

Tocquevillean Reflective Patriotism, Civics, and Perpetuating the American Republic

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One cause of the decline in civic education in the past century, in any mode other than democracy education for civic engagement, is skepticism in academia toward America and any teaching about patriotism or love of country. As Ronald Daniels, president of Johns Hopkins University, recounts in *What Universities Owe Democracy*, the new scientific disciplines in the late nineteenth century, including new social sciences, induced skepticism about the liberal arts approach to civics. The research university, with its new political science, sought ever-new knowledge as defined by universal rationality and methods. The particularism of citizenship education, and American patriotism even more so, was insufficiently rational or academic.¹ The social scientific distinction between facts and values, established by Max Weber, further demoted liberal arts study of politics, law, and economics. In parallel, while skeptical rationalism and positivist social science demoted any patriotic dimension to American civic education from one side, Kantian universal moral idealism critiqued it from the opposite pole. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum as recently as 2013 propounded this view, promoting a cosmopolitan loyalty toward all humanity, versus patriotism with its xenophobia

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and provincialism, said to induce militarism and other injustices. In later work she develops a middle ground balancing love of country with critical distance to avoid jingoism, and she cites George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. as exemplars. Schoolchildren need patriotism, but with love toward one's country corrected by universal moral principles valid for all humans and urging respect for all.² She does not mention Alexis de Tocqueville's praise of an American reflective patriotism; nor does she indicate whether adults should be patriotic even in her critical sense. Steven Smith's *Reclaiming Patriotism* (2021) thus is bold in recommending an enlightened patriotism as loyalty to country, arguing its necessity for all citizens of a constitutional democracy, especially America, given its founding on universal principles of right.³ A few scholars in higher education support such a rational patriotism, and in K–12 public schools there is a slightly broader presence of it, whereas the predominant view in university schools of education and teachers' colleges, and thus most K–12 public schools, runs from skepticism to aggressive cynicism about America and patriotism.⁴

The dangerously weak, dysfunctional condition of American civic culture and civics today recommends skepticism toward this academic-educational skepticism. We have ample evidence that elite skepticism has been tested by reality and failed, just as Aristotle and Montesquieu predicted. There is only so long a free people can deficit-spend the civic culture that sustains free discourse, questioning, and dissent toward dominant moral and constitutional principles; the cost is eventually unavoidable. American educators must strike a better balance between replenishing our distinctive civic culture with space for discourse and critique. For both intellectual and civic reasons we should recover the rational, discursive patriotism Tocqueville articulated. His complex, rich argument that Americans have a unique "reflective patriotism," sustaining this new democratic republic, deserves focal consideration. This view is plausible not only for scholars today but for wider audiences, evident in its featured use in a 2021 national-consensus study of K–12 civics, *Educating for American Democracy*.

Tocqueville's Praise of America's Reflective Patriotism

A paradox of elite American intellectual culture today is that amid great concern over angry polarization and the decline of civil disagreement in political discourse, we largely neglect a once-strong foundation for civic unity that supported a robust middle space for constructive debate and the forging of compromises. This foundation comprises the civic virtues, crucial among them a rational, reflective patriotism befitting a free, argumentative people in a democratic republic.

America's continuing decline in civic knowledge, especially among youth, as measured by school test scores and polls, also tracks a decline in awareness and formation of civic virtues, including a considered patriotism. Gallup polling shows continued decline in the top tier of patriotism, below the level in 2000 before the 9/11 terrorist attacks (after which patriotism spiked); now only 41 percent of adults are "extremely proud" to be American and 26 percent "very proud"—thus 67% are strongly patriotic.⁵ More troubling, in the 18–34 age group, the majority is *not* strongly patriotic; only 21 percent are extremely proud and 24 percent very proud to be American. One cause is that higher education, including political science, no longer encourages civic spirit. The positivist social science view and also the cosmopolitan and critical theory humanities view consider it value-laden or jingoist and thus unacademic. This leaves patriotism at best a private choice for students and one belonging in K–12 schooling, not academia. Gallup's findings suggest this; in the 18–34 cohort, college graduates rank lowest in being "very proud" to be American, at only 36 percent. Those with only some college or with a high school degree or less were more patriotic at 43 percent and 44 percent respectively.

