Problems and Progress in American Democracy  
Political Science 309  
Williams College  

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M 9-10:30, R 11:15-12:30, and by appointment  

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TR 9:55-11:10  
Griffin 6  

Description.  
“I confess,” French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in the introduction to his Democracy in America, “that in America I saw more than America. I sought there the image of democracy itself, with its penchants, its character, its prejudices, and its passions, in order to learn what we have to hope or fear from its progress.” What would Tocqueville see if he returned to America today, almost 200 years later? What types of institutions, dynamics, and processes animate American political life in the twenty-first century? With Tocqueville as a guide to thinking about political ethnography, this course investigates six central elements of political life—religion, education, civic engagement, difference, representation, and crime and punishment—that simultaneously pose problems for and represent (potential) sites of progress in American democracy. For each subject, we will ask several key questions. How has that particular aspect of political life changed in the recent past? How might it change in the near future? Does it conform to how American politics is designed to work? To how we want American politics to work? Approaching these questions from the joint perspectives of theory, practice, and (in your assignments) action, our focus, like Tocqueville before us, is on both teasing out the lived experience—the character and challenges—of American democracy and examining any disconnect between that experience and the ideals that undergird it.

Objectives.  
Thinking Creatively. Democracy is frequently theorized, examined, and critiqued, but such exegesis usually occurs within a fairly narrow conception of not only what democracy is and how it works but also what makes it worthy of attention and how exactly we should study it. Though these conventional frameworks are by no means “bad,” they may create boundaries around the subject of democracy and, thus, limit our ability to grasp it fully. Looking to avoid these pitfalls, we will not be afraid to step outside the traditional, eschewing what might normally be considered canonical in favor of (hopefully) imaginative inquiry and (potentially) innovative insight.  
Thinking Experientially. Far from a mundane set of processes or procedures that have little to do with everyday life, democracy is a way of life. Given that it occurs all around us, shaping how we think, how we feel, and what we do, the study of democracy can only be enriched with attention to the experience of it. Accordingly, we will seek to bring democracy into the classroom through not only intellectual tracts but also personal reflection, less posing one against the other than continually searching for synergy or dissonance between the two.

Format.  
Class will combine elements of lecture, discussion, and various other forms of intellectual stimulation. I prefer to accept volunteers, but, if necessary to facilitate broad participation, I will call on students directly. In either case, there will be ample opportunity for you to ask questions, share your views, and interrogate the course material.
Materials.

- Tocqueville, Democracy in America, eds. Mansfield and Winthrop (2000) (Tocq)*
- PSCI 309 course packet (in four or five volumes) (CP)**

Contributions.***

Democratic Observation (25%). An exploration of the depth of democratic action around you through visits to at least six distinct sites of democratic life, with each visit culminating in a reflection of approximately 3 pages.

Democratic Understanding (25%). An endeavor to capture and internalize the democratic experience of others through seeking out, listening to, and interpreting the views of a particular constituency, culminating in a report of at least 5 pages.

Democratic Expression (25%). An effort to make your voice heard in the democratic sphere through a campaign to persuade or educate fellow citizens about an issue of import, culminating in a report of at least 7 pages.

Class Participation (25%). A process of active engagement that entails more than simply showing up. In addition to your enthusiastic and incisive involvement in class discussions, you will, for one session, be responsible for selecting a newspaper or magazine article (or audio or video clip, if you prefer) relevant to that day’s discussion and distributing it to your classmates—along with a paragraph describing its relevance—at least twenty-four hours prior to class. On occasion, I may also ask you to complete other brief assignments in order to enrich the day’s discussion. Given these various elements, participation grades are not a “free 25%” but, rather, a reflection of my holistic assessment of your performance in class.

Evaluation.

