Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* is arguably the best book ever written about American politics and society; so good is it that it is frequently claimed as authoritative by left, right, and center in contemporary political debates in the United States. It is a book worthy of careful reading, and not simply because of its enduring relevance and popularity. *Democracy in America* will be the only assigned text in this course, allowing us to consider its rich and complex arguments at a pace that will permit the careful consideration that they deserve.

The edition that will be used will be Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. H. Mansfield and D. Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). It is essential that everyone use this translation.

The literature on Tocqueville and his great work is large; most of the best works are listed in the “Suggested Readings” appended to the editors’ introduction to the edition of *Democracy in America* we will be using. While it will be helpful and interesting for you to explore the secondary literature (and no doubt essential when you begin your research paper), the first object of this seminar is to allow you to engage Tocqueville directly, reading and re-reading the text, perhaps seeing things others have not noticed, or seeing things in an entirely new light. You should not become prisoner to others’ interpretations.

This is a seminar, not a lecture course. The discussion will be driven by the reflections you will have as a result of your immediate encounter with Tocqueville’s teachings. Attendance and participation are expected and will be reflected as part of the final grade (25%). Participation will be calculated on
quality, not simply quantity. It is expected that all the reading for a given date will be done in advance of that class meeting and everyone will be prepared to discuss the assigned materials. There will be short analytical papers (3 pp.) due most weeks that will focus on the readings and which will be calculated as part of the class participation grade. The topics for the weekly short papers are included in the reading assignments below.

There will be two short papers on topics to be assigned (35%) and a major research paper on a topic to be agreed (40%). The first short paper topic will be distributed on January 25th and will be due at the beginning of class on February 8th; the second short paper topic will be given out on February 22nd and will be due at the beginning of class on March 1st. A one-page proposal for your major research paper, accompanied by a preliminary but carefully prepared bibliography, is due on February 15th. The research paper will be due no later than 5:00pm on Friday, April 8th.

It would be helpful before the weekly meetings begin if the entire text can be read once in its entirety so we will be able to begin with something of a broad view of *Democracy in America* and at least a glimmer of Tocqueville’s intentions.

**Reading Assignments**

I. Tocqueville and the Politics of Equality (January 11)


II. The Complexities of the United States (January 18)


   Paper Topic: What is the relationship between geography and politics?

III. Constitutionalism and American Democracy (January 25)

Paper Topic: How does the rule of law contribute to the maintenance of democratic states?

**III. The Moral Mechanics of American Democracy (February 1)**


Paper Topic: How do mediating institutions contribute to freedom?

**IV. The Dangers of Majority Rule and their Amelioration (February 8, 15)**

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Book I, Part II, chapters 7-10, pp. 235-396

Paper Topic A: What is the relationship between individualism and tyranny?

Paper Topic B: How prescient was Tocqueville on Russia and America?

**V. Democracy and the Life of the Mind in America (February 22)**


Paper Topic: Discuss the idea of a democratic imagination.

**VI. Democratic Sentiments and Enlightened Self-Interest (March 1, 15)**


Paper Topic A: What is the relationship between commerce and freedom?
Paper Topic B: Is there an inherent dissatisfaction among democratic peoples?

VII. Democracy and its Influence on Mores (March 22, 29)


Paper Topic A: How does democracy affect relations between the sexes?

Paper Topic B: Is there such a thing as “civil society”?

VIII. The Dangers of Democratic Despotism (April 5, 12)


Paper Topic A: Is administrative oppression ultimately inevitable?

Paper Topic B: Why is the lure of equality stronger than that of liberty?

IX. Reflections: Tocqueville’s Teaching (April 19)

Copies of everyone’s research paper will be made available from Monday, April 11th. You will be expected to be familiar with the research of your colleagues for this last class in order to reflect upon the intellectual journey we have made over the course of the semester. Each member of the seminar will give a 10 minute presentation of their work and take part in the general discussion.