

Tocquevilles tyranny of majority essay

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Alexis de Tocqueville, the author of the famous book “ Democracy in America”, criticized the ability of the majority to oppress the minority by silent disapproval. However, it cannot be said that Tocqueville meant deprivation of freedom of thought under his claim. What he basically meant is that majority generated common values for the whole nation on a basis of representation in the political institutions and the minority, which values differ from majority’s, is under a pressure of public opinion. This does not mean that minority cannot have its values, but it means that minority will find it difficult to practice them in public sphere.

Majority, which possesses not only political but moral authority, may exclude the minority from public discourse. Tocqueville compares this phenomenon to tyranny, when tyrant deprived his subjects of their rights and freedoms. However, the impact of tyranny of the majority is far deeper. Tocqueville defines it in such way:

Tocqueville saw manifestation of American democracy as " tyrannical" in the reign of public opinion. The desire of a citizen to get the support of others in a democracy inevitably leads to the masses’ opinion and, therefore, has enormous coercive power that cannot be compared with any laws. Therefore, no matter how balanced and distributed power in a democratic society is, it becomes extremely difficult to express opinions contrary to the opinion of the masses even if it is legally guaranteed by basic civil rights and freedoms. However, Tocqueville makes a small note when discussing totality of public opinion:

His political career is closed forever, since he has offended the only authority, which is able to promote his success but no sooner has he

declared them openly than he is loudly censured by his overbearing opponents. (Tocqueville 292-293)

Here Tocqueville clearly points at political attributes of public opinion. A person can express his own opinion in any way, however will not be able to spread it to political sphere due to public barrier. Also it is worth mentioning that he wrote his book in 1830s when US were a young state with the democracy as the highest political value. The citizens' will was a policy-defining factor that could not be denied. Therefore, Tocqueville, although criticized the impact of public opinion, understood its role and nature better than others.

CONCLUSION

Having criticized the overwhelming role of public opinion in America, Tocqueville understood its role in promotion of democratic institutions and development of a general will. The historical period when he researched democracy in America is characterized by high political activity of American citizens, which was attributed to public opinion. Although Constitution granted all citizens freedom of thought, an opinion, which deviated from generally accepted, was ignored.

Works Cited

Tocqueville, Alexis D. *Democracy in America*. Trans. Henry Reeve. Pennsylvania: A Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication, 2002. Print.