  - \* Moral decay (losing sight of non-material goals);
  - \* Political apathy



# Threats: Democratic individualism

- \* Individualism = excessive privatism
- \* **Democracy destroys all traditional bonds** and the intermediaries that link up the individual and society at large
- \* Thus **individuals become powerless** against the organised force of government
- \* (This did not entail a rejection of individual independence; just its excess.)



# Threats: Centralisation



- \* **Power concentrates** in whatever body represents the people – often the **legislature**, but also the **administration**
- \* **Feudalism**: king needed money, he had to ask parliament (parliament represented ‘the people’ and constituted a limitation on the king’s power)
- \* **Democracy**: government itself represents the people, so no limitation/counterbalance



# Tyranny of the majority

- \* With Mill, Tocqueville was among the first to realise that democracy must, in order not to undermine itself, be **limited**
- \* He worried particularly about **authority over opinion and thought**
- \* In democratic societies **intellectual authority rests with public opinion**
- \* This might lead to **losing the ability and will to think**
- \* He felt that in the U.S., the danger was very real
- \* **It is less of a problem when majorities change over time;** however, when they persist – as with respect to racial or ethnic groups – it can be significant, as the U.S. case attests



# Preserving liberty

- \* We've seen earlier that Tocqueville distinguished a **passive** (or legal and **institutional**) and an **active** (or **behavioural**) aspect of liberty
- \* Accordingly, he observed existing and proposed **new means to counteract the threats to democracy at both the institutional and the behavioural level**
- \* *DA* is full of such counter-measures — e.g., federalism as an institutional measure to fight centralisation and what he called a 'spirit of locality' as the behavioural counterpart
- \* Here let me introduce just two: **associations** and '**self-interest, well understood**'



# Associations

- \* ... come in two kinds:
  - \* **public** (cities, townships, counties); and
  - \* **private** (companies, unions, trade associations...)
- \* To him, associations functioned as **democratic substitutes** for the powerful individuals of aristocratic societies
- \* The latter function as **checks on the power of the sovereign** in aristocracies; associations function in the same way in democracies
- \* **Freedom of speech/press supports this liberty**: the ability to publish one's opinion helps to find like-minded people and thus prevents the tyranny of the majority
- \* Notice how different liberties **interact**!



# Self interest (well understood)

- \* Tocqueville maintained that the principle that '**the individual is the best and only judge of his particular interest**' is a bedrock of American society
- \* At the same time, however, they have an enlightened understanding of interests that common to all Americans: the **public interest**
- \* (This merging of private and public interest was quintessential American; civic republicanism, for instance, held that the private is to be sacrificed for the public.)
- \* Thus, **general enlightenment checked excessive egoism**



# In sum, ...

- \* Tocqueville loved democracy and believed that **the democratic age was here to stay**
- \* However, as a liberal, he worried about tendencies in **democracies** that **jeopardise liberty**
- \* He saw as main threats **centralisation, materialism** and **individualism** and in each case, proposed institutional and behavioural measures to protect liberty in a democracy
- \* Note that he **did not recommend** France (or any state) to **mimic America**; laws have to be compatible with the people they govern and their circumstances (he argued federalism was inappropriate for his contemporary France, for instance, and advocated a hereditary monarchy rather than republic)