

Discussion Questions for *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville,
Democracy in America, Volumes I and II, Bantam Classic

1. In the introduction to the work by de Tocqueville, he writes: “Men are not corrupted by the exercise of power or debased by the habit of obedience, but by the exercise of power which they believe to be illegal and by obedience to a rule which they consider to be usurped and oppressive.” How does de Tocqueville distinguish between ordinary power and obedience and “usurped” power and obedience? What does he mean by “usurped” power? How might this apply to the politics in the United States in the past 50 years?
2. Also in the introductory chapter of the book, de Tocqueville writes about the political parties of Europe and their conception of democracy as follows: “Not far from this class is another party, whose object is to materialize mankind, to hit upon what is expedient without heeding what is just, to acquire knowledge without faith, and prosperity apart from virtue; assuming the title of the champions of modern civilization, and placing themselves in a station which they usurp with insolence, and from which they are driven by their own unworthiness.” What does he mean when he says that the object of these people is to materialize mankind? Why does he believe that it is necessary to consider what is just and not just expedient? Why does he consider this type of person unworthy and insolent? Can we draw any comparisons to present-day politics in the United States?
3. In chapter 2, de Tocqueville writes: “The tie of language is perhaps the strongest and most durable that can unite mankind. All the emigrants [from Great Britain] spoke the same tongue; they were all offsets from the same people.” Do you agree with this statement; why or why not? If de Tocqueville is correct, what challenges do countries face that encourage open borders and welcome emigrants? Can these challenges be overcome, and if so, how?
4. In Chapter 3, de Tocqueville writes about the distinction between liberty and equality, and believes that when there is a choice between the two, equality is seen as paramount to the citizens of the United States: “But liberty is not the chief and constant object of their desires; equality is their idol: they make rapid and sudden efforts to obtain liberty, and if they miss their aim resign themselves to their disappointment; but nothing can satisfy them except equality, and rather than lose it they resolve to perish.” Why does he make a distinction between liberty and equality? Are the notions of liberty and equality the same or different? Do you agree that people in the United States value equality over liberty; why or why not? Can you have equality without liberty, or liberty without equality?
5. In Chapter 5, de Tocqueville writes about the political structure of the country, and believes that local government is what binds citizens together: “Nevertheless local assemblies of citizens constitute the strength of free nations, town-meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it.” Do you agree with de Tocqueville’s assessment of the need for local government; why or why not? If local government is so necessary to the functioning of democracy, why do so few people regularly attend local town meetings? Similarly, why do so many politicians not hold town meetings? What does the lack of participation in local politics mean to a functioning democracy?

6. De Tocqueville continues his discussion of democracy in Chapter 5 by writing: “It was never assumed in the United States that the citizen of a free country has a right to do whatever he pleases; on the contrary, social obligations were there imposed upon him more various than anywhere else.” What is the distinction between a right to do something and a right to refrain from doing something if it infringes on another’s right? How are a person’s rights vis-à-vis the rights of another determined in the United States? What happens when the distinction between free to do and freedom from doing breaks down?
7. De Tocqueville continues his discussion of rights in the United States in Chapter 5 and shifts the discussion to justice and the law courts. He writes: “. . . and it will be found that an elective authority which is not subject to judicial power will, sooner or later, either elude all control or be destroyed. The courts of justice are the only possible medium between the central power and the administrative bodies; they alone can compel the elected functionary to obey, without violating the rights of the elector.” Why does de Tocqueville believe that there should be a judiciary that monitors the behavior of elected officials? Do you agree that the judiciary should act as a balance to the power of elected officials; why or why not? How does this balance play out in politics in the past 50 years?
8. In Chapter 7, de Tocqueville examines the topic of impeachment, writing: “In the United States, as well as in Europe, one branch of the legislature is authorized to impeach and another to judge: the House of Representatives arraigns the offender, and the Senate awards his sentence. But the Senate can only try such persons as are brought before it by the House of Representatives, and those persons must belong to the class of public functionaries.” He goes on to say that in Europe, tribunals can bring criminal charges against impeached functionaries, while in America, they can only deprive an official of his rank. How does the separation of functions between the House and Senate ensure that impeachable offenses are dealt with after considered review, rather than based on impassioned short-sighted decisions? Do you believe that the American system, whereby officials can only be removed from office is superior to that in Europe (at the time of de Tocqueville’s book) where officials can also be convicted of criminal activities?
9. In Chapter 8, de Tocqueville writes about the dangers of an elected chief magistrate, as follows: “The most weighty argument against the election of a chief magistrate is, that it offers so splendid a lure to private ambition, and is so apt to inflame men in the pursuit of power, that when legitimate means are wanting force may not unfrequently seize what right denied. . . . the more the ambition of the candidates is excited, the more warmly are their interests espoused by a throng of partisans who hope to share the power when their patron has won the prize.” What does he mean by this statement? What happens when the judiciary is unable to check the power of a president? Does the wish to share power explain why some men will continue to support a person who has abused the power of his office? How has de Tocqueville’s admonition about excessive presidential power played out in the last 50 years?
10. De Tocqueville goes on to write about party affiliations in Chapter 8: “Political parties in the United States are led to rally round an individual, in order to acquire a more tangible

shape in the eyes of the crowd, and the name of the candidate for the Presidency is put forward as the symbol and personification of their theories. For these reasons parties are strongly interested in gaining the election not so much with a view to the triumph of their principles under the auspices of the President-elect as to show by the majority which returned him, the strength of the supporters of those principles.” Do you agree with de Tocqueville’s assessment of the behavior of political parties; why or why not? What happens if a candidate abandons the principles of his party; should the party continue to support him? What happens if a President is not elected by a majority of the population; can he still claim that he represents the “supporters of those principles”?

11. In Chapter 8, de Tocqueville writes about the advantages and disadvantages of large and small states. He claims that: “The arrogance of wealth and the dejection of wretchedness, capital cities of unwonted extent, a lax morality, a vulgar egotism, and a great confusion of interests, are the dangers which almost invariably arise from the magnitude of States.” What does he mean by this sentence? Do you think that de Tocqueville’s description of the dangers that arise in large states is a forgone conclusion; why or why not? Have we witnessed the same sort of problems arising in the United States in the past 50 – 60 years?
12. In Chapter 8, de Tocqueville writes about clarity in explaining the beliefs of political parties to the people governed. He states: “A proposition must be plain to be adopted by the understanding of the people. *A false notion which is clear and precise* will always meet with a greater number of adherents in the world than a *true principle which is obscure or involved*. Hence it arises that parties, which are like small communities in the heart of the nation, invariably adopt some principle or some name as a symbol, which very inadequately represents the end they have in view and the means which are at their disposal, but without which they could neither act or subsist. The governments which are founded upon a single principle or a single feeling which is easily defined are perhaps not the best, but they are unquestionably the strongest and the most durable in the world.” How does de Tocqueville’s analysis of simplicity in messaging affect governments in the present day? Do you agree with his assessment of simplicity in communication to the people? Does this account for many of the slogans that are bandied about in political campaigns, or by governments (think about the slogans used in the novel *1984*)? What does this say about the peoples’ ability to detect false slogans or campaign statements?