

Introduction



Alexis de Tocqueville is widely considered to be one of the greatest analysts of American political life, and his writings on America have been endlessly interpreted and reinterpreted. But, remarkably, there have been few, if any, sustained analyses of Tocqueville's ideas on leadership, and the relevance of these ideas for American political theory and practice.

The argument of this book is that the best way to approach the problem of democratic leadership in America is through Tocqueville. This is not to say that Tocqueville provides us with a definitive and final account of democratic leadership. Indeed, while I use Tocqueville to set the theoretical terms for this book, I also show how certain American thinkers have built on, contested, and sometimes even improved upon these terms. Although I do not always embrace Tocqueville's understanding of democratic leadership, I focus on Tocqueville because no one else so brilliantly analyzes the American character, and no one else so effectively raises the important questions that we need to ask regarding the role of leadership in America. My analysis of Tocqueville centers on *Democracy in America*, but at times I turn to Tocqueville's other writings in order to gain a more complete understanding of his ideas on leadership.

In recent years, "democratic theory" has been one of the dominant areas of inquiry for political theorists. The role of leadership within democratic theory, however, has been somewhat neglected. Of course, there have been some important exceptions to this general neglect. Although he believes that strong leadership has a tendency "to undermine civic vigor," Benjamin Barber has sought to find forms of leadership that are consistent with his vision of "strong democracy."¹ Moreover, there is a group of presidency scholars—namely, James MacGregor Burns, Bruce Miroff, Marc Landy, and Sidney Milkis—who have explored the relationship between leadership

and democracy. Most political scientists who study the presidency have followed in the footsteps of Richard Neustadt and have focused their work, as Jeffrey Tulis has pointed out, on “presidential effectiveness”—that is, on the capacity of the president to successfully impose his will onto the political landscape.² Although it may be useful for the study of political power, this focus on “effectiveness” tends to obscure the question of how different presidents have strengthened or weakened democratic citizenship. In contrast to this dominant approach, Burns, Miroff, Milkis, and Landy have thoughtfully explored the question of whether or not “democratic leadership” is an oxymoron.³ If democracy means rule by the people, then is a democratic regime threatened by the rule of strong leaders? As Miroff puts it, “Leadership has rarely fit comfortably with democracy in America. The claims of leaders to political precedence violates the equality of democratic citizens. The most committed democrats have been suspicious of the very idea of leadership.”⁴ Kenneth Ruscio has noted that leadership is in tension not just with the democratic value of *equality*, but also with the value of *liberty*, for “[l]eadership often means persuading people to do something they originally may not have wanted to do or perhaps even fashioning policies that may require them to do something they will never want to do . . .”⁵ Miroff and Ruscio thus prompt us to ask, does leadership inevitably threaten democratic citizenship, or are there types of leadership that enhance rather than diminish democracy?⁶

In my view, a critical engagement with Tocqueville’s writings can yield crucial insights into precisely this question. Perhaps more than any other political theorist, Tocqueville’s writings can reveal to us the rich problems and possibilities that arise from the effort to combine leadership with democracy. Oftentimes, defenders of strong leadership are suspicious of participatory democracy. By the same token, participatory democrats are often hostile toward leadership. In contrast to both of these views, Tocqueville embraces participatory democracy *and* leadership in a single, complex vision.

Tocqueville’s approach to the problem of democratic leadership—and to the problem of democratic authority—is thus different from both conservative scholars who fear participatory democracy, such as Samuel Huntington, and radical scholars who fear strong leadership, such as Robert Paul Wolff. In *The Crisis of Democracy*, Huntington suggests that “the vitality of democracy in the United States in the 1960s” led directly to “a substantial decrease in governmental authority.”⁷ In order to restore the proper balance between democracy and authority, Huntington hopes that democracy will somehow be restrained, and authority somehow revitalized. Wolff, for his part, argues that “authority” and “autonomy” are inherently in conflict with one another; in a modern state, the best way to safeguard

autonomy would be to minimize authority by creating an “instant direct democracy.”⁸ Huntington and Wolff disagree, of course, over how much emphasis should be placed on authority versus democracy. But for all of their differences, conservatives such as Huntington and radical democrats such as Wolff both agree that authority and democracy are involved in a kind of zero-sum game. In contrast to both Wolff and Huntington, Tocqueville argues that certain forms of authority—and leadership—can augment rather than weaken democratic self-rule.

