In what way does Tocqueville think that democracy might be tyrannical?

I argue that Alexis de Tocqueville thought democracy might be tyrannical in two ways within *Democracy in America*. The first I shall discuss is tyranny in a political sense. This will look at the potentiality of a political majority turning tyrannical by the reign of a majority population that persecute select minorities. The second way I will examine is tyranny in a social sense – a tyranny of unanimity. I will put forward that Tocqueville, at his time of writing, was concerned that a political tyranny was more likely to occur in France, rather than as a current threat to American democracy; as a result, I infer a key purpose of *Democracy is Tocqueville seeking to find in American democracy a redress for the political ills of France.* I argue Tocqueville was more apprehensive about a tyranny of unanimity occurring within American democracy, and therefore potentially in future developed European democracies. I conclude by commenting to what extent I agree with Tocqueville’s claims of how democracy might be tyrannical.

I will first define what Tocqueville means by ‘democracy’. This will allow a greater understanding of what Tocqueville believed a democratic society consisted of, and therefore what aspects of this could potentially cause tyranny. While Tocqueville did not believe that American style of democracy is the only form of democratic government available, I infer, as Pierre Manent also writes, that the critical element of a democratic society observed by Tocqueville is the ‘almost universal equality of social conditions.’ I distinguish here that I do not believe Tocqueville to understand democratic society as completely equal in wealth and class; it is clear that there still exists a wealthy population within America, with Tocqueville commenting: ‘there are just as many wealthy people in the United States as elsewhere.’ The point I infer Tocqueville to be making is that these factors no longer have the significance within a democratic society that they had within an aristocracy.

My reasoning for inferring this element of close equality of social conditions as democracy’s defining characteristic described within *Democracy* is that Tocqueville uses this element to describe his observation of democracy spreading to other countries. Tocqueville refers to democracy ‘advancing rapidly to power in Europe,’ by observing the higher classes dropping down the social scale ‘while the commoner has risen.’ As I shall argue further on in this essay, it is this factor, of Tocqueville’s observation of the spread of democracy, in which one of Tocqueville’s main aims is to ‘discover lessons from which we may profit’ of American democracy to help guide the progress of French democracy that ‘has always been haphazard.’ It is from these comments that I infer one of *Democracy’s* main aims is to warn European countries, particularly Tocqueville’s home country France, of unchecked democracy, and to learn from American democracy how to best combat democratic tyranny.

This element of ‘equality of social conditions’ as the basis for democracy is important to Tocqueville because of how this condition takes hold not just in ‘political customs and laws’ but also how it ‘forms opinions, creates feelings’ and ‘proposes ways of acting.’ The fact that Tocqueville viewed equality of social conditions ‘as the factor which generated all others’ implies distinctly that he saw this element as a critical component of democracy.

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1 From this point onwards ‘Democracy in America’, is referred to as ‘Democracy’.
3 Ibid., p295.
6 Ibid., p64.
7 Ibid., p11.
8 Ibid., p14.
9 Ibid., p23.
10 Ibid., p16.
11 Ibid., p11.
12 Ibid.
This element will therefore be considered throughout this essay when understanding how Tocqueville believed democracy might be tyrannical within the political and social spheres of society. I shall begin with discussing how Tocqueville believed a political tyranny could potentially occur in a democracy.

A close equality of social conditions spreading into the political sphere of society is the basis for how Tocqueville believed a political tyranny would form. According to Tocqueville, due to the founding circumstances of America, Americans "found themselves in a situation common to all of them." As a result of a close equality of social conditions formed by an essentially equal grounding of new citizens arriving in America, there retained an "everlasting love" for equality. Consequently, within the political sphere, the only means of establishing equality would be that "rights have to be granted to every citizen or none." Therefore the only legitimate form of political activity, based upon equality of social conditions within American democracy, would be to grant governing power to the will of the majority population: "The interests of the greatest number must take precedence over those of the smallest." It is this gifting of absolute sovereignty to the majority population that so concerns Tocqueville’s fear of a political tyranny.

