

**‘NOT MORE DEMOCRATIC, BUT MORE MORAL’:  
TOCQUEVILLE ON THE SUFFRAGE  
IN AMERICA AND FRANCE**

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In studies of liberalism and its history, scholars have made much of Alexis de Tocqueville’s “strangeness.”<sup>1</sup> Neither a social contract theorist nor an advocate of natural rights, Tocqueville offered original, distinctive defenses of the liberty of the individual, at the same time cautioning that *l’individualisme*, manifesting as social isolation and atomization, would lead swiftly to modern despotism. Yet, while Tocqueville cuts a strange figure against the backdrop of familiar liberal defenses of liberty, we can attribute many of his intellectual idiosyncrasies to the features of his time and place. Written for nineteenth-century France and informed by a generation of thinkers disenchanted by the Revolution and the Terror, his *Democracy in America* (hereafter *DA*) offered a new political science for a new world in which aristocracy had been displaced by democracy. Thus, while acknowledging Tocqueville’s ability to transcend the passions of his age, we can still account for the so-called singularity of his arguments and approaches that, in the end, are not so singular at all. By unearthing Tocqueville’s dialogues with his contemporaries, scholars have identified a sensibility common to nineteenth-century France, rooted in the need to navigate the democratic age in a society shaken by violence.<sup>2</sup>

However, this essay argues that even under such unique circumstances, Tocqueville stood alone on one of the central issues of democracy: suffrage. In presenting this claim, I follow in the vein of

work by Cheryl Welch, who has underscored Tocqueville's "resistance" to the idioms of his time, and by Robert Gannett, who has masterfully traced Tocqueville's evolution on the suffrage question, or the issue of who could vote and on what basis.<sup>3</sup> In particular, this essay positions Tocqueville against the dominant French liberal political discourse of the nineteenth century – *capacité politique* – in order to highlight his distinctiveness on political democracy in his own nation. François Guizot and the liberal Doctrinaires championed the ideal of a capable suffrage restricted to those with proven *capacité*. By contrast, Tocqueville was reluctant to embrace *capacité* as a useful limit on the suffrage, or as a necessary substitute for the language of political rights, and expressed as much in his reflections on the suffrage in America and France. Without advocating for either capacitarian or universal suffrage, Tocqueville took an unusual approach to the issue that, by his own admission, left him without allies during the July Monarchy (1830-1848).

Tocqueville's solitary path on the suffrage had a particular purpose. During the 1840s, he wished to redirect the deputies' attention away from what he had criticized years earlier in *DA* as the myopic search for an individual's *capacité*, instead identifying the deeper problem of "political demoralization." At a critical moment in his career in the Chamber of Deputies, Tocqueville attempted to transcend existing debates on the extent of the franchise and on the *capacité* of those who could possess it, urging his countrymen instead to recognize and remedy the systemic ills of the regime. Eschewing disputes over precisely who could or should participate in France's democracy, he declared that he would not seek a "more democratic" electoral law, but a "more moral" one during much of the 1840s.<sup>4</sup> In mapping Tocqueville's departures from his fellow liberals on the suffrage, this essay brings to light his philosophical disagreements with Guizot and the Doctrinaires alongside his overlooked judgments on the character of democracy in France.

Tocqueville's distinctiveness emerges most clearly in contrast with the discourse of *capacité* articulated by Guizot. I begin there – with Guizot's defenses of individual *capacité*, a standard designed to screen all but "the capable" out of the electorate.

FRANÇOIS GUIZOT AND *CAPACITÉ POLITIQUE*

Tocqueville was not alone in reacting to democracy with “a sort of religious terror.”<sup>5</sup> The Doctrinaires, who constituted the liberal opposition to the Bourbon Restoration (1814-1830) and later held the reins of power during the July Monarchy, looked on France’s recent past and its democratic future with a similar sense of dread. Like Tocqueville, they wished to leave revolutionary violence behind, but recognized that France had undergone a fundamental change with the Revolution of 1789 that could not be undone. François Guizot, the most famous of the Doctrinaires and of France’s liberals for his role as foreign minister in the July Monarchy, described this new France with reference not primarily to its politics, but to its *État social*. Describing the social state as “democratic,” Guizot and the Doctrinaires presented it as the product of gradual historical change and revolutionary rupture that altered social classes, *mœurs*, and economic conditions, introducing an equality of conditions distinct from the traditional hierarchies of the *Ancien Régime*.