This academic neglect of patriotism also explains the strong correlation between the declining status of civics in K–12 schools and the decline of required civics in higher education witnessed in the last seventy-five years. The national bipartisan study of K–12 civics and history released in 2021, *Educating for American Democracy*, included five professors among its seven coauthors, coming mostly from political science and history. The report called

on higher education to “rebuild [its] own curricular offerings,” assessing whether as a nation we “adequately require rigorous American history and civic education—to include knowledge, skills, and virtues—of all their graduates.”⁶ The report called both schools and colleges to offer, along with civic knowledge, learning in “civic virtues,” featuring three such virtues: civil disagreement, civic friendship, and reflective patriotism.⁷ Academic leaders, including Derek Bok, former Harvard president, and Daniels of Johns Hopkins, confirmed this view independently: Colleges are failing a basic academic mission by neglecting civics, particularly the civic virtues.⁸ A crucial reason to recover reflective patriotism is the motivation for learning, the larger meaning of any study. From Bok to Stanford educational psychologist William Damon, in turn citing Victor Frankl, prominent voices have noted this failing in K–16 teaching.⁹

To define a considered, discursive patriotism, the *Educating for American Democracy* report turned to Tocqueville’s 1830s insight on a new kind of patriotism in the New World. *Democracy in America* argues that ours is a “reflective patriotism,” blending gratitude for our country and its principles with insistence on argument and questioning aimed toward fellow citizens and government.¹⁰ A further reason to consult Tocqueville on patriotism and civics is the striking parallels between his analysis in 1835 and 1840, in both volumes of *Democracy*, and Lincoln’s 1838 Lyceum Address, “On the Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions.”¹¹ Lincoln sees decline in civics and a constitutionally informed patriotism as causing lawlessness. He warns that lack of an informed patriotism points to national “suicide,” and he does so two decades before our Civil War. *Democracy*, with its more comprehensive aims, also addresses the challenges to sustaining a rational patriotism and healthy civic culture in a modern era of rising technology, secularism, and individualism.

The Six Elements of America’s Complex, Reflective Patriotism

Tocqueville defines our “reflective” or considered patriotism as a love of country distinct from Old World sentiment about blood and

soil. Americans are proud of America and thin-skinned about criticisms by foreigners; but the pride is only partly rooted in sentiment and fellow-feeling. The pragmatic American spirit moves from knowledge of founding ideals based on individual rights to realizing one's self-interest is secured only by undertaking civic duties and self-government. Citizens calculate that civic participation and a resulting healthy political order benefit one's family and friends. Yet while a rational patriotism is noted in volume 1 of *Democracy*, volume 2 deems our utilitarianism regarding civic participation and civic duties an "enlightened self-interest." In that fuller discussion, Americans claim only rational, self-interested motives; but in fact, they undertake "disinterested and unreflective" acts of altruism (2.2.8, 502). This picture sees Americans blending rational argument and self-interest with love of country and civic duty. A crucial foundation for both love of country and civic altruism, and thus patriotism and civic health, is America's original "point of departure"—our first founding, in the Puritan blend of religion and commitment to liberty. Yet Tocqueville also discerns in the 1830s that the efficacy of this first founding is fading, and in volume 2 he proposes remedies for supporting it.

