

## POSC 352: TOCQUEVILLE—*DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA*

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Spring 2021  
Office Hours: by appt.

### I. Purpose and Scope

What would it mean to study a country's politics and society philosophically? What questions would we ask? What data would we examine? What methods would we employ? How would we examine not only laws and institutions but also, and especially, manners and morals, attitudes and values, life and experience? Tocqueville will tell us the answers to these questions, or rather he will *show* us, if only we pay attention. The entirety of this course will be devoted to *Democracy in America*. Truthfully, a proper reading of this book would require more than just ten weeks, but we'll do our best with the time we have. Let's begin by taking note of one signal feature of Tocqueville's enterprise: his thinking, like that of his great Socratic predecessors, is in no way abstract. Tocqueville always begins with close observation of concrete phenomena. (Interestingly, one of the concrete phenomena he observes is the tendency of modern, democratic people to *ignore* concrete phenomena in favor of abstract and simplistic theorizing.) This is why he presents his work, which is surely philosophic, as political *science*. A truly philosophic political science will never lose sight of particulars in its pursuit of generality. Another feature of a genuinely philosophic political science is mindfulness of change and the need for science to develop as the objects of its inquiry develop. Thus Tocqueville describes his enterprise as "a *new* political science . . . for a world altogether new."

Among the themes addressed by Tocqueville's philosophic political science are the following: the relationship between aristocracy and democracy; the instability of democratic government; the institutional mechanisms that serve as antidotes to these instabilities; the significance of habits and mores in shaping politics and society; the importance of religion for democratic freedom; the novel, "soft" despotism that threatens democracy, and the insidious sources of this despotism; and the many variables, including sentiments and ideas, that either support or threaten freedom in the democratic age. As we address these (and other) themes we will consider the adequacy of Tocqueville's new political science. *Democracy in America* is a truly great book. As your translators put it, it is "at once the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America." The greatness or wisdom of a book shouldn't place it beyond criticism, however. Some of Tocqueville's ideas have been opposed by thinkers of equal stature, and some of what he said, at least about the future, was demonstrably wrong. But a book as wise as this one will always repay close study, perhaps especially where we disagree with it.

### II. Course Requirements and Grading

By far the most important requirement is that you read all assigned passages **closely** and **before class**.

You will be asked to present a short paper (5 to 7 pages) on a selected portion of the text (chosen by the instructor in accordance with your preferences, if possible) and to lead class discussion for a portion of that day's meeting. The short paper will count for 25% of your grade.

A twenty-page seminar paper will count for 50% of your grade. The seminar paper will be due on Monday, June 7. Paper topics must be approved by the instructor by Monday, May 24 (preferably sooner).

The remaining 25% of your grade will be based on class participation (including your class presentation). Since this is a seminar, your active and sustained participation is expected.

### **III. Reading**

The only required text for this course is *Democracy in America*. Please be sure to purchase the translation by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (University of Chicago Press), which is available at the bookstore.

I will be happy to recommend a variety of additional useful secondary readings to those interested.

### **IV. Class Schedule**

The following assignments refer to page numbers from *Democracy in America* (Mansfield and Winthrop translation). You will be asked to read the entirety of the book. But for the sake of good class preparation, I have sometimes noted within parentheses the passages that are likely to be the focus of discussion in class. The reading assignments vary considerably in length: be sure to give yourself enough time to complete them. Note that this is an *approximate* schedule. We may depart from it if class discussions, etc. so require.

#### **Volume One**

#### **“Introduction” and Part One**

March 30: 3-27

April 1: 27-55

April 6: 55-161 (esp. 56-65, 82-93, 149-161)

#### **Part Two**

April 8: 165-220 (esp. 180-187, 199-202, 210-220)

April 13: 220-249

April 15: 250-264

April 20: 264-302

April 22: 302-325

April 27: 326-396

April 29: review previous reading

**Volume Two**

**“Notice” and Part One: “Influence of Democracy on Intellectual Movement  
in the United States”**

May 4: 399-428

May 6: 428-476 (esp. 428-444, 450-463, 469-472)

**Part Two: “Influence of Democracy on the Sentiments of the Americans”**

May 11: 479-503

May 13: 504-532

May 18: 535-576

**Part Three: “Influence of Democracy on Mores Properly So-Called”**

May 20: 577-599

May 25: 599-635 (esp. 599-622)

**Part Four: “On the Influence That Democratic Ideas and Sentiments  
Exert on Political Society”**

May 27: 639-676 (esp. 639-650, 661-676)

June 1: Conclusion