For Guizot, as for Tocqueville, who recorded his observations of the *État social* of the Anglo-Americans, the democratic social state was unavoidable and irresistible, though its outcomes were uncertain.<sup>6</sup> Guizot expressed dismay at “the violent and perpetual confusion of places and persons” introduced by democracy’s equality of conditions, in which neither one’s rank nor class are fixed by birth.<sup>7</sup> Liberals, in short, worried about what the democratic social state would bring to France. Faced with such uncertainty, Guizot used his lectures on European history to consider which political institutions were most appropriate to manage and direct this new social state.<sup>8</sup> Against the *ultras*, he and the Doctrinaires condemned aristocracy as an outdated form of government, ill-suited to the equality of conditions that characterized democracy. But they were likewise critical of political democracy, which they defined as the reign of popular sovereignty supported by an extended or a universal suffrage. The Doctrinaire Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard expressed liberals’ shared skepticism of political democracy when he warned that universal suffrage would spell “anarchy, tyranny, misery, bankruptcy, and despotism.”<sup>9</sup> To hand electoral politics over to the unfit many – to the *incapable* – was to risk the very stability of the nation. For though the advance of a democratic social state had superseded aristocratic rule, the Doctrinaires urged that

it ought not lead France headlong toward democracy as a political form.

In order to manage the democratic social state and preserve social stability, Guizot proposed the standard of *capacité politique*. *Capacité*, he maintained, ought to precede and confer the suffrage. The individual had to prove capable in order to obtain the right to vote, a right different in kind from civil rights like freedom of the press and freedom of religion, those which extended universally and without qualification. In fact, voting was better understood as a public office than as a privately-held right. In occupying that office, the elector (and his vote) had to serve the public good rather than further personal interests. For this reason, only “the capable” could rightly be entrusted with the “office” of the franchise.

As he advocated for capacitarian suffrage, Guizot denied the validity of popular sovereignty. He found it “impossible to attribute to one man or to several the possession of an inherent right to sovereignty.” This view simply gave too much credit to humanity; it assumed that the people’s “ideas and inclinations were in all cases correspondent to the dictates of justice and of reason.”<sup>10</sup> The goal of elections, as Guizot held, was not to give voice to each individual or to each group in society, but to “extract whatever of reason, justice, or truth, exists in society, in order to apply it to the practical requirements of government.”<sup>11</sup> A capacitarian suffrage alone could meet the standard for truth-and-reason-extracting politics. It would do so, in part, by filtering out all that was unreasonable, leaving “the incapable” outside of the electorate and therefore outside of political decision-making. This design for the suffrage, moreover, would forestall the worst outcomes of popular government, revolution and despotism among them. It would elevate the rule of the rational capable elite over that of the impassioned incapable masses. For while aiming to promote the sovereignty of reason through a capacitarian franchise, liberals like Guizot also assigned *capacité* a protective function – to protect the government from the worst impulses of a democratic society.

Beginning with the Electoral Law of 1817, liberals established *capacité* as their shared discourse to delimit the suffrage.<sup>12</sup> Following that law, most of the deputies – liberal and otherwise – from the Bourbon Restoration through roughly the first decade of the July Monarchy, agreed that France needed *some* restrictions on the suffrage.

And while they disagreed about how severe those restrictions ought to be (and, moreover, about exactly what it meant to be capable) they conducted national suffrage debates generally in the terms of *capacité* first set forth by liberals.<sup>13</sup> The requirements to vote in national elections shifted at different points during the Restoration and July Monarchy. But those requirements were all tied to the *cens*, that is, to direct taxation on property. Property ownership, liberals believed, served as the *outward* sign of one's *inner* capacity for the franchise. Property showcased the individual's rationality, his independence from the will of another, and his awareness of what Guizot called "the social interest," or the good of society beyond the individual or the family.<sup>14</sup> These restrictions, as liberals intended, yielded a narrow electorate of the capable few – those with the demonstrated reason, independence, and knowledge of the social interest to choose their representatives well. In 1831, during the first year of the July Monarchy, fewer than 200,000 men qualified to vote out of a population of nearly 35 million people.<sup>15</sup> Since liberals held the reins of power, they resisted any attempts to broaden the suffrage. They remained steadfast in their goal to use *capacité* to ensure a limited franchise that would, in a sense, safeguard political institutions from democratic society.<sup>16</sup>

