

12-15-2019

Working Paper No. 50, Alexis de Tocqueville on American 'Exceptionalism'

Zachary McKinster
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/econ_workingpapers



Part of the [Economic History Commons](#), and the [Economic Theory Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

McKinster, Zachary "Alexis de Tocqueville on American 'Exceptionalism', Working Paper No. 50", Portland State University Economics Working Papers. 50. (15 December 2019) i + 17 pages.

This Working Paper is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Working Papers in Economics by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE ON AMERICAN ‘EXCEPTIONALISM’

Working Paper No. 50

Authored by: Zachary Mckinster

Undergraduate Student; Portland State University; Oregon. USA

A Contribution to the *Working Papers* of the
Department of Economics, Portland State University

Submitted for: EC457, “American Economic History, First Century”
15 December 2019; i + 17 pages

Prepared for Professor John Hall

Abstract:

From early settlers to the sophisticated nuances and concerns facing Americans in his time, Alexis de Tocqueville authored a definitive piece on democracy as it emerged and was practiced in 19th century America. This inquiry seeks to establish that Tocqueville’s penetrating insights into the United States in its early decades assisted him in arriving at the notion of what is widely touted as American ‘Exceptionalism’. In the first half of the 19th century Tocqueville travelled widely, seeking to understand this republic and its constitutional emphases upon principles of democracy. Completing his tour, in 1835 Tocqueville published *Democracy in America*. It was during his visit and later reflections that Tocqueville came to his rich understanding, highlighting the warp and weft that proved so integral to the fabric of American democratic practices. What helps to differentiate Tocqueville and what renders his contribution so enduring is that he possessed an uncanny ability to grasp the larger picture and to focus in upon the key variables contributing to America’s success story with democracy. In his analyses, the full array of variables contributing to and constituting the formation of American democratic institutions are considered in earnest.

JEL Classification Codes: A30, B10, B25

Key Words: Alexis de Tocqueville, American Exceptionalism, Democracy in America, Early American Life (1607-1835)

In *Democracy in America* [1835], what can be considered as his most influential work, Alexis de Tocqueville, a French lawyer and scholar, advanced clear ideas regarding what is now referred to often in political rhetoric as “American Exceptionalism.” Tocqueville formed his thought process on democracy by drawing upon experiences and impressions associated with his travelling in the first part of the 1830s throughout the newly formed United States of America. This inquiry seeks to establish that Alexis de Tocqueville’s penetrating insights into the nascent United States advances the notion of American ‘Exceptionalism’.

Although only mentioned once in his Two Volume work, Tocqueville provided deep insight into the fundamental reasons for the American disposition and the associated successes with democracy. Tocqueville appears to have advanced his ideas in three major parts. He considers the Puritans that came to America in search of freedom and the prospect of living a life of liberty free of oppression from government as well as religious bigotry. America’s townships and federalist systems were constructed by individuals of equal standing with the aspiration of protecting liberty. Americans believed that they lived in a country with a unique destiny that was superior to all other nations of the world. Emigrants to America would tend to display an innate and uncanny commercial drive and were able to advance their self-interests. Through this mechanism men pursued passions, money, and entrepreneurship; all undertaken in the interests of maintaining, and

defining personal liberty. Crucial to America's 'exceptional' categorization is that those immigrants entering America were essentially required to leave behind their traditions. This allowed those arrivals to benefit from social and economic mobility never before witnessed in human history. What Tocqueville reflects upon after his journey through America are these key variables and their interplay.

Puritanical Origins

i) Tocqueville (2000, 21-22) understands that the foundation upon which America is built presented a rare opportunity in human history, 1) due to the extensive records kept during colonization, and 2) as the first large-scale participatory democracy created by a population. In particular, what was first established in New England provides what Tocqueville (2000, 24) explains as "singular and original." In addition, for Tocqueville understanding New England's founding proves essential for understanding the eventual outcomes that the United States of America could achieve as a nascent nation on the world scene during the first half of the 19th century.

What became designated as New England got its start in 1607 with a puritan population seeking religious, as well as political and intellectual freedom. As an early arriving group, these new American colonists were largely homogenous, spoke a common language, and displayed a common bond based upon intent. In

addition to language, Tocqueville teaches us that these new emigrants could be understood as middle class Europeans, and in coming to America left a life that was substantially easier behind in order to build a society based upon ideals.

Tocqueville (2000, 25) views these early settlers as an idealistic society based upon “most absolute and democratic and republican theories...” in the image of the people. This image would reflect the values and intellectual depth of the New England pilgrim population that valued education and liberty above all else.