Thus across several discussions in both volumes of *Democracy*, Tocqueville can be read as identifying six elements of this American patriotism, blending Christian and/or classical elements with modern, Enlightenment ones.¹² The six elements, and their textual locus, follow:

1. America's Christian point of departure, balancing "the spirit of religion" (including the Christian ethic of love thy neighbor) and "the spirit of liberty" (self-rule, citizenship). This balance is a foundational, historically unique achievement drawing on Christian as well as classical and medieval philosophical principles. (1.1.2)
2. A rational public spirit arising from experience of efficacy in local self-government. This blends love of country with a demand or expectation that America—all governments and communities, local to state to federal—should benefit oneself and one's family. (1.2.6, also 1.1.5)

3. The political institution of religion from our first founding continuing into our second founding as the American republic (1776 onward). This politico-religious approach teaches mores of political equality, liberty, and self-restraint guided by metaphysical and fixed principles of right, patriotic concern for the common good, shared beliefs, and hope for the future. (1.2.9)
4. American exceptionalism manifest in the testy pride shown toward any criticism of America. This understanding complements professions of belief that Americans form the only enlightened *and* religious *and* free people in history, succeeding where other peoples failed. (1.2.10, also 1.1.2)
5. Interest well understood, or enlightened self-interest. This encapsulates the American philosophy that one undertake duties or service not from altruism but from reasonable expectation that one's family and friends will benefit thereby; yet Tocqueville sees deep American altruism nonetheless, and thus the limits to this rationalist self-analysis, which further persuades him of the need to reinforce the religious grounds of altruism and American civic culture generally. (2.2.8)
6. Schooling, literature, and civic culture—from home schooling to mostly church-run local common schools for all students, to elite schooling in classic works (Greek, Latin), to a culture that values poetry. These dimensions of American civic culture support the metaphysical/altruistic foundation of reflective patriotism. (1.2.9; 2.2.9, 15, and 17)

Tracing Tocqueville's analysis of this theme throughout *Democracy* confirms James Ceaser's view that his complex, Montesquieuan political science praises both the original seventeenth-century founding in Christian belief and political liberty and the eighteenth-century political founding shaped by Enlightenment ideas of law and politics.¹³ Given our deepening crisis of American civic knowledge and patriotic attachment, Ceaser was prescient in arguing to restore attention to civic passions, customs, and mores per the more complex political

science of Montesquieu and Tocqueville. These moderate modern philosophers argue that emphasizing only abstract doctrines of justice—as in our tendency to consider only the opening claims of the Declaration of Independence—fails to provide strong roots for civic attachment. A moderate political science further argues that rational doctrines alone do not support a more moderate, less extreme politics because they do not promote a robust civics, reflective patriotism, and healthy civic culture.

Both Tocqueville and Lincoln insist a rational patriotism undergirds reasonable, peaceful disagreement among citizens about their strongly held views, rising above denunciations of opposing views and fellow citizens—a passion-drenched civic culture descending to anger and violence. In today's terms, Tocqueville and Lincoln (Montesquieu as well) were alert to the negative polarization in a democratic republic. This includes opposing factions offering not an American civics but narrower instruction in their favored views. This approach becomes, in effect, an angry echo of the Old World patriotism of sentiment without rational grounding, susceptible to fueling propaganda and partisanship under the guise of civics. For these great teachers of America, in contrast, a rational patriotism supports civic virtues of civil disagreement and civic friendship across philosophical and political differences. Smith's *Reclaiming Patriotism* draws on Tocqueville and Lincoln, and American founders, to recover an "enlightened patriotism" of head and heart, balancing rational understanding of our principles with loyalty and affection for the free political order allowing all to participate in the arguments of self-government, as well as a pluralism requiring further civic virtues of civility and moderation.¹⁴

Tocqueville's subchapter "On Public Spirit" is his focal account of patriotism; in a chapter on "Real Advantages" America derives from democratic self-government (1.2.6, 220–35). The unique patriotism of the democratic republic is a real advantage. Others include our idea of rights, of respect for the rule of law, and our characteristic busyness devoted to private and public pursuits. Public spirit he defines as "love of native country." The Old World

version is “instinctive,” with “respect for ancestors” and “memory of the past,” “bind[ing] to the heart” one’s blood and soil (225). It “is a sort of religion itself; it does not reason, it believes, it feels, it acts.” This is patriotism as “sentiment.” Yet in the New World and America,