#### TOCQUEVILLE ON UNIVERSAL AND CAPACITARIAN SUFFRAGE

When read in the context of French suffrage debates and the liberal discourse of *capacité*, Tocqueville's comments on popular sovereignty in the 1835 *DA* seem to speak not only of America but also to France. The distinctive, almost divine character of American popular sovereignty gave Tocqueville occasion to reflect on the principle of universal white male suffrage that it supported.<sup>17</sup> In putting pen to paper on the subject, he confessed to having tread on "fiery ground," his words sure to "offend" in different ways the parties dividing France, whose opinions had been heard in the spring 1831 debates on the national and local suffrages.<sup>18</sup> But universal suffrage was not raised as a serious proposal in these debates; the deputies largely agreed that it was premature, and they continued to debate within the terms established by the 1817 law that limited the electorate on the basis of *capacité*.

By entertaining the idea of universal suffrage at all, Tocqueville's was a lone voice, relaying to France surprising lessons learned from America. Universal suffrage there, he concluded, "was far from

producing all the good and all the evil that are expected in Europe, and that in general, its effects were other than those supposed.”<sup>19</sup> As liberals like Guizot and Royer-Collard warned of the disastrous, violent consequences that would befall France under universal suffrage, Tocqueville experienced it in America as a pacifying force. Because of universal suffrage, the majority makes itself known to all at the ballot box. No association or party can therefore credibly claim to be underrepresented in the government and wage war on that basis. The American experiment with universal suffrage led Tocqueville to a unique conclusion about the ability to manage democratic *society* by means of democratic *politics* that placed him at odds with his liberal contemporaries, who praised the protective, pacifying function of capacitarian suffrage. Under the right conditions and “in the immense complication of human laws,” Tocqueville acknowledged that “extreme democracy” in electoral politics could prevent the greater dangers posed by democracy as a social form.<sup>20</sup>

Although he observed the benefits of extreme democracy in the United States, Tocqueville’s portrayal of universal suffrage ultimately struck a balance between its “good and evil” consequences. Though universal suffrage forestalled the *worst* outcomes in America by discouraging factional violence, Tocqueville challenged the view that it would yield the *best* in a wise representative government, criticizing the “complete illusion” that “a people hardly ever fails to point out those who are most capable of holding power.”<sup>21</sup> Because of the democratic tendency to scorn hierarchy in favor of equality, Tocqueville advised against placing any confidence in the supposed wisdom of the multitude to choose wise representatives. Instead, he put the unquenchable democratic passion for equality front and center. Even if democratic citizens wish to elect the best among them, their interest in doing so is easily overtaken by their passion for equality.<sup>22</sup> In America, where he saw this passion on display, Tocqueville commented on the “common merit” of the governed, but found few outstanding men in public office.<sup>23</sup>

In the same breath and using the same line of thought, he argued against the justifications for a capacitarian suffrage. Like the Doctrinaires, Tocqueville extolled the virtues of a representative assembly in which “the most enlightened and most moral classes of society lead.”<sup>24</sup> And universal suffrage, he concluded, could not ensure the rule of the most enlightened or moral. Yet neither could the

capacitarian alternative, and Tocqueville likewise dismissed the claim that an electorate of the capable would yield the enlightened government that an electorate of (nearly) all could not. As he framed it, in fact, the *capacité* or *incapacité* of the electorate was not the central issue. For “it is not always the *capacité* to choose men of merit that democracy lacks,” he explained, “but the *desire* and the *tasté*” for doing so.<sup>25</sup> Compelled by the taste for equality joined to the sentiment of envy, democratic citizens resist the rule of any superior of merit, regardless of whether they are *capable* of recognizing that merit in the first place.