Throughout this book, my focus will be on the concept of *leadership*, but at times I will discuss the closely related concept of *authority*. Some clarification of these terms is thus in order. Wolff defines authority as “the right to command, and correlatively, the right to be obeyed.”⁹ But, as Joseph Raz suggests, Wolff’s definition is too narrow. Raz argues that a better “explanation of authority is that offered by John Lucas: ‘A man, or body of men, *has authority* if it follows from his saying “Let X happen,” that X ought to happen.’”¹⁰ For Lucas and for Raz, authority is thus the power to generate an “ought.” This means that authority is closely related to what Raz calls “normative power.”¹¹ Raz is helpful here insofar as he points toward the notion that authority is not merely the right to command, but rather authority is that which shapes norms. Drawing in part on Raz’s insight, in this book I define authority as that which *educates*. As Sebastian de Grazia usefully puts it, “authority . . . is responsible for the setting up of values. . . . By observing man grow into the citizen we learn that authority is a creative, a cultivating force. Far from being merely restrictive, it forms his character, upholds the things worth loving, and teaches him to see.” Whereas scholars such as Wolff suggest that freedom is always at odds with authority, de Grazia writes that, “authority is a necessary condition of freedom, for freedom apart from values or goals or morals makes no sense.”¹² My understanding of authority in this book is also informed by the work of John Schaar. Much like de Grazia, Schaar suggests that, “Authority and authorities form our values and goals, show us what is admirable, and uphold us in the pursuit of ideals.”¹³ Authority, in short, attempts to offer “a conception of what freedom is *for*,” as Schaar puts it.¹⁴ With this definition of authority in mind, one can now see that by “leaders” I refer to political actors who seek to shape the norms—and thus seek to educate—their fellow citizens.

To be sure, education is not the only task of leadership; for instance, leadership also entails the coordination and organization of collective action. Following Tocqueville, though, I suggest that education is the most important task of the democratic leader. As we shall see, instead of emphasizing the issue of “effectiveness,” Tocqueville’s conception of

leadership focuses our attention on the question: How can leaders educate their fellow citizens so that they are more fit for democratic self-rule?

Tocqueville's approach to leadership thus differs not only from the approach favored by presidency scholars who focus on the effectiveness of leaders. Tocqueville's approach also differs from that of Robert Faulkner. In *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics*, Faulkner offers an account of statesmanship that is inspired by Aristotle's concept of the great-souled man. Faulkner argues—as I also do in this book—that the “service” of great leaders “is at least as necessary in democracies as in other political orders.”¹⁵ However, Faulkner does *not* emphasize—as I, following Tocqueville, seek to do—that a key part of what makes a democratic leader great is his or her ability to educate, elevate, and empower the citizenry. Faulkner celebrates the “superior powers” and “superior character” of great statesmen, but he does little to suggest that great democratic leadership involves empowering *other* citizens and elevating their character.¹⁶

Tocqueville teaches us that democratic leadership must, above all, be *educative* leadership when he writes in the Introduction to *Democracy in America* that,

The first duty imposed on those who now direct society is to educate democracy; to put, if possible, new life into its beliefs; to purify its mores; to control its actions; gradually to substitute understanding of statecraft for present inexperience and knowledge of its true interests for blind instincts; to adapt government to the needs of time and place; and to modify it as men and circumstances require.¹⁷