Tocqueville’s apprehension is that by giving the majority of society absolute sovereignty, they also have the capacity to abuse its power, with the potentiality of a political tyranny threatening the liberties of certain minorities. As Tocqueville rhetorically asks: ‘If you admit that an all-powerful man can abuse his power against his opponents, why not admit the same thing for a majority?’ If a majority of the population wished to discriminate against a certain minority, a de jure prejudicial treatment could follow against this portion of society, potentially removing their freedoms if the majority so wished. Individual liberty, especially within a minority group, is no longer assured.

Tocqueville’s worry of majority control is clearly present in his observation of the election of representatives to government. Representatives are ‘appointed directly by the people and for a very brief term of office,’ and therefore constantly under control of public opinion if they should wish to reinstate their post. In this political environment, a majority decision is not necessarily based on intelligence or excellence because, due to a lack of stability, representatives cannot base their decisions independently; decisions are justified numerically. In Tocqueville’s comparison to the French king, it is assumed that the majority can do no wrong because the ‘moral ascendency of the majority is partly founded upon the idea that more enlightenment and wisdom are found in a group of men than in one man alone.’ Thus, when a president chooses to stand for re-election, Tocqueville is concerned that this candidate will appeal to the majority opinion, rather than choosing what they independently believe to be in the public interest. In other words, this candidate seeking re-election ‘is but a docile tool in the hands of the majority.’ This, Tocqueville fears, could lead to a majority decision threatening the liberties of certain minority groups if an unchecked majority so wished.

However, as David Maletz argues, despite this rhetoric Tocqueville uses there is barely mention of any serious examples of this form of tyranny occurring in American democracy; Tocqueville rather only speculates its happenings. As John Stuart Mill writes in

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14 Ibid., p67.
15 Ibid., p66.
16 Ibid., p289.
17 Ibid., p297.
18 Ibid., p293.
19 Ibid., p288.
20 Ibid., p288.
21 Ibid., p161.
his review of *Democracy*, Tocqueville ‘was uneasy rather at the total absence of security against the tyranny of the majority, than at the frequency of its actual exertion.’\(^{23}\) While Tocqueville recognises a form of political tyranny occurring between white Americans and African Americans, he writes that slavery ‘is not an institution which can last,’ because it is not characteristic of democratic freedom.\(^{24}\) I infer from this that Tocqueville did not envision a permanent majority tyranny over African Americans, instead foreseeing, in hindsight correctly, that slavery in America would eventually become nonexistent. In furthering Maletz’s point, I believe Tocqueville was actually not as concerned of a political majority tyranny occurring in America, because he saw no deep divisions within social groups; there seemed to exist no ‘natural or permanent antagonism between the interests of the different inhabitants,’\(^{25}\) because of the close equality of social conditions. Instead, as I will argue next, Tocqueville was more focused on the formation of a political tyranny in France, rather than America.

As previously stated, I infer one of the key purposes of *Democracy* was to act as a guide for democracy to peacefully take shape within France, taking examples and lessons from a more developed American democracy. At first glance it would appear that Tocqueville’s efforts would be in vain, as he comments: ‘The causes for the mildness of the government should be sought more in circumstances and habits than in laws.’\(^{26}\) If American democracy holds back political tyranny through its unique habits then it appears there could be little hope for France. However, this does not stop Tocqueville commenting that perhaps if a country of less favourable founding circumstances than American democracy is able to adopt better laws, their own democracy could still succeed.\(^{27}\) Even if Tocqueville placed importance on a country’s customs, he quickly revised this factor and began, as George Pierson writes, ‘to analyse American society for customs and institutions that might be worth copying or imitating.’\(^{28}\) This does not imply Tocqueville wanted to copy American institutions in toto but rather that some institutions could be incorporated into the French political system, to hold back against political tyranny occurring.\(^{29}\)

One such political structure of American democracy that I infer Tocqueville to have perhaps emphasised to help stop political tyranny from occurring in France is the decentralisation of authority. Though Tocqueville is aware of a growing majority within American society, its influence lacks the means necessary to spread its scope because central authority has not been enlarged alongside it. Therefore a political tyranny ‘can be a burden at one point but could not extend to all points of influence.’\(^{30}\) Political majority tyrannies, if they existed in America, would find it hard to increase their influence outside of their own decentralised authority. This is in comparison to France, which, at the time of Tocqueville’s writing, had a centralised form of authority; the power of the royals had been transferred straight to government.\(^{31}\) Here a political tyranny was more likely to take hold as the ability to increase scope and influence could be more easily spread from a single centralised point. Indeed, Tocqueville had observed the French government interfering in large aspects of administration, increasing his concern that this form of tyranny was more likely to occur.\(^{32}\)

Due to the deeper divisions Tocqueville saw in French society in comparison to America, I do not believe he shared the same fear of a political majority tyranny occurring in


\(^{24}\) Tocqueville, op. cit., p426.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p289.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., p361.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., p363.


