

# *Democracy in America: Reflections on the Spirit of American Democratic Education*

Yuqi Guo<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China

Correspondence: Yuqi Guo, Department of Education, East China Normal University, Shanghai 200062, China.

Received: April 1, 2022

Accepted: April 25, 2022

Online Published: May 27, 2022

doi:10.20849/jed.v6i2.1175

URL: <https://doi.org/10.20849/jed.v6i2.1175>

## **Abstract**

*Democracy in America* is the first book to conduct a comprehensive investigation and study of the United States, the author of Tocqueville from the perspective of the French survey and exposition of American democracy, is an important material for the later study of American democracy. This paper analyzes the meaning of "democracy" of *The Times*, the causes of the emergence of American democracy, the existing problems and the final reflection, and provides some experience and ideas for future research

**Keywords:** American democracy, education, tocqueville, democratic spirit

## **1. Introduction**

Tocqueville was born in France at a time when aristocracy and royalty were being challenged by the French Revolution. All kinds of new ideas, such as natural rights and separation of powers, replaced the ideas of the old society. The July Revolution launched by the people of Paris also made the social political situation more turbulent at that time, and the struggle between the old and new social forces was extremely fierce. This situation made Tocqueville realize the inevitable decline of the aristocracy. Because of a chance, Tocqueville went to the United States for field investigation in the name of work. When he first arrived in the United States, it was only 54 years since the independence of the United States, and extensive social changes had taken place in the American society at that time. After nearly two years of personal experience and travel, Tocqueville made a comprehensive investigation of the Society, religion, natural environment, economy, legal system, people's conditions and other aspects of the United States, and wrote the book *On Democracy in America*, which made Tocqueville instantly famous and became a world-famous thinker. *Democracy in America* was the first comprehensive study of the United States, and has long been called "the Mirror of The American people."

## **2. The Contemporary Meaning of "Democracy"**

The title is *Democracy in America*. What is democracy? A system? A thought? A theory? It's actually pretty vague. There was a big difference between tocqueville's time, when he wrote this book, and today, the word "democracy" was not a good word. From the history of political philosophy, democracy was born in ancient Greece, but ancient Greek thinkers did not think democracy was a good thing. This is because the democracy of Athens because democratic meeting decision-making errors, humiliating defeat in the peloponnesian war, so the era of famous thinkers, such as Plato and Aristotle, and have not been very appreciated democracy, think this system makes the public decision without deliberate major matters, it is easy to make mistakes. Of course, democracy also has the advantage of being fairer. According to the view of mainstream political science in Ancient Greece, human polity can be roughly divided into three types: one-man rule, minority rule and majority rule, which correspond to monarchy, aristocracy and democracy respectively. Each of them has its own advantages and problems. The best system is one that absorbs the good qualities of all three systems of government and restrains their bad qualities. Later, with the rise of Rome, the Roman system was actually a republican system. For example, the consul was equivalent to monarchy, the Senate was equivalent to nobility, and the Popular assembly was equivalent to democracy. The balance and cooperation of these three institutions enabled Rome to conquer the Mediterranean. Roman republicanism, however, was weakened by the Middle Ages, largely because of the influence of religious theology, which was largely pro-monarchy, and by the Reformation and enlightenment, many thinkers were calling for a republic. By tocqueville before the time of life, which is about the American revolution and the French revolution, most western countries the mainstream of the system or the monarchy, a republic at the time was already a more radical system, few countries democracy, then

most of Europe countries think democracy is very disorder, chaos, not easy to manage.

### **3. Why American Democracy Came Into Being**

Tocqueville begins his book with an analysis of three deep causes that shaped American democracy.

First is the reasons of geographical level, the origin of the United States is the British established 13 colonies in North America, the first colony in the United States today of the east, the fertility of these regions, water is enough, very suitable for human habitation, this is a crucial issue for American democracy breeds, some scholars have put forward the theory of Oriental absolutism, The frequent flooding in eastern countries is an important factor in the birth of absolutism. China is a typical example, the country's vast, always broke out around the flood, frequent floods, they must be treated group, and the role of water conservancy will be borne by the state, usually, because of the water conservancy need huge resources of manpower, requires countries have stronger ability to rule and centralized, this provides the soil for emergence of tyranny, in contrast, the United States, Superior natural conditions are indispensable for the birth of democracy.

