

Alexis de

Democracy



TRANSLATED, EDITED, AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY



Tocqueville
in America

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Peoples can therefore draw two great political consequences from the same social state: these consequences differ prodigiously between themselves, but they both issue from the same fact.

The first to be submitted to the formidable alternative that I have just described, the Anglo-Americans have been happy enough to escape absolute power. Circumstances, origin, enlightenment, and above all mores have permitted them to found and maintain the sovereignty of the people.



Chapter 4 ON THE PRINCIPLE OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE PEOPLE IN AMERICA

It dominates all of American society.—Application that the Americans already made of this principle before their revolution.—Development that their revolution gave to it.—Gradual and irresistible lowering of the property qualification.

When one wants to speak of the political laws of the United States, it is always with the dogma of the sovereignty of the people that one must begin.

The principle of the sovereignty of the people, which is always more or less at the foundation of almost all human institutions, ordinarily dwells there almost buried. One obeys it without recognizing it, or if sometimes it happens to be brought out in broad daylight for a moment, one soon hastens to plunge it back into the darkness of the sanctuary.

National will is one of the terms that intriguers in all times and despots in all ages have most largely abused. Some have seen its expression in the bought suffrage of a few agents of power; others in the votes of an interested or fearful minority; there are even some who have discovered it fully expressed in the silence of peoples, and who have thought that from the *fact* of obedience arises the *right* for them to command.

In America, the principle of the sovereignty of the people is not hidden or sterile as in certain nations; it is recognized by mores, proclaimed by the laws; it spreads with freedom and reaches its final consequences without obstacle.

If there is a single country in the world where one can hope to appreciate the dogma of the sovereignty of the people at its just value, to study it in its application to the affairs of society, and to judge its advantages and its dangers, that country is surely America.

I said previously that from the origin, the principle of the sovereignty of the people was the generative principle of most of the English colonies of America.*

It was nevertheless very far from dominating the government of society then as it does in our day.

Two obstacles, one external, the other internal, slowed its pervasive advance.

It could not come to light outwardly within the laws since the colonies were still constrained to obey the mother country; it was therefore reduced to hiding itself in provincial assemblies and above all in the township. There it spread in secret.

American society then was not yet prepared to adopt it in all its consequences. As I brought out in the preceding chapter, enlightenment in New England and wealth to the south of the Hudson long exerted a sort of aristocratic influence that tended to narrow into few hands the exercise of social powers. They were still very far from having all public officials elected and all citizens electors. Everywhere electoral rights were confined within certain limits and subordinated to the existence of a property qualification. That property qualification was very low in the North, more considerable in the South.

The American Revolution broke out. The dogma of the sovereignty of the people came out from the township and took hold of the government; all classes committed themselves to its cause; they did combat and they triumphed in its name; it became the law of laws.

A change almost as rapid was effected in the interior of society. Estate law served to break down local influences.

At the moment when this effect of the laws and of the Revolution began to reveal itself to all eyes, victory had already been irrevocably pronounced in favor of democracy. Power was, in fact, in its hands. It was no longer permissible even to struggle against it. The upper classes therefore submitted without a murmur and without combat to an evil henceforth inevitable. What happens ordinarily to powers that fall happened to them: individual selfishness took hold in their members; as they could no longer tear force from the hands of the people and as they did not detest the multitude enough to take pleasure in defying it, they no longer dreamed of anything except gaining its good will at any price. The most democratic laws were therefore voted in a rivalry among the men whose interests they bruised the most. In this manner the upper classes did not excite popular passions against them; but they themselves hastened the triumph of the new order. Thus, a singular

*DA I 1.2.

thing! One saw the democratic impulse more irresistible in states where aristocracy had the deepest roots.

The state of Maryland, which had been founded by great lords, proclaimed universal suffrage¹ first and introduced into its entire government the most democratic forms.

When a people begins to touch the electoral qualification, one can foresee that it will sooner or later make it disappear completely. That is one of the most invariable rules that govern societies. As one moves the limit of electoral rights back, one feels the need to move it back more; for after each new concession, the forces of democracy increase and its demands grow with its new power. The ambition of those who are left below the property qualification becomes irritated in proportion to the great number of those who are found above. The exception finally becomes the rule; concessions succeed each other relentlessly and there is no stopping until they have arrived at universal suffrage.

In our day the principle of the sovereignty of the people has tried out all practical developments in the United States that the imagination can conceive. It has been disengaged from all the fictions with which one has taken care to surround it elsewhere; one sees it re clothed successively in all forms, according to the necessity of the case. Sometimes the people in a body makes the laws as at Athens; sometimes deputies whom universal suffrage has created represent it and act in its name under its almost immediate surveillance.

There are countries where a power in a way external to the social body acts on it and forces it to march on a certain track.

There are others where force is divided, placed at once in society and outside it. Nothing like this is seen in the United States; there society acts by itself and on itself. Power exists only within its bosom; almost no one is encountered who dares to conceive and above all to express the idea of seeking it elsewhere. The people participate in the drafting of laws by the choice of the legislators, in their application, by the election of the agents of the executive power; one can say that they govern themselves, so weak and restricted is the part left to the administration, so much does the latter feel its popular origin and obey the power from which it emanates. The people reign over the American political world as does God over the universe. They are the cause and the end of all things; everything comes out of them and everything is absorbed into them.*

* See AT's note VIII, page 691.

1. Amendments made to the constitution of Maryland in 1801 and 1809 [articles 12 and 14, ratified in 1810].