\(^{29}\) Horwitz, op. cit., p297.

\(^{30}\) Tocqueville, op. cit., p306.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p19.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., p114.
America as former-President James Madison had, a key member in designing the American political system to prevent the spread of power, providing checks to political and juridical decisions made. Instead, as Michael Horwitz argues, ‘Madison represented a seductive alternative for France’ because of the greater heterogeneous society Tocqueville saw existing within his home country. Rather, as Mill comments, political tyranny ‘though a real evil, does not appear to be a formidable one’ within American democracy; ‘the tyranny which we fear, and which M. de Tocqueville principally dreads, is of another kind – a tyranny not over the body but over the mind.’ As I shall go on to discuss, the second way Tocqueville believed democracy might be tyrannical is by a tyranny of unanimity.

Tocqueville’s observation of a close equality in social conditions within democratic societies could likewise potentially lead to the formation of a tyranny in a social aspect. Tocqueville notes that the majority of a democratic society can come to hold a physical and, more worryingly for Tocqueville, a moral force over the population’s mindset. As Tocqueville writes, this physical and moral force ‘affects people’s will as much as their actions.’ With the majority possessing absolute power within democracy, there is little shelter to be found if a minority is of a dissenting opinion; the majority is ever-present.

Tocqueville believes such a tyranny over the mind is more dangerous than a physical tyranny because it ‘goes straight to the spirit.’ While a repressive government can only harm the body, the power of the majority in a democracy goes after the soul. With the threat of being shunned from society, I infer that Tocqueville believes such is the moral force of the majority that it forces citizens to conform, removing individual freedom of thought from the public sphere. Instead of political majority tyranny as the main concern of a heterogeneous society, Tocqueville is more concerned with the antithesis of this in American society: a frightening degree of uniformity.

To make this point clearer, I put forward this analysis draws contemporary similarities to Michel Foucault’s argument, that society is ordered and controlled through covert forces. This organic mechanism of citizen surveillance, with individuals disciplining each other by being too afraid to be controversially outspoken, is key to Tocqueville’s fear of a tyranny of unanimity and represents the idea of a panoptical society. For example, though Tocqueville observed very few divisions within American society, Americans were not blindly conformist; Tocqueville notes that in secret some Americans were actually not as supportive of majority opinion as they made out to be in public: ‘In America, I met men whose secret aim was to destroy the democratic institutions in their country.’ Freedom of thought exists, but just not in the public sphere where it is at odds with the majority: ‘You come across sceptics in America but scepticism cannot find an outlet for its views.’ I infer this factor to greatly concern Tocqueville, that Americans are not at liberty to speak their individual opinions to a public audience, despite dissenting viewpoints actually existing. This tyranny of unanimity creates a form of psychological control from the fear of societal disapproval, forcing the individual back into their private sphere. Society thus becomes self-disciplined and self-censored.

It is from this tyranny of unanimity that Tocqueville fears the accession of democratic despotism. To avoid majority scorn, individuals turn inwards from society ‘in a restless search for those petty, vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls.’ Consequently, they

33 Horwitz, op. cit., p300.
35 Tocqueville, op. cit., p297.
36 Ibid., p298.
37 Horwitz, op. cit., p305.
40 Ibid., p299.
41 Ibid., p805.
submit to the majority will; ‘civilization has civilized despotism itself.’

This democratic despotism slowly intertwines with citizens’ everyday lives, slowly shaping them into complete societal uniformity that ‘reduces each nation to nothing more than a flock of timid and hardworking animals.’ With the majority around the individual also becoming as individualised, centralisation is granted to government for individual security. Democratic despotism consequently acts paternally on society, a hidden force that guides society onwards in the pattern it wishes: ‘It blots out their mind and enfeebles their spirit’ and thus society experiences the ‘gradual loss of the faculty of autonomous thought, feeling, and action.’