[t]here is another more rational than that one; less generous, less ardent perhaps, but more fruitful and more lasting; this one is born of enlightenment; it develops with the aid of laws, it grows with the exercise of rights, and in the end it intermingles in a way with personal interest. A man understands the influence that the well-being of the country has on his own; he knows that the law permits him to contribute to producing this well-being, and he interests himself in the prosperity of his country at first as a thing that is useful to him, and afterwards as his own work. (225)

Monarchy’s “instinctive patriotism” is not “the reflective patriotism of the republic” (226).¹⁵

A crucial element of a rational public spirit, the second of the six elements of patriotism Tocqueville delineates, is its foundation in a broad citizenry primed for participation: “[T]he most powerful means, and perhaps the only one that remains to us of interesting men in the fate of their native country is to make them participate in its government. In our day, the spirit of the city seems to me inseparable from the exercise of political rights” (226). Every American is “interested in the affairs of his township, of his district, and of the state as a whole as in his own” because “each, in his sphere, takes an active part in the government of society.” The citizen grasps “the influence that general prosperity exerts on his happiness.” He thus “sees in the public fortune his own, and he works for the good of the state not only out of duty or out of pride, but I would almost dare say out of cupidity” (226). Thus when America is criticized, a citizen is “interested in defending” it, for “not only is his country then attacked, he himself is” such that “national pride” takes on qualities of mere “individual vanity”

(226–27). This is the fourth element of a reflective patriotism, American exceptionalism. This “irritable patriotism” is “annoying” and petty compared with the lofty, tranquil sentiments of the old patriotism, but it greatly sustains political attachment between individuals and democratic republics (1.2.6, 227).

Tocqueville’s focal analysis sees in America’s considered patriotism traces of traditional emotions and civic virtues; “duty” and national “pride” remain. Yet a new spirit of calculation and interest is strong. The tensions in the account and the comment in volume 2 debunking the American insistence about being civic-minded only to serve interest require analysis of Tocqueville’s commentary throughout volume 1 on this new kind of patriotism. He instructs about the new democratic republicanism, the patriotism it produces, and its necessity for perpetuating America. Indeed, the theme is so important that he raises it in opening the work.

Democracy first mentions love of country in the introduction when imagining an ideal democratic-republican society in the postrevolutionary era, a society in which “the love one would bear” for one’s president would be “a reasoned and tranquil sentiment” (introduction, 9). Patriotism is a benchmark of a just, healthy polity (10–12). Patriotism then features in the important discussion of “The Spirit of the Township in New England,” with Americans experiencing the efficacy of self-government (in 1.1.5, 63–65). In fact, however, the first element of a considered patriotism arises in the crucial early chapter on “The Point of Departure and Its Importance for the Future of the Anglo-Americans” (1.1.2). America’s first founding explains most political and cultural realities: Readers of *Democracy* find here “the key to almost the whole work” (29). The chapter’s striking summation, “the character of the Anglo-American civilization,” combines, uniquely in human affairs, “the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of liberty*” (43, emphasis in original). The sequel notes that Americans combine a religious devotion to Christianity—providing clear bounds for thought and action—with a political culture that is tumultuous, tradition-discarding, and demanding progress (43). This prefigures a reflective patriotism, arguing with governments and fellow citizens about the meaning of America. This balance of

Christian belief and liberty leaves citizens in a “moral world” with everything “classified, coordinated, foreseen, decided in advance” yet in a “political world” where all is “agitated, contested, uncertain,” but these cultures somehow “lend each other mutual support” (43). The work’s foundational note, linking America’s religious, mainly Puritan character with a discursive patriotism, explains *Democracy’s* initial praise for the new patriotism yet warnings about the support needed from religious belief to sustain it and, in turn, a complex constitutional and civic culture.

