

Guest Editorial: Tocqueville would worry about U.S. character

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Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* offers perhaps the best account of what Donald Trump's candidacy for the presidency means for our country.

Although Tocqueville was not clairvoyant, his analysis of American democracy in this classic work is famous for its insights regarding the perennial problems free, democratic societies face.

Demagoguery is one of these problems.

Tocqueville came to America in the early 1830s, partly to learn how France could prevent gross abuse of power by a popularly elected leader.

Tocqueville considered then-President Andrew Jackson an interesting case. Jackson, in his view, was a "man of violent character and middling capacity," despotic by temperament, if not in fact. Nothing in all the course of his career "had ever proved he had the requisite qualities to govern a free people," he wrote.

Respect for morality and equity

Yet Tocqueville did not consider Jackson's ascent to power a mortal threat to our free political institutions. Even American "revolutionaries" must openly express "a certain respect for morality and equity," which keeps them generally law-abiding, he wrote.

Trump clearly resembles Tocqueville's Jackson, although he is not quite the

“revolutionary” Tocqueville feared. Trump’s covert support for popular violence, contempt for constitutional norms and ignorance of public policy all suggest a President Trump would have neither the wisdom nor the moral virtue needed to fulfill the responsibilities of high office.

Indeed, his open disrespect for the basic decencies of political life helps explain why so many Republicans as well as Democrats view him with fear and loathing.

Yet if Tocqueville were alive today, he would be less concerned about Trump than about the nature of his supporters.

Gauge of political health

Tocqueville considered America’s national character the best gauge of its political health. Unlike the American founders, he believed our character rather than our Constitution would be the chief bulwark of our freedom. Tocqueville admired our character for many reasons, but mostly because it was based on the core ethical doctrines of Christianity.

In Tocqueville’s time, freedom-loving Americans subscribed to the then-prevalent Christian ideas that all human beings are worthy, our rights are sacrosanct, we must be charitable and tolerant, and we are morally accountable, both here and in the hereafter.

Politicians deferred to these principles, at least publicly, because their constituents expected them to do so.

Tocqueville did not consider all American Christians sincere believers. Nor did he think they were sufficiently moral to prevent their less ethical brethren from oppressing Africans and Native Americans. Yet he deemed their shared Christian ethos strong enough to maintain our free political institutions.

Unfortunately, America's national character is not quite that strong today.

Denying core ethical tenets

While most Trump supporters consider themselves Christians, their willingness to empower a despicable demagogue suggests they no longer adhere to the core ethical tenets of their faith.

Tocqueville's analysis of American religious life helps us understand why. He believed that strong democratic forces tend to promote popular skepticism. He therefore admired the willingness of American clergy to bolster faith by deferring to majority opinion on secondary, but not primary, matters.

Thus, for example, ministers encouraged their congregants to pursue wealth, as long as they did so honestly. These compromises helped Christianity keep American political life relatively decent for most of our history.

Yet as American public opinion has become more secular and more powerful in recent decades, American Christianity has become less able to thwart the will of the majority in any significant way.

Gutting faith

In fact, majority opinion now shapes the contours of American faith rather than vice versa. In so doing, it has gutted the core of this faith in profound and disturbing ways. Many American Christians no longer believe we must help the weak and the vulnerable, or that we should pursue nonmaterial ends. Without these beliefs, very little prevents them from jumping on Trump's bandwagon.

In the 1830s, Tocqueville considered America free from despotism. But his prognosis for our future was guarded. Different circumstances, he warned,

could lead democracies like ours to breed tyrants. And that brings us to candidate Trump in 2016.

Our urgent, long-term task is to revitalize America's national character by restoring widespread, genuine respect for the ethical principles of all religions that support freedom. While Tocqueville warned meeting this challenge would be difficult, he cautioned us never to lose heart.

For American democracy to flourish, he observed, we must simply be good enough to "wish" it so and wise enough to make it so.

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