

Chapter 24 Viewpoint Activity

By the 1830s, most white males—not just property owners—could vote in the United States (textbook pages 624–627). Democracy was expanding in Europe too, but the United States was still in the lead. In the first excerpt below, Alexis de Tocqueville, a French writer who visited the United States in 1831–32, marvels at Americans' involvement in politics. In the second, a modern historian examines some of the economic causes of what de Tocqueville observed. ♦ *As you read, keep in mind when each selection was written. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Democracy in America**Alexis de Tocqueville (1831–32)**

It is not impossible to conceive the surprising liberty which the Americans enjoy; some idea may likewise be formed of their extreme equality; but the political activity which pervades the United States must be seen in order to be understood. . . .

The cares of politics engross [occupy] prominent place in the occupations of a citizen in the United States; and almost the only pleasure which an American knows is to take a part in the government and to discuss its measures. This feeling pervades the most trifling habits of life; even the women frequently attend public meetings. . . .

. . . I am not sure that, upon the whole, this is not the greatest advantage of democracy. . . . The humblest individual who co-operates in the government of society acquires a certain degree of self-respect; and as he possesses authority, he can command the services of minds more enlightened than his own. . . . He is perhaps neither happier nor better than those who came before him, but he is better informed and more active.

Sean Wilentz (1990)

. . . Vast social changes were necessary before the deferential politics of the eighteenth century gave way to the democratic politics of the 1820s and after.

Recent historians have described these changes in terms of a market revolution. Between, roughly, 1800 and 1850, an astonishing series of economic innovations hastened the spread of wage labor and commercial agriculture in the northern states and the spread of plantation slavery in the South. New financial institutions, transportation improvements, and the rapid accumulation of American merchant capital shattered old. . . social relations and tied more and more Americans to an impersonal cash market. With these changes, old social resentments mingled with new ones, to propel entire classes of people—urban workingmen, manufacturers, yeomen [farmers], planters, financiers, petty slave holders—into political battles over issues like debtor relief, banking, internal improvements, tariffs, temperance, and (ultimately) slavery.

Sources: (1) *Democracy in America*, by Alexis de Tocqueville; (2) "Property and Power," by Sean Wilentz, in *Voting and the Spirit of American Democracy*, ed. Donald W. Rogers (University of Illinois Press, 1992).

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Questions to Discuss

1. What three qualities of American life does de Tocqueville point out to his European readers? Which of these qualities does he say must be seen to be believed?
2. What are some of the groups of people that Wilentz says became involved in politics in the 1800s because of social and economic changes?
3. **Recognizing Bias** From this excerpt, do you think that, on the whole, de Tocqueville admired American-style democracy? What seems to be his attitude toward the “ordinary” American involved in politics? Do you think he would welcome this much democracy in his home country of France?