Tocqueville (2000, 24) asserts that decisions made in New England were the first of their kind to appear in human history, and that the principles founded in 1620 New England would gradually be adopted by the rest of the American colonies. Soon after arrival New England settlers set up laws that they decided would guide their efforts at building community. Townships were created as early as 1650. Tocqueville (2000, 31) notes that right or wrong the ‘Code of 1650’ was voted upon and enforced by the people of townships in New England. This may seem arbitrary, but at the time it was revolutionary. No other body in history was set up by the people for the people.

ii) Tocqueville (2000, 31) elaborates on the organization that sprang up from the township noting that “the township was organized before the county, the county before the State, the State before the Union.” He describes the township as

the ‘nucleus’ that all self-interest derives from in the New World, and that in the example of New England, citizens make an earnest effort at self-governance.

Although the colonies were still young, and England was acknowledged at the “Motherland,” Tocqueville (2000, 29) explains that even before Massachusetts was officially granted charter by the King of England in 1628, New England chose to settle independently of the Empire’s interests, and only received charter roughly 40 years after sovereign operations. This inherent decision came easily for the puritans, and they chose to form their own constitution and elect officials.

Tocqueville (2000, 46-47) observes that in this new township structure ‘everyone’ was able to participate in the government and was also expected to be intelligent and capable of casting a thoughtful vote. This right was predicated on the notion that everyone had an equal voice, and that the responsibility to preserve one’s personal interest should be given to each individual.

While a simple concept, Tocqueville (2000, 47-48) emphasizes that the townships in the state acted as the individual in the township. Thus, representation was truly an outcome of individual votes and reflected the wants and needs of members in the formative stages of nascent America. This structure was foundational to what made America unique. Prior to the American experiment, there was common disbelief that a population could govern itself autonomously and effectively. This belief proved largely responsible for the feudal and

aristocratic societies in Europe during the same period puritans were creating this new democracy. Tocqueville (2000, 63) viewed popular sovereignty as the major source of independence in New England, and as a guard against aristocracy after the Revolutionary War. It turns out that the upper class was unable to wrestle popular sovereignty away from the people in America, and this was related to the length of time that democratic principles had been accepted and become custom as well as law. Unlike other nations, America had come to expect equality as a founding principle of their democracy.

iii) The Puritans and their Township Structures, are in many ways just a layer when considering the uniqueness of American democracy. Tocqueville (2000, 374) argues that in addition to these key institutions, individualism in American democracy created a people without history or traditions. Individualism in America grew from a diverse set of impulses; however, Tocqueville (2000, 373-375) returns to the lack of aristocracy as fundamental in the creation of 'new families'. In the Old World, aristocracies were in many ways permanent, and new generations were expected to carry on as expected. This usually involved inheriting land and social obligations. In America, contemporary families generally did not succumb to traditional pressures.

This point cannot be understated, lending itself to the founding of the exceptional society that Tocqueville first observed in New England and that spread

to form the larger part of American society. Tocqueville (2000, 374) stresses that in a democracy, families rise and fall, and this leads men to be less likely to die for one another. This is not related to hostility, but to a common understanding that each individual is believed responsible for their own outcomes and destiny.

Tocqueville (2000, 50) reiterates the importance of New England in having no tradition of ranks [aristocracy] upon foundation, and that no one within the community was tempted to abuse another.

Tocqueville (2000, 50) finds that this lack of tradition helps to solidify the structure of government and inject individualism into the American justice system. The people of New England counties adopted laws from the British, but they applied justice equally due to the lack of familial preference and legacy. This set of circumstances came together to form the independence of individuals in New England. Successes with this newly formed system of democracy spread throughout America, allowing for the pursuit of self-interest which had never been widely accepted in other nations.

Innate Commercial Drive

i) In the United State Tocqueville (2000, 586) observes that in opposition to the steady, stagnant state found in aristocratic nations in Europe, a democratic nation would support individualism through a societal equalization. This sense of

equality is the seed that drives individuals to work to improve their situation. In America people believe that it is possible to rise and fall within society, and Tocqueville (2000, 213) attributes this to the nature of the European emigrant who first came to the New World. Most of those leaving the Old World were independent, and unafraid of seeking out opportunities without support from an extended network or family ties. These immigrants that became the first Americans accepted self-interest as natural—and without apology—relying upon their own ingenuity and work ethic in the pursuit of dreams. Tocqueville (2000, 212-213) claims that this spirit of freedom is a key component to the industrious nature Americans [historically] seem to widely share.

The nature of work radically shifts in American society, and reasons include the aforementioned set of circumstances. Additionally, all democratic people in America remain in close proximity to work. Tocqueville (2000, 404) explains that the people of this new nation do not come from families of wealth, and even those that attain wealth must work to maintain their self-made fortunes. There is a notion that work is an honorable activity unto itself, and that each individual is obliged to produce and remain productive. Tocqueville (2000, 405) states that this feature of America as a democratic nation stands in contrast to the aristocratic societies that encouraged idleness, and in which labor served as a means to achieve honor, where profit was a mere byproduct. In the nascent democratic society found in America,

individuals—whether wealthy, middle-class, or poor—remained motivated to strive and also to acquire material goods.

