<u>Democracy in America</u>
by Alexis de Tocqueville
A Civic Reflection Discussion Guide

❖ Reading

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Part 2, Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, (transl. G. Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer, Anchor Books, 1969)
- Elizabeth Lynn , "An Introduction to Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, or Why Read This Book?" (below)

❖ **Icebreaker** (optional, for smaller groups)

Going around the room, ask participants to describe some (other) association in which they participate and what they most value about it.

❖ Small Group Exercise

- Break into groups of three.
- Take a minute to look over your text and find a passage that struck you as particularly true, absurd, surprising, perplexing, etc.
- Take turns reading aloud and discussing the passages you have identified.

❖ Large Group Discussion

Focus on the following sentence as a compact summary of Tocqueville's argument:

> *The Americans have used liberty to combat the individualism born of equality, and they have won.* [Chapter 4, top of page 511]

These sixteen words contain three strong arguments. Let's consider each in turn.

- ♦ "*Individualism born of equality*." What is individualism, according to Tocqueville? How is it born of equality?

- ♦ "*The Americans have used liberty to combat . . . .*" How does liberty combat individualism? Is there a paradox here?

- ♦ "*And they have won*." Won what? Is he right? What has our art of association in fact won us? Has it lost us anything?

❖ Wrap-up

So what? What does this mean for our own association, or the associations with which we work?

An introduction to Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*
(transl. G. Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer, Anchor Books 1969)
or
"Why Read This Book?"

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), a French nobleman trained in the law, came to the United States in 1831-1832 to study the American penal system. During his travels through 18 states, Tocqueville became fascinated with American democracy as a new kind of social order which was dramatically changing people's lives and their ways of relating to one another. In 1835-1836, he published his observations of American society in a two-volume work called *Democracy in America.*

The America that Tocqueville visited had long been a source of interest to European nations, which were looking to the new nation for evidence of whether or not this largely untested form of government called "democracy" could work in a country of this scale. Although by 1830 democracy was a powerful and intoxicating force in much of Europe, the United States was, at the time of Tocqueville's visit, the only country which had proven experience and apparent success with a democratic form of government.

Tocqueville's starting point in *Democracy in America* is his observation that American democracy is driven by the principle of equality (in sharp contrast to the principle of hierarchy that animates aristocracy). In his introduction, he asserts that equality is the "basic fact" of American life, pervading all spheres of activity:

> No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly during my stay there than the equality of conditions. It was easy to see the immense influence of this basic fact on the whole course of society. . . .[I]t creates opinions, gives birth to feelings, suggests customs, and modifies whatever it does not create. (p. 9)

It is worth noting that Tocqueville is not interested in assessing the truth of human equality or the desirability of democratic society. He accepts democracy as inevitable. He wants to anticipate its consequences for his own country by studying the American experience. His question is: *What is life like in this new social order called democracy?*

The American society he describes in *Democracy in America* has five key features:

> 1) <u>Love of Equality</u>: Americans love equality even more than we love individual liberty or freedom. (Vol. II, Part II, Chapt.1)
>
> 2) <u>Absence of Tradition</u>: We inhabit a landscape largely without inherited institutions and traditions (family, class, religion) that define our relations to one another. (Vol. II, Part I, Chapt.1)
>
> 3) <u>Individualism</u>: Because no one person is intrinsically better than another, we begin to seek all reasons in ourselves, looking not to tradition, nor to the wisdom of singular individuals, but to our own opinion for guidance. (Vol. II, Part II, Chapt. 2)
>
> 4) <u>Tyranny of the Majority</u>: At the same time, we give great weight to--and feel great pressure from--the opinion of the majority. Precisely because we are all equal, we feel insignificant and weak in contrast to the greater number. (Vol. I, Part II, Chapt. 7)
>
> 5) <u>Importance of Free Association</u>: We have a happy impulse to work together to improve our common life, most obviously by forming voluntary associations. This uniquely American art of association tempers our tendencies toward individualism, and gives us "a habit and taste for serving others." (Vol. II, Part II, Chapts. 4-5)

Democracy in America has become popular quotation material in recent years, especially in Congress, and on both sides of the aisle. (In the 104th Congress alone, there were 47 references to Tocqueville--60% Republican, 40% Democrat.) Most popular of all are his statements about the value of associations in Volume II, Part II (included

here), with their apparent claim that America's voluntary associations offer an important "third way" of addressing our common problems, alongside government and business.

As you read the following selections, think about the following questions:

- What is Tocqueville really saying here? Why do Americans associate, in his view? What good does our art of association do us?
- Is he right? Does this match up with your own experience in associations? Where and where not?
- So what? Where does his argument leave you in your own work with associations in civic life?

Elizabeth Lynn
Project on Civic Reflection
January 2003