The second reason is the composition and distribution of population. According to Tocqueville, the success of American democracy is based on a high degree of social equality. Americans for equality and freedom of belief comes from religion, the first immigrants to the United States on demographics are extremely close, most of them are puritans, universal elementary education, illiteracy rarely, freedom of belief is a product of the protestant, because people to directly communicate with god, and the idea of equality is by the Catholic foster, Because Catholicism says we are all the same before God. So democracy advocates equality for all people naturally easy to accept.

Finally, due to international geopolitics, Canada to the north was large and sparsely populated, while Mexico to the south was relatively poor and backward. This made it impossible for the United States to have any other country to rival it after independence, which also ensured that the Americans could develop their democracy at their own pace without foreign interference. This kind of international political environment is also quite important. The French Revolution was subjected to the collective military intervention of European monarchies, which eventually led to napoleon's exile and the successful restoration of the Bourbon Dynasty. After the outbreak of the October Revolution, Russia was also subjected to the military intervention of European countries and almost lost. It is often very difficult to develop your own political system in an enveloped political environment, and the United States is uniquely positioned to do so. It is this gene of equality that makes America a unique democracy whose success cannot be replicated by any other country that copies the American system.

### **4. Tocqueville's View of Education**

Tocqueville believed that education was necessary to maintain freedom in a democracy; But only a special type of education - political education - can best perform this function. He refutes two European misconceptions about education: one about its function and the other about its aims.

In the United States, he found that Americans of all classes believed in "the value of education," that "where there are no restrictions on the property qualifications to vote and be elected, the diffusion of knowledge is useful to all peoples, and absolutely necessary to a free people like themselves; They're all on the same page." But in Europe, there was "the strongest opposition to the overextension of knowledge." For Europeans, education arouses material desires and raises expectations, leading to social unrest. For Europeans, education does not guarantee freedom and democracy, but rather serves as a catalyst for desire and social unrest.

Why do these two very different views of the function of education arise? The European advocates of universal education are optimistic that "if you teach people to read and write, they will become citizens at once." In France, there is a blind love of education. They imagined that if they could only teach someone to read, write and count, they would make a fine citizen and almost a virtuous person." The education of Americans is different from that of Europeans. There, "the subjects of the people possess an understanding of public affairs, a mastery of laws and precedents, and the sensibility and capacity to properly understand the national interest." Therefore, "All education in the United States is for political purposes; In Europe, the main purpose of education is to prepare people to deal with their private lives." In short, it is precisely because of two different types of education: political education and private education that have produced different political effects in the United States and Europe.

Therefore, it is pointed out that "Tocqueville puts more emphasis on political education than Burkhart or Mill, that is, education is directed towards the relationship between the individual and society rather than personal cultivation." Tocqueville placed great emphasis on the value of political education. "I firmly believe that the truth which arouses me a hope for the future happiness of Europe" is that the American public is not only the most

enlightened in the world, but more valuable, "its practical political education is the most progressive."

Starting from the experience of the United States, Tocqueville believed that political education as a specific type of education, only a small part can be obtained in schools. Although Tocqueville often emphasized education, he rarely mentioned schools or classrooms; And when he does mention these things it's almost always out of the context of discussing political education. Tocqueville summed up his view of the classroom this way: he did not want to exaggerate the benefits of the national education system to American democracy. He did not "imagine that by teaching people to read and write they will instantly become citizens. The chief source of real knowledge is experience. If Americans had not gradually become accustomed to governing themselves, their book learning would not be of much help to their success today." Therefore, Tocqueville's political education was not mainly classroom learning, let alone children's education. Dewey's democratic education focuses on school education, children's training and the reconstruction of experience, while Tocqueville's political education mainly focuses on adult education. Much of this education is made up of their practical experience in politics and public affairs outside of school. This kind of civic education, which obtains political experience and skills through political participation and cultivates individual spirit of independence and ability of joint action, is both a means and an end. In short, political participation is political education. It has been argued that "Tocqueville was concerned with reconciling individuality, liberty and democratic equality... This is Tocqueville's main contribution to modern political thought." How can political participation achieve harmony between democracy and freedom? It is education and enlightenment to achieve this purpose. Tocqueville believed that participation in political life can bring citizens out of isolation, unite in public affairs, and curb the authoritarian tendencies of democratic political culture. It can make people get rid of money worship, arouse people's great dedication to work and public responsibility, prevent the general degeneration of human mind and spirit. But "in order to defend freedom in a democratic society, people should feel and love freedom." If all the people are not allowed to acquire political education and form liberal ideas and habits through political participation, then, in the end, "no one can be independent, whether they are the property or the nobility, whether they are poor or rich, and tyranny will rule over all." In this respect, Tocqueville was in common with his contemporaries and with those who later styled themselves as orthodox liberals.