In America, Tocqueville (2000, 405) highlights that all men work for money, even the President, and this reality reinforces the general ideal that work is honorable. Tocqueville finds that everyone in American society is surrounded by hardworking individuals, and this institution of hard work is reinforced over time. This idea is novel in history, and it leads to an increasing migration out of agriculture and towards industrial and commercial enterprise. Tocqueville largely attributes this migration to achieve higher pay. Money in American life proves more important to the population than any other in history.

ii) Tocqueville (2000, 39) repeatedly finds that the ‘love of money’ in America guides and moves fortunes rapidly, even changing a person’s fate within a single generation. In other nations it can be observed that values are quite broad among the population, but in America the acquisition of money became the key driver with rising equality. Tocqueville (2000, 449) claims that equality and the lack of ancestral traditions produces the love of money in America. This love stems from the fact that men must still measure themselves against each other and money is what remains without aristocracy and inherited fortunes.

In a democratic society this love of money drives workers to engage their intelligence as a way of improving production through making a process more

efficient or through lowering the quality of goods in order to sell at a lower price. Tocqueville (2000, 345) again juxtaposes this example to an aristocratic society, claiming that the artisan does not seek to undermine quality, but will cater their work to the higher classes that can afford to pay. This intuitively acts as a reinforcement mechanism in both societies. In the aristocratic nations, artisans will not sacrifice quality, which in turn keeps prices high and allows few to indulge in ‘finer’ pursuits. In the democratic nation cheaper goods make items more common, including everything from watches to newspapers, and consumers come to accept that lower quality stemming from a greater scale in production lowers costs, allowing for greater participation in markets.

Tocqueville (2000, 338) explains that equality again is constantly reinforcing and creating a society that seeks to satisfy their love of money. In a democratic nation a rebalancing takes place as more individuals, being equal, realize that intellectual pursuits lead to more wealth. This has the effect of creating a greater number seeking to pursue science and adds activity and ingenuity into every part of society and industry. This inventiveness is not without its origins in the pilgrims of New England, but also spreads throughout America and establishes itself as an enduring institution.

iii) Tocqueville (2000, 54) considers pilgrims seeking religious freedom that arrived before and after the start of America’s founding, noting that members of

this community were naturally enterprising, and hence provide the foundation for the high level of entrepreneurship for which Americans would become legend.

Tocqueville traces this enterprising and entrepreneurial orientation back to the original choices made to depart from a secure, comfortable life in Europe.

Relatedly, this enterprising trait appears deeply rooted in the American experience and serves as one of the key distinctions that helps to drive innovation and commercial successes. History teaches us that many Americans have remained unafraid to place even their lives at risk to realize an idea or a principle. Reflecting on the founders of life in New England, Tocqueville, (2000, 69) writes of their almost feverish attitude towards the pursuit of liberty and material wealth.

Stemming from their religious beliefs, and ranging from politics to new ventures, Americans exhibit to strive in the direction of growing prosperous, and this can be associated with their proclivities for extreme passions and willingness to follow and realize dreams.

The love of business outweighs even the love of politics in America, and it can be argued as evident in the early ventures into the New World by the British in establishing colonies. Another explanation for this love could be attributed to the American praise for order. Tocqueville (2000, 463) describes “order” as a habit of good business in America that spills over and affects essentially every aspect of democracy. Claiming that while Americans are in many ways a pragmatic people,

Tocqueville (2000, 463-464) argues that a person must experience America to understand how striving for improved material well-being generates extraordinary effects and outcomes.

In the 1830s, during the time of his research and writing, Tocqueville (2000, 344) regarded the democratic nation of America as lacking in the arts and humanities. Tocqueville (2000, 294) suggests that even with the freedom of press in the new democracy, instead of writing on intellectual topics, as much as seventy-five percent of a thick newspaper would be filled with advertisements. This is certainly a shared opinion in the Old World and hard to argue against. Europeans at the time loved theory, art, and tradition; Americans love practice, material benefits, and 'real advantage'. This translates to an industrious commercial nation driven by a free people choosing to pursue personal well-being by achieving material prosperity.