I thus infer Tocqueville to fear this tyranny of unanimity greater than a political tyranny, for democratic despotism, while keeping society secure, comes at the cost of liberty.

At his time of writing, I do not believe Tocqueville was concerned about a tyranny of unanimity occurring in France, but instead more apprehensive about its potentiality within American democracy, commenting: ‘I know of no country where there is generally less independence of thought and real freedom of debate than in America.’ As earlier pointed out, Tocqueville observed that France does not possess the habit of mind of Americans. Tocqueville notes that the French mindset is much better suited to preventing a tyranny of unanimity in its current form. In France, its citizens have the outlet to mock certain aspects of its society that they may not agree with. In America however, ‘the United States does not understand being mocked like that. The slightest reproach offends it.’ For example, as a result American writers are constantly being subjected to majority opinion, over time causing the writer to give up trying to express their own views; the American writer ‘finally bends beneath the effort of each passing day, withdrawing into silence.’ This is why Tocqueville puts great emphasis on encouraging a freedom of press, as it is more useful for ‘the evils it prevents rather than for the benefits it produces,’ providing an outlet for dissenting opinions. Tocqueville realises that America is a more developed democracy and therefore, I believe, concerned that this social tyranny could indeed take place in a future French society. While Tocqueville’s comments on a social tyranny were more beneficial towards America in his time of writing, they retain value to other developing democracies for the future. It seems that while Tocqueville believes democracy might be tyrannical in a political and social sense, it is clear he saw them as preventable.

I will conclude by stating to what extent I agree with Tocqueville of the reality of a political and social tyranny occurring. To be straightforward, I believe that Tocqueville’s concerns about a political tyranny are very real; for example, North Carolina banning same-sex marriage with a 61% majority vote is a clear impediment of the liberty to marry for a gay minority within this state of America. Despite this concurrence, however, I put forward that perhaps a more rounded argument requires a focus on minority political tyranny as well; we cannot rely entirely on Tocqueville for a complete explanation for why democracy might be tyrannical. As Mancur Olson argues in The Logic of Collective Action, a well-organised politically active minority can just as easily impose their will upon a diffused majority within a democracy. However, Tocqueville’s warnings for a greater check and spread of powers within democratic political and juridical institutions remain highly relevant to keep a

42 Ibid., p298.
43 Ibid., p806.
44 Ibid., p808.
46 Ibid., p299.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., p298.
49 Ibid., p213.
dominant portion of society from imposing their will upon the rest, be it the majority or minority of a population.

I am less certain about a tyranny of unanimity occurring in a democracy. I believe Tocqueville’s concerns of uniformity are rather exaggerated, which I suggest was done to perhaps awaken political representatives in France to the dangers of untamed democracy. It is clear that Jacksonian America was far more diverse and unequal than Tocqueville exhibits in *Democracy*, despite America being more egalitarian in comparison to European countries at the time. This is not to say a tyranny of unanimity could not exist to some extent. It can be said some level of societal uniformity must exist for a healthy society to function. Drawing back upon Foucault, some measures of uniformity may be beneficial to society, an obvious example being road laws. However, I put forward the extent perhaps complete democratic despotism could take place within a contemporary democratic society is halted because of, no less, the nowadays commonplace provisions that Tocqueville advocated, like freedom of press, that allows political debate to take place within a diverse public sphere. Greater availability to access information from the Internet provides a common platform for debate to take place, importantly with the option of anonymity that avoids the direct shunning of society Tocqueville feared a social tyranny could have. Therefore I believe while a social tyranny is less likely to take place, Tocqueville’s provisions against it’s occurrence certainly have a timeless quality in keeping democracy vibrant, and democratic despotism at bay.

Overall, I have argued Tocqueville believed there to be two ways democracy might become tyrannical: in a political and social sense. Alongside this, I have put forward that a key purpose of *Democracy* was to inform France of the dangers of unchecked democracy, providing provisions to prevent democratic tyranny occurring. I conclude that the extent I agree with Tocqueville’s concerns go as far as agreeing a political tyranny could take place, but not a complete tyranny of unanimity. However, I believe Tocqueville’s proposed methods of invigorating democracy are entirely necessary for strengthening contemporary democratic states.

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Bibliography