## 5. Conclusion

The real historical mission of the French elite is to think and observe how France should take its own democratic road, find the differences between France and the United States, and design a democratic system suitable for France, rather than fighting against this trend. Tocqueville had a deep concern about democracy, but he still firmly believed that democracy was the inevitable course of human history. If the elites of a country are truly responsible for the nation, they should be prepared for it. The main reason for Tocqueville's deep concern was the long-term shortcomings of the democratic system discussed above, which Tocqueville did not think could be easily solved by a single institution or movement. It required the cooperation of many institutions and the joint efforts of many factors. However, a generation of people with limited energy and ability may not be able to solve problems in the best way at the best time, which is left to our contemporary thinking.

Democracy in this book is not just an institution, but a spirit. Tocqueville clearly sorted out how democracy has a specific impact on the soul and living conditions of individuals in a society, and this impact can be reasonably analyzed with causality. Only in this way can we look at the true meaning of democracy to the society objectively and neutrally. Second, we most want to focus on the author's writing ideas, which looks how Tocqueville around such a grand thesis discusses three - assuming that let us now to write an article in the analysis of a country's political culture, how to cut, the choice of many angles are hard to do as he was so unique and elegant, argument analysis can also be difficult to have his deep; Finally very significantly, it's not just a book about American politics, it is the important research data of the comparative politics, Tocqueville in the research field is always intentionally or unintentionally when a French national perspective, but also be able to see Americans own imperceptible to the particularity of American democracy, so the domestic scholar's revelation to us, In the future, when studying foreign politics, society and culture, we should not feel weak at the psychological level, but should make good use of the perspective bias, which may put forward some insights that the local people have never heard before.

## References

- de Tocqueville, A. (2019). *On American Democracy*. Nanjing: Yilin Publishing House.
- Hu, Y. (2005). On Tocqueville's Middle Liberalism Political Thought. *Wuhan University*.
- Li, C. (2009). The Fate of Democracy: Autocracy or Freedom. *Southwest University of Political Science and Law*.

- Li, C. (2019). Popular Sentiment and American Welfare Model: An Analysis based on Tocqueville's "On American Democracy". *Shandong Social Science*, (1), 171-175.
- Li, H.-L. (2020). Book Review on Democracy in America. *Taste Classics*, (12), 62-63.
- Li, Y.-J. (2004). The Soil of American Democracy and Legal System -- After Reading Tocqueville's On American Democracy. *Chinese and Western Legal Tradition*, 4(00), 328-343.
- Page, B. I., & Gilens, M. (2020). *Democracy in America?: What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It*. University of Chicago Press, May 20.
- Wang, X. (2011). On American Democracy and Contemporary American Local Autonomy. *Social Science Front*, (2), 87-93.
- Wang, Y. (2010). An Intellectual and an Era -- Sociological Methodology of Tocqueville's On American Democracy. *Social Science Forum*, (24), 15-19, 28.
- Yeselson, R. (2014). Social Democracy in America?. *Journal of Dissent*, 21(4).
- Zhang, F.-Q. (2017). *Exploring the Development course of American Democracy*. Taiyuan: Shanxi People's Publishing House.
- Zhang, M. (2005). From American "Democracy" to French "Revolution". *Fudan University*.

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).