In the pages of *DA*, Tocqueville thus defined and criticized *capacité* as an epistemic quality of the individual, one often superseded by those “natural instincts” of democratic society that “lead the people to keep distinguished men away from power.”<sup>26</sup> To design the suffrage around *capacité* alone was to overlook the influence of democratic desires, instincts, and tastes on a people’s decision-making. In trying to understand American democracy in all of its complexity, Tocqueville reached a general conclusion on the suffrage that, as he anticipated, left him without allies in France. Neither a universal nor a capacitarian suffrage can guarantee wise government, he concluded. But the former, despite the warnings of his liberal contemporaries, does not always portend instability and violence.

Tocqueville had other reasons for remaining skeptical of a capacitarian suffrage. From his study of the variety of state suffrages in the United States, he predicted that any restricted franchise, whether restricted by *capacité* or some other standard, could not remain that way for long. Just as nations tried in vain to hold back the swell of a democratic social state, they could not forever contain political democracy by regulating the size of the electorate through law. Calling this phenomenon “one of most invariable rules” of societies, a rare declaration for a thinker attentive to the particulars of places and peoples, Tocqueville foresaw its progress: “as the limit of electoral rights is pushed back, the need grows to push it further; after each new concession, the forces of democracy increase and its demands grow with its new power.”<sup>27</sup>

Tocqueville’s objections to *capacité* went beyond his observations of the United States. In a lengthy marginal note in the 1835 *DA*, he introduced his opinions of popular sovereignty and universal suffrage

by accepting the premises articulated by Guizot in his lectures on European history at the Sorbonne in 1828, which Tocqueville had attended and admired before embarking for America.<sup>28</sup> “I cannot acknowledge the absolute right of each man to take an active part in the affairs of his country,” Tocqueville wrote, channeling Guizot against popular sovereignty, “and I am astonished that this doctrine, so contradictory to the ordinary course of human affairs, could be proposed.”<sup>29</sup> He likewise restated the capacitarian case for denying the suffrage to some. If an individual cannot exercise right judgment over his own affairs, then why should he be trusted to judge and influence the affairs of all?

Yet the conversational style of Tocqueville’s marginalia exposes the mind of a student unwilling to accept his teacher’s lessons outright. In the same note, we find his reluctance to endorse *capacité* as a limiting condition on the individual’s right to vote. While acknowledging that political participation was a matter of “fact, not of right” – Guizot’s distinction that put the fact of the sovereignty of reason before any supposed rights of the individual – Tocqueville distanced himself from the logic of *capacité* lines later. That logic, he believed, raised questions that could not be resolved. If *capacité* alone confers the right to participate in politics, then how can the incapable ever hope to become capable? How can one who has been denied the right to take part in government develop the ability to do so? Can existing defenses of *capacité* offer any direction by which to ascend out of *incapacité*? Furthermore, how can a government claim to be “of the people” if one part of the people is left outside of it?

These questions still-lingering, Tocqueville settled on a final philosophical objection to *capacité*. To acknowledge the incapacity of *some individuals* within a society was to grant the possibility that *whole societies* remain incapable and therefore unfit to choose their governments at all. Tocqueville framed the right “to choose a government” and the right “to take part in a government” as two “analogous products of human judgment.” It was impossible, he thought, to uphold one right while denying the existence of the other. The standard of *capacité*, a test of the *individual’s* fitness to participate in politics, had the potential to undermine foundational, *national* claims to self-determination.<sup>30</sup> With that in mind, he warned that “you are moving even further from the maxim that all people have the right to



choose their government” – in his view (and despite his imperialist leanings), wrongly so.<sup>31</sup>

‘POLITICAL DEMORALIZATION’ AND THE JULY MONARCHY

Tocqueville’s reticence to embrace *capacité* resurfaced in his comments on the state of French politics during the July Monarchy. As a deputy elected in 1839, he participated in debates regarding the size of the national electorate and the qualifications of those eligible for election as representatives to the Chamber. On the extent of the suffrage, his stance toward *capacité politique* reflected ambivalence akin to that expressed in *DA*. And as we will learn, he eventually looked beyond debates over the individual’s *capacité* in calling for the reform of France’s electoral law.

