

# Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*



**ABOUT THE READING** People around the world viewed the early United States as a test to see how well democracy worked. France felt closely connected to America. People in both countries had rebelled against their governments. In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville came from France to visit the United States. Soon after, he published a book about what he saw on his trip. He tried to show how democracy affected all parts of life in America.

## VOCABULARY

**inhabitants** residents  
**resolving** solving  
**transcends** goes beyond  
**comprehend** understand  
**enervate** weaken



*As you read* note how the author describes the way democracy and daily life are linked in the United States.

I think that in no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States. The Americans have no philosophical school of their own, and they care but little for all the schools into which Europe is divided, the very names of which are scarcely known to them.

Yet it is easy to perceive that almost all the **inhabitants** of the United States use their minds in the same manner, and direct them according to the same rules; that is to say, without ever having taken the trouble to define the rules, they have a philosophical method common to the whole people.

To evade the bondage of system and habit, of family maxims, class opinions, and, in some degree, of national prejudices; to accept tradition only as a means of information, and existing facts only as a lesson to be used in doing otherwise and doing better; to seek the reason of things for oneself, and

Americans have a common way of thinking.

Americans try to get away from old habits and ideas. They use the past only as a starting point for doing things better.

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in oneself alone; to tend to results without being bound to means, and to strike through the form to the substance—such are the principal characteristics of what I shall call the philosophical method of the Americans.

But if I go further and seek among these characteristics the principal one, which includes almost all the rest, I discover that in most of the operations of the mind each American appeals only to the individual effort of his own understanding. . .



*Toqueville sees some problems with the American way of thinking and living.*

The practice of Americans leads their minds to other habits, to fixing the standard of their judgment in themselves alone. As they perceive that they succeed in **resolving** without assistance all the little difficulties which their practical life presents, they readily conclude that everything in the world may be explained, and that nothing in it **transcends** the limits of the understanding. Thus they fall to denying what they cannot **comprehend**; which leaves them but little faith for whatever is extraordinary. . .

There are no revolutions that do not shake existing belief, **enervate** authority, and throw doubts over commonly received ideas. Every revolution has more or less the effect of releasing men to their own conduct and of opening before the mind of each one of them an almost limitless perspective. When equality of conditions succeeds a protracted conflict between the different classes of which the elder society was composed, envy, hatred, and uncharitableness, pride and exaggerated self-confidence seize upon the human heart, and plant their sway for a time. This, independently of equality itself, tends powerfully to divide men, to lead them to mistrust the judgment of one another, and to seek the light of truth nowhere but in themselves. Everyone then attempts to be his own sufficient guide and makes it

**Sudden equality after a period of class conflict causes people to change the way they act. For a while they may be unkind, proud, and too sure of themselves.**

his boast to form his own opinions on all subjects. Men are no longer bound together by ideas, but by interests.

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. What does Tocqueville say is the most common thing about the way Americans think?

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2. How does Tocqueville describe what happens as a result of revolutions?

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3. According to Tocqueville, how might the Americans' way of thinking cause problems for them? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

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