Written Work.**** Good writing is good thinking—that is to say, writing well first requires thinking well. The manner in which and the depth with which you approach writing and thinking will be the determining factors in your grade. More specifically, I base grades for written work on the following three factors: the extent to which you make a clear, compelling, and original argument; the extent to which you support that argument through close analysis and consideration of primary and secondary source evidence; and the extent to which you organize and articulate your thoughts in a logical and sophisticated structure. Needless to say, proper mechanics of writing—including features such as grammar, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and so forth—are assumed; be sure to proofread your work in order to catch any errors along these lines.

Written work in the A range is characterized by a strikingly creative, perceptive, and persuasive argument; comprehensive synthesis and trenchant analysis of an abundance of course material; straightforward yet sophisticated organization of thoughts; and clear, cogent, fluid, and error-free prose. Written work in the B range is characterized by a sound, original, and reasonably thoughtful argument; competent analysis of various course material; logical and intelligible organization; and clear, cogent, and error-free prose. Written work in the C range is characterized by a relatively underdeveloped, simplistic, or derivative argument; partial, inconsistent, or faulty

* Available for purchase at Water Street Books.
** The first volume is available for pickup in Hollander 026; the remaining volumes will be distributed later in the semester.
*** I reserve the right to fail any student who fails any element—observation, understanding, expression, class participation—of the course.
**** These are my general grading guidelines. For more specific guidelines relative to the assignments in this course, see the attached descriptions of your three projects.
analysis of course material; convoluted organization; and awkward, stilted, or otherwise distracting prose. Written work in the D range is characterized by an incoherent or extremely confusing argument; superficial or fleeting engagement with the course material; chaotic or irrational organization; and distorted, error-riddled prose. Written work that lacks any argument or analysis, fails to engage the course material, or is any way incomprehensible earns an F.*

**Participation.** Three factors contribute to class participation grades: the degree to which you demonstrate analytic or critical understanding of the course material, the degree to which you articulate thoughtful or original questions and arguments in response to the course material, and the degree to which you succeed in advancing discussion by responding meaningfully to what others have said. The emphasis here is on quality, not quantity. One or two insightful offerings are infinitely more valuable than several derivative or mediocre ones. Worry not: provided you attend class, complete the reading, and think carefully about the themes of the course, you will be in an excellent position to contribute thoughtfully to discussion.

Participation grades in the A range are reserved for those students who consistently come to class with questions and comments, engage others in a respectful manner, and generally elevate the level of discussion. Participation grades in the B range are earned by those students who participate but do not stimulate discussion, adequately listen to their classmates, or relate their comments to the direction of the conversation. Participation grades in the C range are for those students who are infrequent or unwilling contributors to discussion. Participation grades of D and F, respectively, are for those students who do not arrive adequately prepared for class and for those who disrupt and detract from the overall quality of the course.

**Responsibilities.**

**Attendance.** Put simply, I expect you to be in class each and every day. I do not formally call roll, but I notice—and make a mental note!—when you are absent. Besides avoiding my undying wrath, you should plan on full attendance for three reasons. First, participation, which counts for 25% of your final grade, is impossible if you are not present. Second, the lectures and discussions that occur in class will be crucial elements of your learning in this course. Third, and most importantly, by choosing to take this class, you are making a commitment to me, to your classmates, and to yourself that you will be an active and engaged participant in our academic community. Class will go on without you, but everyone’s learning will suffer as a consequence of your absence. If you know in advance that missing class will be unavoidable, please have the courtesy to let me know.

**Punctuality and Preparedness.** As part of your aforementioned commitment to me, your classmates, and yourself, you are expected to arrive in class on time, prepared, and without technological distractions. This means, first, that you have thoroughly and carefully read the material before class and, second, that you have thought about that material and are willing and ready to contribute your thoughts to discussion. (On occasion, I may also ask you to complete a brief exercise or assignment in order to enrich the day’s discussion.) Of course, I recognize that students lead busy lives, have commitments (both academic and otherwise) in addition to this course, and may occasionally be affected by unforeseen events and unpredictable circumstances that make adequate preparation difficult. Even in those instances, I still urge you to come to class and encourage you to let me know—either through an email in advance of class or a quick comment upon entering class—that you were unable to prepare as fully as you had hoped. Not only will you not be penalized for your

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* The following adjectives capture the essence of what individual grades mean in this course: truly exceptional (A+), outstanding (A), excellent (A-), very good (B+), good (B), satisfactory (B-), fair (C+), sub-par (C), poor (C-), seriously deficient (D+), minimally acceptable (D), borderline unacceptable (D-), completely unacceptable (F).
disclosure, but I agree not to call on you for that period. I trust you not to abuse my generosity by availing yourself of this option more than twice.