Like the Doctrinaires, Tocqueville wished to cultivate a citizenry that could help to manage and mitigate the most devastating outcomes of a democratic society. His new political science, after all, aimed to “make democracy useful to men” and to do so by instructing the people in its virtues and vices.<sup>32</sup> In an 1836 letter to Eugène Stoffels, Tocqueville even used the standard of a capable citizenry explicitly to detail his ideal state of affairs for France. This ideal included his “wish that citizens were introduced into public life to the extent that they are believed capable of being useful in it.”<sup>33</sup> At first glance, this statement seems only to rephrase the prevailing liberal view on individual rights and social utility; as Guizot and others argued, the individual’s political participation was justifiable insofar as it contributed to the “social interest,” with *capacité* as proof of the usefulness of a single individual’s vote. But Tocqueville’s statement was not a simple defense of *capacité* to regulate the suffrage. In fact, he articulated his “wish” for a capable citizenry *against* an electoral status quo defined by *capacité*. “I wish that citizens were introduced into public life to the extent that they are believed capable of being useful in it,” he continued, “*instead of seeking to keep them away from public life at all costs.*” To this, he added the prospect that “the majority of the nation itself can be involved with its own affairs, that political life can be spread almost everywhere,” and directly against the objectives of the liberals in power, that “the direct or indirect exercise of political rights can be quite extensive.”<sup>34</sup>

While Tocqueville therefore saw the value in a citizenry capable of directing democracy, he had little regard for *capacité politique* as Guizot and the liberals of the July regime had used it – as an exclusive standard

for the suffrage and a barrier to public life. Still, characteristic of his ambivalence on the issue, Tocqueville did not oppose a restricted franchise *per se*. For while he did not align himself with liberals, he also did not join figures like Alexandre-Auguste Ledru-Rollin on the radical left, who had begun to agitate for universal suffrage in the 1840s.<sup>35</sup> Nor did he vote in favor of modifying the *cens* to expand the franchise in 1842.

Instead, his evaluations of *capacité* and the requirements for suffrage during this period were interwoven with his disapproval of the regime under which he served but in which he found little to admire. Having disparaged the government as a “bourgeois pot of stew,” Tocqueville found it responsible for national malaise that found no remedy in the merchant-monarch Louis-Philippe.<sup>36</sup> As witnesses to the homogeneity of their “shameless, materialistic,” middle-class government, “the people fall more and more into indifference; it seems as if the rights which have cost them a dear price have ceased to be precious to them.”<sup>37</sup> Because the personal interests of the ministers and deputies guided national politics, the entire nation had come to mirror the materialism displayed by its leadership.

Beneath the regime’s many vices, Tocqueville found the “great evil” of political corruption.<sup>38</sup> In his eyes, the narrowness of France’s middle-class government – the result of the *cens* – was a symptom of the more serious illness of “political demoralization,”<sup>39</sup> a term meant to target the conjunction of the government’s middle-class materialism with systemic corruption under the July Monarchy, which had roughly the same number of patronage positions for distribution (~200,000) as France had national voters.<sup>40</sup> The ministers had the power to distribute positions among the deputies, who in turn distributed their share to electors, who were also supporters and friends. Observing this practice of patronage-run-rampant, Tocqueville lamented that the electors, once again following their leaders in the ministry and Chamber, confused “the particular interest for the general interest,” since they approached politics as a means to win bureaucratic offices.<sup>41</sup> Faced with the reality of a spoils system that began with the ministry and reached the *mœurs* of the French public, Tocqueville did not direct his efforts to resolving the suffrage question – or the qualifications determining *who* could vote – during most of the 1840s. Nor did he devote his energies to attacking *capacité* as an electoral principle head-on, occupied as he was by a “demoralization” with sources deeper than

the *cens*. He intended, rather, to uproot a system that rewarded personal loyalty with administrative offices.