In this book, I put Tocqueville into dialogue with key American thinkers on the subject of how leaders can best “educate democracy.” In chapter 1, I provide a critical interpretation of Tocqueville's understanding of the relationship between leadership and democracy. Then, in the light of Tocqueville's theory of leadership, I examine the Antifederalists (chapter 2), Abraham Lincoln (chapter 3), Woodrow Wilson (chapter 4), and Robert Putnam as well as Robert Bellah (chapter 5). As we shall see, these American thinkers each strived to think through the supposed opposition between leadership and democracy in ways that resemble, in important respects, Tocqueville's political theory.¹⁸ These thinkers thus contribute to an important but insufficiently examined strain within American political thought according to which leadership—and authority—are crucial for the full flowering of democracy. Although only the first chapter is focused solely on Tocqueville, each of the later chapters helps us further under-

stand Tocqueville's political thought. In other words, Tocqueville's ideas on leadership and democracy can illuminate the American figures that I examine, but these American figures also help to illuminate Tocqueville. For the most part, these American figures help to confirm Tocqueville's theoretical claims, but sometimes these figures expose important shortcomings in Tocqueville's theory of leadership.

If leaders are defined as those who shape norms, then parents, schoolteachers, and members of the clergy can all rightly be considered leaders. However, my focus in this book is primarily on *political* leaders—one can also call them statesmen—who seek to guide and educate the polity as a whole. In *Ruling Passions: Political Offices and Democratic Ethics*, Andrew Sabl argues that Tocquevillian leadership in America can be discerned largely in the activities of the “moral activist” and the “community organizer,” both of whose “sphere of activity is civil society rather than the state.”¹⁹ Although often very illuminating, I think that Sabl's emphasis on community organizers and moral activists as Tocquevillian leaders does not do justice to Tocqueville's interest in how “men in power” can educate democracy.²⁰ By considering statesmen such as Lincoln and Wilson in the light of Tocqueville's theory of leadership, my book returns attention to the key Tocquevillian question of how governmental leaders—called by Tocqueville “men in power” as well as “those who now direct society”—can best educate the citizenry.

That said, like Sabl, I do not confine myself in this book solely to the study of elected leaders. For in the book's final chapter, I turn to an analysis of Robert Putnam and Robert Bellah. This chapter considers the leadership role played by “public intellectuals.” By including public intellectuals such as Putnam and Bellah within my analysis of democratic leadership, I follow Tocqueville's lead. For when Tocqueville discusses the education of American democracy, he usually has in mind governmental leaders (those who “direct society,” as he puts it), but he sometimes has in mind those whom he calls “moralists.” Tocqueville never defines the term “moralist,” but with this term he seems to refer to writers of a philosophical bent who have a wide audience, and who try to shape the values and goals of the citizenry. According to Tocqueville, both governmental leaders *and* moralists should seek to educate democracy, often in similar ways. For instance, in Volume II of *Democracy*, Tocqueville suggests that in an era of restlessness and skepticism, the “duty of rulers” is precisely the same as the task of “moralists,” insofar as both should seek to uphold “distant goals” in the minds of the citizenry.²¹ Because Tocqueville sometimes includes moralists (or public intellectuals, to use a more current term) as well as power-holders in his discussion of democratic leadership, I do the same in this book.

By seeking to elucidate how Tocqueville and certain American theorists understand the problem of democratic leadership, my work can be viewed as part of a wider post-Hartzian effort to depict the richness and complexity of American political thought. In *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Louis Hartz argued that American political thought and culture is predominantly “Lockean,” by which he meant it is marked by individualism, the pursuit of self-interest, and materialism.²² According to Steven Dworetz, Locke’s original theory was actually *not* intended simply to promote self-regarding behavior.²³ In Dworetz’s interpretation, Locke was a “theistic liberal” who was concerned with God’s law and the salvation of the soul.²⁴ Dworetz is no doubt correct that Locke himself did not intend to promote the pursuit of radically selfish behavior; after all, Locke himself insists in the *Second Treatise* that “a *State of Liberty*” is “*not a State of Licence*.”²⁵ Nevertheless, I believe that Lockean liberalism *does* lead toward the pursuit of raw self-interest if it is not complemented by republican and religious ideals. As Robert Bellah and his co-authors point out, “The essence of the Lockean position is an almost ontological individualism. The individual is prior to society, which comes into existence only through the voluntary contract of individuals trying to maximize their own self-interest.”²⁶ Lockean theory, then, encourages us to think of human relationships as purely voluntary relationships which are based on nothing more than utility.