**Discourse and Decorum.** You are responsible for conducting yourself appropriately—both in your own comments and in your responses (verbal or otherwise) to the comments of your peers. As respectful discourse is the norm, criticism should be reserved for ideas, arguments, and opinions rather than for people; ad hominem comments will not be tolerated.

**Field Trips and Class Visits.** Depending on site and speaker availability as well as class interest, I may attempt to organize one or two field trips and/or one or two class visits from relevant political actors during the course of the semester. Should we endeavor trips, your attendance would be strongly encouraged, though not required.

**Screenings.** As a means of supplementing our reading and enriching our discussions, I have assigned one movie and one television show episode over the course of the semester. (Suggestions for others appreciated!) The latter can be easily (and legally!) downloaded for comfortable viewing from the confines of, well, wherever you want. In order to facilitate easy viewing of the former, I will attempt to arrange a screening as well as place the relevant source on reserve at Sawyer Library. Since these materials are designed to be educational as well as entertaining, you should be sure to view them—one way or another—in advance of class.

**Submitting Work.** Because of the specific nature of your three projects—all of which require (in varying ways) substantial forethought and planning—it is absolutely imperative that you meet the sequencing benchmarks as detailed for each assignment. Both these and the final deadline (May 18) are *firm.* I will not grant extensions, nor will I accept late work. This policy is not meant to be punitive but, rather, to keep you on a workable timetable for completion of tasks that might otherwise be left to the last minute, when they will scarcely able to be completed (let alone with the verve and gusto they deserve!).

**Academic Honesty.** I hope—frankly, I *expect*—this will not be an issue, but it is worth repeating that all work you do in this course is governed by the College’s Honor Code. (If you have any questions about how the Honor Code applies, do not hesitate to ask!) I take scholarly integrity very seriously, and any suspected violations will be pursued to the fullest extent. *No exceptions.*

**Contact Information.**

**Email.** The most efficient way to reach me is via email. As a general rule, emails received before 9pm will usually receive a reply that day; emails received after 9pm will likely receive a reply on the following day.

**Office Hours.** For my regularly scheduled office hours, no sign-up or prior notice is necessary, nor is a specific course-related question or concern. (If you wish to schedule an appointment for another time, you should let me know a few days in advance.) Although I am obviously available to discuss any issues that may arise in class or in the reading, you are also more than welcome to stop by and join me for some friendly conversation. Indeed, I encourage you to do so; really—come see me. I am interested in learning about you and your thoughts, and I never (well, ok, hardly ever) tire of talking about American democracy.

**Phone.** Though email is, as noted above, the easiest way to reach me, you should feel free to call me in the office at any time. If, between the hours of 9am and 7pm, you have a question that requires urgent attention, you may also contact me at home.

**Some Final Thoughts.**

I take teaching seriously, and I hope you will reciprocate by taking learning seriously. That said, I intend for our classes to be enjoyable—both for you and for me. This course revolves around rich, interesting, and controversial debates that help to animate the puzzles and promise of
democracy in twenty-first century America. So expect to teach each other and to learn from each other, but also expect to enjoy yourself; for my part, I promise to do the same.

