

**Tocqueville & American Political Culture  
Primary Source Analysis Activity**

**Grade Level:** 8-12

**Subject:** Civics

**Time Required:** One 60-minute class period

**Historical Thinking Skill:** Primary Source Analysis, Compare and Contrast

**Objective:** Summarize key observations Tocqueville made about American democracy and make connections to American political culture.

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**Lesson Plan:**

**Part 1: Bell Ringer** (5-10 minutes)

Ask students: *Why do people want to move to America?*

Students do a quick-write or pair-share.

**Part 2: Setting the Stage** (15 minutes)

Provide students with necessary background information:

- What is political culture?
  - Shared values, beliefs, and behaviors that shape how people live and govern themselves in a society
    - In America, these include liberty, equality, civic participation, rule of law, individual responsibility
- Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859)
  - French visitor to the U.S. in 1831,
  - Wrote *Democracy in America* about what made the U.S. different
- Tocqueville's Big Question – what makes democracy work in America?
  - Why do people here care about freedom and equality?
  - Why do they solve problems together?



- What habits, values, and beliefs shape American democracy?

### **Part 3: Primary Source Analysis** (25 minutes)

Say-Mean-Matter analysis (see attached)

### **Part 4: Discussion and Reflection** (15 minutes)

Lead a class wide discussion using questions such as:

- What is one American value Tocqueville saw that still matters today?
- Which of Tocqueville's observations is most important for democracy?
- Which American value do you think is strongest today?
- Which is weakening?

### **Part 5: Assessment**

Exit ticket: "What is one thing Tocqueville noticed about America that still feels true today?" Or have students draw a modern political cartoon labeled "Tocqueville in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."



Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Tocqueville & American Political Culture – Say, Mean, Matter**

This graphic organizer will help you explore Alexis de Tocqueville's key observations about American society in the 1830s. For each concept, consider Tocqueville's original insights, interpret them in your own words, and evaluate their relevance today.

<b>Say</b> <i>(Specific information or quote from the text)</i>	<b>Mean</b> <i>Analyze the meaning of the excerpt</i>	<b>Matter</b> <i>Connection to American political culture</i>
The more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that the equality of conditions is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived, and the central point at which all my observations constantly terminated.		
Individualism is a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself.		

<p>In America I saw the freest and most enlightened men placed in the happiest condition that exists in the world; it seemed to me that a sort of cloud habitually covered their features; they appeared to me grave and almost sad in their pleasures.</p> <p>The principal reason for this is that the first do not think of the evils they endure, whereas the others dream constantly of the goods they do not have.</p> <p>It is a strange thing to see with what sort of feverish ardor Americans pursue wellbeing and how they show themselves constantly tormented by a vague fear of not having chosen the shortest route that can lead to it.</p>		
<p>But liberty is not the chief and constant object of their desires; equality is their idol: they make rapid and sudden efforts to obtain liberty, and if they miss their aim resign themselves to their disappointment; but nothing can satisfy them except equality, and rather than lose it they resolve to perish.</p>		

**Reflection:** Which of Tocqueville's ideas are still most prevalent in America today?