To do so, he targeted France's electoral system, in particular the system of direct elections that remained in place during the July regime, whereby electors voted directly for candidates. Guizot himself defended direct elections against the *ultras*, praising them as an instrument vital to representative government, since they placed electors in direct proximity to their representatives.<sup>42</sup> What Guizot extolled as the system's virtue, Tocqueville targeted as one source of its vices.<sup>43</sup> He decried the elections as so parochial as to verge on personal, such that "all local interests become, in the minds of citizens, in the minds even of the deputies, stronger than the general interest." The directness of elections reinforced the commercialized, self-interested tendencies of the nation, as the electors chose their deputies for promises of private gain rather than any perceived political good. Moreover, *directness* incentivized *patronage*. With the "realm divided into an infinite multitude of small pieces," each of which held direct elections for a deputy, citizens had little regard for issues of national or truly political importance, choosing to spend their days huddled around their deputy to "annoy him unceasingly" for favors and offices.<sup>44</sup> The electoral system reinforced the cycle of corruption: motivated to gain the votes of his neighbors, the deputy carried their narrow interests into the Chamber, "demoralizing" politics from the electorate to the legislature and back again. The true problem of French politics during this period, as Tocqueville diagnosed it, had little to do with the size of the electorate, with the *capacité* of those who voted, or even most directly with the narrow, nepotistic government that resulted. Instead, that problem was with the *incentives* created by France's parliamentary and electoral systems. As of 1842, Tocqueville was quite explicit about the dangers stemming from the law: "I do not think that the electoral law should be attacked as an instrument of monopoly" – that is, as a law (and a resulting electorate) too restrictive by design. "It is as an instrument of political demoralization that I attack it."<sup>45</sup>

Because of confusion between issues local and national, personal and political, Tocqueville also dismissed complaints about the *incapacité* of individual electors. "We still complain that it happens too often that the elector, in his choice of deputy, has paid more attention to the services rendered to him than to the political acts of the deputy he appoints," Tocqueville reiterated. But to resent the incapacity of the

individual elector for his choice of deputy was to miss the glaring issue. “*How do you expect it to be otherwise?*” Tocqueville asked, pointing to the failures of a system that incentivized corruption as it pit the elector’s strong personal interests against an enfeebled common good.<sup>46</sup> To turn one’s attention solely to suffrage reform – to modifying the *cens* based on the individual’s perceived capacity or incapacity – was to underestimate the extent of France’s demoralization, the cure for which could not be found in adjustments to the *cens*. And in searching for that cure, Tocqueville’s conclusion for his nation was altogether distinct from the one he had found in America. “I do not want a more democratic electoral law,” he specified, “but a more moral one...an electoral system that renders corruption by patronage more difficult.”<sup>47</sup> A capacitarian suffrage was not the answer to France’s ills. Moreover, the “extreme democracy” of universal suffrage that served America’s democratic social state would not bring the same benefits to France under Louis-Phillippe. In putting morality before democracy, Tocqueville voted against measures to expand the national electorate in 1842, concluding that political democracy had, for now, reached the appropriate pitch: “at present, in matters of electoral law, we have given enough but not too much to democracy.”<sup>48</sup>

Tocqueville thus raised and confronted issues that he believed to be much larger than *capacité* versus universal suffrage during most of the July Monarchy. To resolve these issues, as I have argued, he attempted to alter the existing terms of debate, and to target the mode of elections *over* the suffrage question that continued to captivate Guizot and the liberals who advocated for a limited suffrage of the capable. He aimed to transcend persistent disagreements over a capacitarian versus a universal suffrage for France, at least for most of the 1840s. By targeting the electoral law, Tocqueville hoped to identify the deep-rooted pathologies of parliamentary and electoral practice so as to correct for the defects of the liberal regime.

At the same time, he never lost sight of the ideal, energetic France he described to Stöffels in 1836, in which “most” participated either directly or indirectly in national politics. Nor did he abandon the idea that a nation and a people ought not only endeavor to tame democracy, but to make it useful. At moments during his American travels, Tocqueville witnessed the actions of a people energetic and capable, that is, able to adapt to the democratic social state without succumbing either to social violence or political despotism. But America’s specific

lessons – including the peace gained from its scheme of universal suffrage – did not apply to the particulars of the “demoralized” July Monarchy. In seeking national morality over political democracy for France in the early 1840s, he sought to steer his nation through its democratic revolution, in the way best suited to its particular course.