Introduction

1. Defining American Democracy  (February 1)
   no reading...yet

2. Of Democracy and Ethnography, From Theory to Practice  (February 7)
   Tocq: “Introduction” (pp. 3-15)
   handouts: Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us”
   Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy”
   Farrar, “Dinner with Democracy”
   Glenn, “The Power of Everyday Life”
   Schatz, “Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics”
   Baiocchi and Connor, “The Ethnos in the Polis”

I. Religion

3. Is America a religious nation?  (February 9)
   Tocq: “On the Point of Departure and Its Importance for the Future of the Anglo-Americans” (pp. 27-44)
   “On the Principle Causes That Make Religion Powerful in America” (pp. 282-288)
   Morone, “A Nation with the Soul of a Church”
   Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”
   Carter, “God as a Hobby”
   Shorto, “Founding Father?”
   Heclo, “Is America a Christian Nation?”
   Sullivan, “Going to Church on Christmas”
   Klein, “I Love Christmas Music”
   Kazin, “I Love Christmas Kitsch, And I’m Not Afraid To Admit It”
   Gray, “Alabama Town Gives Offenders a Choice”
   Goodstein, “In Kentucky, Noah’s Ark Theme Park is Planned”
   Weiner, “Americans: Undecided About God?”

4. Are religious beliefs, practices, and institutions a threat or support to American democracy?  (February 14)
   Tocq: “Indirect Influence That Religious Beliefs Exert on Political Society in the United States” (pp. 278-282)
   “How, in the United States, Religion Knows How to Make Use of Democratic Instincts” (pp. 417-424)
   “How the Americans Apply the Doctrine of Self-Interest Well Understood in the Matter of Religion” (pp. 504-506)
   “How Religious Beliefs At Times Turn the Souls of Americans Toward Immaterial Enjoyments” (pp. 517-521)
   CP: Putnam and Campbell, from American Grace
5. Are there particular religious traditions that are incompatible with democratic values? (February 16)
   Tocq: “On Religion Considered as a Political Institution” (pp. 275-278)
   “On the Progress of Catholicism in the United States” (pp. 424-425)
   “Why Certain Americans Display Such an Exalted Spiritualism” (pp. 510-511)
   CP: Blanshard, “The Catholic Church and Democracy”
   Kennedy, Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association
   McWilliams, “Critical Rebound”
   Romney, “Faith in America”
   Linker, “The Big Test”
   Bushman, “Have Faith”
   Putnam and Campbell, from American Grace
   Krakauer, from Under the Banner of Heaven
   Norris and Inglehart, “The True Clash of Civilizations”
   Feldman, from After Jihad
   Worthen, “Who Would Jesus Smack Down?”
   Putnam and Campbell, from American Grace

II. Education

6. What—or how much—do Americans need to know in order to be democratic citizens? (February 21)
   CP: Hayakawa, “English as Our Official Language”
   Foster Wallace, 2005 Kenyon College Commencement Address
   Comer, “Development, Learning, and Democracy”
   Westheimer and Kahne, “Educating the ‘Good’ Citizen”
   Bennett, “Education for Democracy”
   McWilliams, “Democracy and Mystery”
   Intercollegiate Studies Institute, “Our Fading Heritage”
   Lane, “America 101”

7. To what extent should public schools be inculcators of democratic (or patriotic) ideals? (February 23)
   Tocq: “Education of Girls in the United States” (pp. 563-565)
   CP: Ravitch, “Education and Democracy”
   Barber, “Education for Democracy”
   Gutmann, “The Purposes of Primary Education”
   Hochschild and Scovronick, “Democratic Education and the American Dream”
   Commager, “Our Schools Have Kept Us Free”
   Brighouse, “Should We Teach Patriotic History?”
   Katz, “Who’s Afraid of Senator Byrd?”
   Hanson, “The Civic Education America Needs”
8. How have changes in American higher education affected the health of democratic life? (February 28)
   CP: Bloom, “The Student and the University”
   Kronman, from Education’s End
   Kors and Silverglate, “The Water Buffalo Affair”
   Washburn, “Paying More for Less”
   Weinberger, “Why Is Yale Outsourcing a Campus to Singapore?”
   Seery, “America Goes to College”
   Canada, “The Currents of Democracy”
   Brooks, “The Organization Kid”