A New Nation Not Encumbered by Traditions

i) During the era of English colonization, Tocqueville (2000, 452) observes that the American population had doubled in number every twenty-two years, and had benefited from being located in the most temperate territory of the entire continent. This observation alone is not enough, but in conjunction with an increased freedom of movement, the new Americans were able to take full

advantage of the land that they occupied. Unlike Europe, Tocqueville (2000, 50) teaches us that the property laws and the customs surrounding inheritance in America prevented aristocratic [anti-productive] land ownership. In the founding of the colonies Tocqueville (2000, 50) emphasizes that land was not yet owned, and anyone with the will to undertake the hardship, could cultivate the land. Land in America that Tocqueville considered was generally best worked as small plots by families, and this proves essential in blocking the formation of an aristocratic class.

ii) According to Tocqueville (2000, 452) America's 'Exceptionalism' is largely dependent on the 'exceptional' geographical advantages and location of this newly formed democracy. The favorable setting, that included not having threatening neighbors, provided a free people the opportunity to focus their energies upon industry, and in this manner became more productive than those communities in Europe. It must be noted that Tocqueville (2000, 499) ascribes that the favorable geography accounts as one of the three most important variables supporting the emergence and institutionalization of American democracy. Along with a favorable geography, Tocqueville cites the importance of customs and also laws. Tocqueville (2000, 283) observes that America gradually began to specialize in production based upon this favorable geography, characterized by a focus on agriculture for commodity production in the American South, and with the North

concentrated on the shop and nascent manufacturing. In 1835, during his year of authoring *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville (2000,284) speculated that a political divide was growing not from the emergence of political parties, but from material interests. And it could be argued that these interests derived from the geographic layout of the American territories.

ii) Tocqueville (2000, 312) emphasizes the origination of American political enterprise, and as a newly formed nation the American government demonstrated a deep seated strength for offering clear ideas and commendable leadership. This can be attributed to the fact that America was not burdened by an established aristocratic tradition, or monarchy. In addition to the purely physical benefits of the American geography, Tocqueville (2000, 272) suggests that the position of the country is a contributing factor that led to the adoption of a federal government. This decentralization of government ensured that a democratic nation could thrive without a centralization of federal powers. This structure supported the formation of well-intended, democratic institutions along with sets of laws that helped to reinforce American customs. Overtime in America, ‘mores’-customs or norms in society-became laws that were based on proclivities displayed by a majority of members of the American population.

In a note of warning, Tocqueville (2000, 210-419) expressed a fear that democracy in America would lead to what he refers to as a ‘Tyranny of the

Majority”. He finds that men in ‘modern’ America are not like the founding fathers or the early colonists, but instead tended to follow a set path that included sharing in many of the same thoughts and opinions as their fellow citizens. Tocqueville (2000, 420-423) speculates that the ‘majority’ could, in a sense, become a ruling class, with consequences that may lead to independent thinkers, critical of norms and laws, falling into a minority without their opinions being represented.

iii) This combination of majority rule and minority opinion provides insight into conditions unique to America in 1835. From the founding at the start of the 1780s, and up to his visit in the 1830s, Tocqueville (2000, 397) observes that while Americans sought absolute equality above all else, only white males enjoyed the true privileges of the democratic system. In a qualification, Tocqueville (2000, 397) notes that women in America are able to express their voice more so than in comparative examples drawn from the Old World.

Other than the obvious flaws, Tocqueville (2000, 76) explains that the social state of the Anglo-Americans should be seen as inseparable from American democracy. Social interactions between citizens are viewed through a democratic lens, with social equality as a key element. Tocqueville (2000, 104) observes a binding mechanism within the democratic nation. The character of the people forces politicians to please the social body by meeting the needs of the democracy, this leads to a virtuous cycle, allowing the system to thrive.

Conclusion

This inquiry sought to establish that Alexis de Tocqueville's penetrating insights into America during its fifth decade is best described by his use of the word 'Exceptionalism'. Although Tocqueville observed flaws within the young democratic nation, it remains clear that he had a profound respect for this nascent democracy. The nation he observed in 1835 was profoundly different from any other in history, and Tocqueville was keenly aware, he emphasized this point. Stemming from puritan groups seeking autonomy and practicing self-governance, the stage was set for a truly remarkable experiment in grass-roots democracy. Circumstances particular to the American experiment contributed towards an innate commercial drive that benefited society at large through generating a widely shared material prosperity. Tocqueville understood how this drive was able to direct the American people towards their noted prosperity. Self-interest and the pursuit of material well-being were not something that brought shame, but a common goal widely shared. These unprecedented characteristics help to distinguish American 'exceptionalism'. Tocqueville saw the benefits of starting without the burden of traditions, and that as a new nation, America was able to confront and overcome obstacles through the application of intelligence and ingenuity. In sum, as traveler, researcher, and author, Alexis de Tocqueville offers

a penetrating perspective into America and the unique foundations in democracy; a perspective that endures and serves as an ongoing reference for those seeking to understand what indeed endures as 'exceptional' regarding the American experience.

Bibliography

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. New York: Bantam Classic,
[1835] 2000.