CONCLUSION: TOCQUEVILLE IN THE LANDSCAPE OF FRENCH LIBERALISM

By 1847, Tocqueville again attempted to reform the electoral law to remedy political demoralization, calling for a more expansive suffrage to rouse the French from their collective slumber and to avoid revolution in so doing.<sup>49</sup> His goal then, as it was earlier in the decade, was not to join the liberals in power to prop up their defenses of *capacité*, but to use the instrument of the electoral law and the scheme of the suffrage to address what he identified as pressing national needs. In putting morality first – before either “extreme democracy” as he observed it in America, or a capable suffrage as devised by the Doctrinaires in France – Tocqueville took a solitary stance on the suffrage that was not dogmatic but practical. And as Robert Gannett has argued, it was suited to the unique circumstances of French society.<sup>50</sup> By analyzing Tocqueville’s philosophical and practical objections to *capacité*, this essay has shown moments that explain when and why Tocqueville evaded or attempted to alter the debates of his time over the electoral law.

Tocqueville did, of course, adapt lessons learned from Guizot and from the Doctrinaires. Like them, he wished to direct the democratic social state toward freedom rather than despotism and saw the potential for the right kind of citizenry to aid in that goal. But he was not simply a product of the Doctrinaires’ lessons. Tocqueville remained unwilling to endorse their electoral strategies (their common language of *capacité* and the instrument of direct elections) for taming democracy’s advance. Perhaps this was because he had seen firsthand that the alternative of universal suffrage could bring peace to the right place at the right time, such that democracy as a political form would not always and everywhere spell violence and instability. Or perhaps, as this essay has uncovered, it was because he harbored philosophical reservations against the ideal of *capacité*, finding its logic weak and its implications for self-government dangerous. In charting a distinct path on the suffrage, both as a traveler in America and in his political career as a deputy, Tocqueville found himself alone in his quest to preserve

the political morality of the entire nation rather than a franchise of the capable few.

## NOTES

- [1] Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Cornell University Press, 1987).
- [2] François Furet, “The Intellectual Origins of Tocqueville’s Thought,” *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, vol. VII (1985): 117–29. On Tocqueville as “insider and outsider,” see Alan Kahan, *Alexis de Tocqueville* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013). Boesche introduced the point about Tocqueville’s strangeness to highlight his context. See Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville*. On Tocqueville and the Doctrinaires, see Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003). For an excellent recent study of Tocqueville and the generation of 1820, see Aurelian Craiutu, “Tocqueville’s Dialogues,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, ed. Richard Boyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming).
- [3] Cheryl B. Welch, “Tocqueville’s Resistance to the Social,” *History of European Ideas* 30, no. 1 (2004): 83–107; Robert T. Gannett, “Tocqueville and the Politics of Suffrage,” *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, vol. XXVII, no. 2 (2006): 209–25.
- [4] Alexis de Tocqueville, “Notes Pour Un Discours,” in *Œuvres Complètes* [hereafter, OC], ed. André Jardin, vol. III, tome 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 208–212 at 209.
- [5] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* [hereafter, *DA*], ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schliefer, vol. I (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012), 14.
- [6] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 74–91.
- [7] François Guizot, *Memoirs to Illustrate the History of My Time*, trans. J.W. Cole, vol. III (London: Richard Bentley, 1860), 12.
- [8] On the background to these lectures, see Aurelian Craiutu, “Introduction,” in *The History of the Origins of Representative Government in Europe* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002).
- [9] Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, *Opinion de M. Royer-Collard sur l’hérédité de la Pairie*, 4 October 1831.
- [10] François Guizot, *The History of the Origins of Representative Government in Europe* [hereafter *HORG*], trans. Andrew R. Scoble, introduction by Aurelian Craiutu (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), 51.
- [11] Guizot, *HORG*, 55.
- [12] On *capacité* as liberals’ shared language, see Alan Kahan, *Liberalism in Nineteenth Century Europe: The Political Culture of Limited Suffrage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). See also Gianna Englert, *Democracy Tamed*:

- French Liberalism and The Politics of Suffrage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
- [13] These debates are discussed in Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le sacre du citoyen : histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris: Folio, 2001); and Kahan, *Liberalism in Nineteenth Century Europe*.
- [14] Guizot, *HORG*, 334–35.
- [15] Rosanvallon, *Le sacre du citoyen*, 607.
- [16] The intersections between a capacitarian suffrage and liberals' defenses of the rule of the middle class are beyond the scope of this short essay. On this topic, see Vincent Starzinger, *The Politics of the Center* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991) and Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).
- [17] "The people rule the American political world as God rules the universe." Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 97
- [18] Kahan, *Liberalism in Nineteenth Century Europe*, 35–45.
- [19] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 313 and 314.
- [20] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 311.
- [21] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 314.
- [22] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 314, 317.
- [23] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 315.
- [24] Tocqueville to Louis Kergorlay, 29 June 1831, *OC*, XIII. 1, 234.
- [25] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 316. Emphasis mine.
- [26] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 316.
- [27] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 95
- [28] On Guizot as Tocqueville's "teacher and guide," see André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 81.
- [29] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 93, note e.
- [30] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 94, note e.
- [31] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 94, note e. For a sample of work on Tocqueville's imperialism, see Melvin Richter, "Tocqueville on Algeria," *The Review of Politics* 25, no. 3 (1963): 362–98; Jennifer Pitts, "Empire and Democracy: Tocqueville and the Algeria Question," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 8, no. 3 (2000): 295–318.
- [32] Tocqueville, *DA*, I: 19.
- [33] Tocqueville to Eugène Stöffels, October 5, 1836 in *The Tocqueville Reader*, ed. Olivier Zunz and Alan Kahan (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002), 156-8 at 157.
- [34] Tocqueville to Stöffels, 157.
- [35] For Tocqueville against the radical left, see Gianna Englert, "Tocqueville's Politics of Grandeur," *Political Theory*, OnlineFirst September 2021.
- [36] Tocqueville to Beaumont, 9 August 1840, in *Tocqueville: Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Boesche, trans. Boesche and James Toupin (Berkeley: UCLA Press, 195) 142-3 at 143.
- [37] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848 and Its Aftermath*, ed. Olivier Zunz, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 8; Tocqueville, "Lettres sur la situation intérieure de la France," in *OC*, III. 2, 95.

- [38] Tocqueville, “Notes de Tocqueville” in *OC*, III. 2, 719-28 at 727. For an excellent, thorough study of Tocqueville on corruption, see William Selinger, “Le grand mal de l’époque: Tocqueville on French Political Corruption,” *History of European Ideas* 42, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 73–94.
- [39] Tocqueville, “Discussion de l’adresse,” in *OC* III. 2, 197-212 at 206.
- [40] Gannett, *Tocqueville and The Politics of Suffrage*, 217.
- [41] Tocqueville, “Discussion de l’adresse,” 206.
- [42] Guizot, “Élections,” in *Discours académiques* (Paris: Didier, 1862).
- [43] Tocqueville wrote approvingly of indirect elections to the US Senate. See *DA*, I: 320-1.
- [44] Tocqueville, “Discussion de l’adresse,” 205-6.
- [45] Tocqueville, “Discussion de l’adresse,” 205.
- [46] Tocqueville, “Discussion de l’adresse,” 206. Emphasis mine.
- [47] Tocqueville, “Notes Pour Un Discours,” 209.
- [48] Tocqueville, “Discussion de l’adresse,” 205.
- [49] See Englert, “Tocqueville’s Politics of Grandeur.”
- [50] On Tocqueville’s “calibrating” strategy for the suffrage, see Gannett, *Tocqueville and the Politics of Suffrage*, 221-2.

#### ABSTRACT

Tocqueville has been portrayed as a “strange liberal” for his singular defenses of individual liberty. This essay highlights an overlooked instance of Tocqueville’s distinctiveness by analyzing his thoughts on suffrage, which placed him at odds with his French liberal contemporaries. It uncovers Tocqueville’s attitude toward universal suffrage in America and his critiques of a capacitarian suffrage in France. I argue that Tocqueville articulated his hope not for a “more democratic, but for a more moral” electoral law during most of the July Monarchy, aiming to transcend existing debates over the extent of the electorate or the *capacité politique* of the individual elector. By arguing for Tocqueville’s singularity on the suffrage, this essay brings to light both his departures from the thought of the liberal Doctrinaires and his reflections on the particular character of democracy in France.