III. Civic Engagement

9. What is the state of civic engagement in contemporary America? (March 1)
   Tocq: “On Political Association in the United States” (pp. 180-186)
   “On the Use That Americans Make of Associations in Civil Life” (pp. 489-492)
   “Relations Between Civil Associations and Political Associations” (pp. 496-500)
   CP: Putnam, “The Strange Disappearance of Civic America”
   Putnam, “Bowling Together”
   Skocpol, “The Narrowing of Civic Life”
   Berry, “The Rise of Citizen Groups”
   Senior, “Alone Together”
   Eliasoph, “The Evaporation of Politics in the US Public Sphere”

10. What does technology do to civic engagement? (March 6)
    CP: Sunstein, “The Daily We”
    Manjoo, “The End of the Echo Chamber”
    Akdeniz, “Anonymity, Democracy, and Cyberspace”
    Mossberger, “The Benefits of Society Online: Civic Engagement”
    Niedzviecki, “Facebook in a Crowd”
    Putnam and Feldman, “Craigslist.org”
    Wieseltier, “Going to Melody”
    Leslie, “In Search of Serendipity”
    Homans, “The Geekdom of Crowds”

11. What does diversity do to civic engagement? (March 8)
    CP: Putnam, “E Pluribus Unum”
    Jonas, “The Downside of Diversity”
    Eliasoph, from Making Volunteers
    Schmitt, “Title IX Dad”

12. Is more civic engagement always better than less? (March 13)
    CP: Dyreson, “Maybe It’s Better to Bowl Alone”
    Fiorina, “Extreme Voices”
    Eliasoph, “Top-Down Civic Associations Are Not Grassroots Associations”
    Schulman and Anderson, “The Dark Side of the Force”
    Caplan, “Myth of the Rational Voter”
13. **Presuming we want to, how do we revitalize civic engagement in America?** (March 15)
   Tocq: “On Public Spirit in the United States” (pp. 225-227)
   CP: Farrell, “Can Partisanship Save Citizenship?”
   Dagger, “Stopping Sprawl for the Good of All”
   Goodlad, “Democracy, Education, and the Community”
   Isaac, “Faith-Based Initiatives”
   Noah, “We Need You”
   Putnam, “Toward an Agenda for Social Capitalists”

IV. **Difference**

14. **Is difference (broadly construed) necessary in a democracy? Is it always desirable?** (April 3)
   Tocq: “How the Americans Understand the Equality of Man and Woman” (pp. 573-576)
   CP: Publius, *The Federalist* 2 and 10
   Gutmann, “Integrating Identity in Democracy”
   McWilliams, Democratic Multiculturalism”
   Norton, “The Virtues of Multiculturalism”
   Macedo, “The Place of Diversity”
   Buchanan, “Can Diversity Destroy Us?”
   Huntington, “Deconstructing America”
   Rodriguez, “E Pluribus Unum”
   Glastris, “The Case for Denial”
   Brooks, “People Like Us”

15. **Is race still the fundamental obstacle to—“the American dilemma” for—democratic egalitarianism?** (April 5)
   CP: Hsu, “The End of White America”
   Fausset, “A Gray Future for a Black College in Georgia?”
   Mendelberg, “Deliberation, Incivility, and Race in Electoral Campaigns”
   Cohen, “My President is Black”
   King and Smith, from *Still a House Divided*
   Benn-Michaels, “The Trouble with Race”

16. **Is inequality inescapable in a democratic polity?** (April 10)
   Tocq: “How the Americans Combat Individualism By the Doctrine of Self-Interest Well Understood” (pp. 500-503)
   “How Equality Naturally Divides the Americans into a Multitude of Particular Little Societies” (pp. 577-578)
   CP: Benn-Michaels, “Against Diversity”
   Lasch, “Opportunity in the Promised Land”
   Mahler, “Now That the Factories Are Closed, It’s Tee Time in Benton Harbor, Mich.”
   Newman, from *No Shame in My Game*
   Duncan, from *Worlds Apart*
   Fraser, “Down and Out in the New Middletowns”
   Continetti, “About Inequality”
   screening: Spurlock, “Minimum Wage” from *30 Days*
V. Representation