Hartz’s masterpiece successfully demonstrated the dominance of Lockean liberalism in American political thought, but later political scientists—such as Wilson Carey McWilliams and Michael Sandel—have shown that there are highly valuable minor chords in American thought as well. In *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, McWilliams argues that while America’s “public institutions” are based on “Enlightenment liberalism,” American thinkers have also often given voice to an older conception of politics, a conception that is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition.²⁷ In *Democracy’s Discontent*, Michael Sandel argues that while America is today dominated by procedural liberalism, American political thought also contains a significant republican tradition.²⁸ It is my hope that this book will be viewed as complementary to the works of these post-Hartzian scholars, for my aim is to demonstrate that American thinking on leadership has often sought to transcend the liberal individualism that Hartz found to be so widespread in America. As we shall see, the Tocquevillian understanding of leadership that is articulated in this book resonates with McWilliams’s understanding of “the political order” as “an educative community,” and it also resonates with Sandel’s insistence that democratic politics must be a “formative politics.”²⁹

Unlike the dominant liberal tradition, the Tocquevillian conception of leadership that I trace in this book emphasizes the pursuit of the common good over the pursuit of self-interest, and it emphasizes society's need for character-formation over the individual's desire for unrestrained private freedom. According to Tocqueville, then, it is the task of leadership to shape character and to point the citizenry toward higher ideals than materialism and individualism. As John Diggins and Mark Kann have noted, "America was born in an act of resistance to constituted authority," and Americans have long been wary of strong leadership.³⁰ According to Tocqueville, however, leadership is in fact necessary to restrain and elevate the citizenry. Upon this view, leadership is not simply charged with the task of setting up and maintaining procedures that allow each individual to pursue his or her own good; instead, leadership is charged with the task of educating democratic citizens, and providing their understanding of freedom with a sense of purpose, a sense of "what freedom is *for*."

All of these ideas about leadership can be found, in a particularly compelling fashion, in the political thought of Tocqueville. Moreover, we shall see how the American thinkers examined in this book each have their own distinctive version of these ideas. I have chosen these particular American thinkers primarily because their ideas resonate with—and sometimes productively challenge—Tocqueville's ideas on leadership. I have also chosen them, however, because they allow us to consider the relevance of Tocqueville's ideas on leadership during four key periods of American history: namely, the period of the Founding (chapter 2), the period that culminated in the Civil War (chapter 3), the Progressive period (chapter 4), and, finally, the present era, a time when civil society is widely thought to be in decline (chapter 5).

In his important book on *Leadership*, Burns writes that after the intellectual and political upheavals of the seventeenth and eighteenth century,

the doctrine of authority came into the modern age devitalized, fragmentized, and trivialized; it became a captive of the right, even of fascism. Mussolini substituted authority, order, and justice for liberty, equality, fraternity. . . . [Authority] was not transformed into a doctrine suitable for the new age. No new, democratized, and radicalized doctrine arose to salvage the authentic and the relevant in authority and link these strengths to a doctrine of leadership that recognized the vital need for qualities of integrity, authenticity, initiative, and moral resolve. . . . *The resulting intellectual gap . . . was especially evident in America.*³¹

Like Burns, my goal is to articulate a theory of leadership that is conducive rather than hostile to democratic politics. But I believe, unlike Burns, that the resources for carrying out this project already lie largely *within* American political thought (at least in an inchoate form), particularly when complemented by Tocqueville's ideas. Through a critical appropriation of the American canon that has been inspired by Tocqueville, then, my most ambitious goal in this book is to help pave the way toward a theory of leadership that is appropriate for democracy in America.