Democracy In America: Analytical Review

Central Theme

Volume I of Democracy in America included a wide selection of topics. The first chapter describes the geographical layout of North America, in great detail. Following this chapter is a discussion of the social conditions of Anglo-Americans, judicial power, the Constitution, freedom of the press, and the positives and negatives of a democratic government. Throughout this volume, the central theme is freedom. The United States was able to form a non-monarchial state; one that was reliable, in which men could be free.

Tocqueville reasons that the land in America would not work in an aristocracy. The land is too much to handle, and cannot support a landlord as well as a tenant (de Tocqueville 34, 2003). This seems a spurious statement, as slaves in the South created a sort of aristocracy, in which all people were not free. The colonies were split into two sections; the North and the South. The colonies organized themselves independently.

The criminal laws that were established following the formation of the colonies were strict and could be invasive. However, these laws were agreed upon freely and based on moral codes from the Bible (de Tocqueville 51, 2003). Political laws were also established and included community involvement in public affairs and jury trials. This contributed to local independence, and each township was a republic. The laws included vulnerable populations as well, like the poor. The new laws insured that everyone got an education, calling ignorance an ally of the Devil (de Tocqueville 53, 2003). This furthers the freedom of the individual.

The decentralization of the government in America is another way freedom was established. In England, the people did not have a say in the way the government operated. The only way to preserve freedom is to allow the public to become a part of governing; by voting or by getting involved in local government and issues (de Tocqueville 97, 2003).

Relevance

The Constitution is mentioned frequently throughout the first volume of Democracy in America. The Constitution is examined by Tocqueville, as he is identifying the ways the United States has protected itself from tyranny. Tocqueville determined that thus far, the Constitution had done a fine job of protecting the United States from tyranny (de Tocqueville 136, 2003). The checks and balances established by the Constitution was one large way to protect the United States from becoming a tyrannical state. Power is checked and weighed, the opposite of unchecked power.

A member of the Senate cannot draft legislation and pass it without the piece of legislation being checked. As described in the Constitution; the bill must be proposed, go to committee for research and changes, go to the House or Senate floor, and finally be voted on. This process ensures that no Senator or Representative has unchecked legislative power. Tocqueville points out that the legislature has more power than the President (de Tocqueville 138, 2003). This is true; however, the President does hold veto power, which holds Congress in check.

One issue Tocqueville had with the Constitution was the ability for the President to be re-elected (de Tocqueville 151, 2003). The President serving more than one term could corrupt the government, and this could potentially be dangerous. In 1835, when Democracy in America was published, this was a real threat. At this time, there were no established term limits. Congress changed this in 1947 bypassing the twenty-second amendment to the Constitution (Strout, 1957). This amendment was ratified by the States in 1951.

Public Affairs Implications

Public affairs are extremely important and are not discussed as such. Tocqueville's book goes over and over issues that many probably do not think are public affairs. Democracy in America has broadened my understanding of public affairs, and has impressed upon me the importance of them. Chapter three of Democracy in America describes the social state of America, at the time it was written. The social state was found to be eminently democratic, with people respected on the basis of intellect and virtue (de Tocqueville 60, 2003).

Democracy allows the public to have a role in the government. The people of the United States have had that right since the beginning of this country. Taking part in public affairs allows elected representatives to be reminded of who voted them into office and public pressure can help sway them into doing what is best for their constituency, and not what is in their best interest.

It seems that taking part in public affairs is less common than it once was. People have gotten comfortable, as Tocqueville feared. Tocqueville believed that once people were used to freedom, they would do the bare minimum in order to maintain it; "It cannot be repeated too often: nothing is more fertile in marvels than the art of being free, but nothing is harder than freedom's apprenticeship. The same is not true of despotism. Despotism often presents itself as the repairer of all the ills suffered, the support of just rights, defender of the oppressed, and founder of order. Peoples are lulled to sleep by the temporary prosperity it engenders, and when they do wake up, they are wretched. But liberty is generally born in stormy weather, growing with difficulty amid civil discords, and only when it is already old does one see the blessings it has brought" (de Tocqueville 280, 2003). I agree with Tocqueville in this sentiment. Despots may take all the pressure off the public, but in return, they have zero influence into their government. Freedom may be more work but is worth it.

Tocqueville also feared that too much faith in public opinion would be detrimental. Many politicians have forgotten who elected them and act in their best interests. If they listened to public opinion, or at the very least the opinions of their constituents, it would be a positive, not a negative. The government can of course not govern solely by public opinion, but the voice of the people should be taken into account.

Democracy's core principle is a commitment to equality, for all citizens. Tocqueville touches on this in volume I, but does not discuss it in depth. His version of equality seems to be sameness, which is not the same. Sameness is equality for those at a certain level; an example is those with the same educational background should be treated the same. A sad fact is that all citizens of the United States are not equal. Laws affect citizens differently, depending upon wealth and ethnicity; as well as status in society.

Tocqueville’s Democracy in America feels like a warning. Many of the things I read in volume I echo what is happening in politics today. Despotism in particular seems a bigger threat than it has been in years. The current political situation has exhausted Americans, and the engagement I remember seeing during President Bush and President Obama is not there anymore. I am hopeful that America will bounce back, and begin to get involved in public affairs again.

References

1. de Toqueville, Alexis. Democracy in America and Two Essays on America. New York, NY: Penguin Putnam, 2003.
2. Strout, Richard L. 'The 22nd Amendment: A Second Look.' The New York Times Magazine (1957): 5

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