17. What constitutes “good” representation in a democratic republic? (April 12)
   Tocq: “What Are the Real Advantages That American Society Derives from the
   Government of Democracy” (pp. 220-224)
   “Absence of Administrative Centralization” (pp. 250-251)
   “What Are the Chances That the American Union Will Last? What Dangers
   Threaten It?” (pp. 348-379)
   “On Republican Institutions in the United States” (pp. 379-384)
   CP: selections from The Anti-Federalist and The Federalist
   Burke, Speech to Electors of Bristol
   Riordan, from The Plunkitt of Tammany Hall
   Pitkin, “Political Representation”
   Margolies, “The Bailout and Financial Crisis Call to Mind Another Tough Vote”

18. How should we balance representation of local and national, of urban, suburban, and rural? (April 17)
   Tocq: “Necessity of Studying What Takes Place in the Particular States Before Speaking of
   the Government of the Union” (pp. 56-93)
   CP: selections from The Anti-Federalist and The Federalist
   Clarren, “A Bridge to Nowhere”
   Young, “The Need for Regional Democracy”
   Kemmis, “The Art of the Possible in the Home of Hope”
   Hanson, “Democracy without Farmers”
   Katz, Muro, and Bradley, “Miracle Mets”
   Oliver, from Democracy in Suburbia
   Duany and Plater-Zyberk, “The Second Coming of the American Small Town”

19. What is the relationship between wealth and representation? (April 19)
   CP: APSA Task Force, “American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality”
   Parenti, “Wealth and Want in the United States”
   Bartels, from Unequal Democracy
   Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom, selections from Place Matters

20. What types of constituencies are underrepresented? Do any deserve more representation? (April 24)
   CP: Seery, from Too Young to Run?

VI. Crime and Punishment

21. What is the proper role of law enforcement in a democratic society? (April 26)
   Tocq: “Reasons For Some Singularities That the Laws and Customs of the Anglo-
   Americans Present” (pp. 44-45)
   “On the Idea of Rights in the United States” (pp. 227-229)
   “On Respect for the Law in the United States” (pp. 229-231)
   Skolnick, from Justice Without Trial
   Jackall, Street Stories
   Simon, from Homicide
   Conlon, from Blue Blood
22. Does the jury system encourage or preclude democratic justice? (May 1)
   Tocq: “On the Jury in the United States Considered as a Political Institution” (pp. 258-264)
   CP: Publius, The Federalist 83
   Abramson, from We, the Jury
   Butler, “Jurors Need to Know That They Can Say No”
   Gastil and Weiser, “Jury Service as an Invitation to Citizenship”
   Cavanaugh, “Run Away, Jury!”
   Rosen, “Democracy in Action”
   Barkan, “Luck of the Draw”
   Sleeper, “Daily Life and the Jury System”
   Walzer, “Waiting to Serve”
   Mills, “See You in Six Years”
   screening: Rose, Twelve Angry Men

23. How should we conceptualize the purpose(s) of punishment in a democratic regime? (May 3)
   Abramsky, from American Furies
   Moskos, “Bring Back the Lash”
   Wright and Gehring, “From Spheres of Civility to Critical Public Spheres”
   Wood, “Prison Without Walls”
   Steinhauer, “For $82 a Day, Booking a Cell in a 5-Star Jail”

24. How might the rise of the “carceral state” threaten America’s democratic future? (May 8)
   CP: Liptak, “1 in 100 U.S. Adults Behind Bars, New Study Says”
   Gopnik, “The Caging of America”
   Gottschalk, “Whither the Carceral State?”
   Schlosser, “The Prison-Industrial Complex”
   Williams, “The Community’s Story”
   Clear, from Imprisoning Communities
   Conover, from Newjack
   Steinhauer, “Arizona May Put State Prisons in Private Hands”

Conclusion

25. Debating American Democracy (May 10)
   Tocq: “General View of the Subject” (pp. 673-676)
   handouts: TBD