Tocqueville then initially delineates the second dimension of patriotism—a rational interest in self-government—in analyzing the New England township and its spirit of self-government. Civic agency fuses the rights and duties of citizenship and generates love of country. So many people share in multiple, dispersed offices that they combine a right to liberty with a sense of duty to perform township functions. Quotidian tasks gain a larger civic meaning. He marvels at “[h]ow many men thus exploit the power of the township for their profit and take interest in it for themselves!” (1.1.5, 64). Citizens also reframe their interest in self-government as patriotic ritual and duty: “In the United States they rightly think that love of one’s native country is a kind of worship to which men are attracted by its observances” (64). The political benefits of this “administrative decentralization” include generation of a blend of interest in and love for the success of one’s township, state, and the United States all at once. A citizen “applies himself to each of the interests of the country as to his very own.” Indeed, “[h]e is glorified in the glory of the nation; in the success that it obtains he believes he recognizes his own work, and he is uplifted by it; he rejoices in the general prosperity from which he profits. He has for his native country a sentiment analogous to the one that he feels for his family, and it is still by a sort of selfishness that he takes an interest in the state” (1.1.5, 89–90).

Challenges to Sustaining Patriotism and Enlightened Self-Interest

Tocqueville offers warnings along with description and praise, as Montesquieu does in appraising the English in *The Spirit of*

Laws (1748). The rational element of American patriotism is endangered by the populist excesses of Jacksonian democracy. Considering “the Reelection of the President,” Tocqueville says a degradation of patriotism is inherent in pandering to voters for a second term, inviting crude passions to swamp the tranquil, reason-friendly political sentiments he has praised. “The principle of reelection thus renders the corrupting influence of elective governments more extensive and more dangerous. It tends to degrade the political morality of the people and to replace patriotism with cleverness” (1.1.8, 129; see also 129–30). Regular praise in *Democracy* for the Constitution and its framers offers models for more balanced, republican politics. The Constitution is “Superior to the Constitutions of the States” in political wisdom and merit because it is less democratic; and he praises the 1787 framers for their great character. He reminds readers that in opening the chapter he had praised Washington strongly, as well as James Madison and Alexander Hamilton: “I have already observed above that the legislators of the Union were almost all remarkable for their enlightenment, more remarkable still for their patriotism” (1.1.8, 143; see 107). The question, given Jacksonian populism, is how to sustain reflective patriotism in the people.

Tocqueville commends the Constitution’s design of sharing sovereignty between member republics and the federal republic as allowing robust local patriotism to be shared upward to the Union. American federalism strikes a healthy balance, leaving most political activity in state and local self-government. Citizens also appreciate the advantages of pooling some state sovereignty in a federal government that ably manages foreign affairs and commercial, economic coordination. He admires that “in the United States the taste for and usage of republican government are born in the townships and within [state] assemblies.” Each state, which hardly gives political leaders an arena for “much wealth or much glory,” nonetheless animates political attachment, using ceremony to induce a sense of the great achievements of state and local governance, even in the quotidian tasks of opening a canal, or laying a road:

[I]t is this same republican spirit, these mores and habits of a free people, which, after having been born and developed in the various states, are afterwards applied without difficulty to the sum of the country. The public spirit of the Union itself is in a way only a summation of provincial patriotism. Each citizen of the United States so to speak carries over the interest that his little republic inspires in him into love of the common native country ... [including] the general interests of the country and the glory of the nation. (1.1.8, 153)

American federalism promotes a complex, dual-level patriotism because it works. In a dangerous world, with most governments reigning over scarcity, among subjects, not citizens, Americans enjoy local liberty and national power—the latter, both commercial and military. Echoing Montesquieu on the advantages of a federal republic (*Spirit of Laws*, book 9), he concludes, “The Union is free and happy like a small nation, glorious and strong like a great one” (154).

Yet notes of warning persist. There is perhaps too strong a tendency toward patriotism of the local and familiar (1.1.8). Tocqueville ultimately closes part 2 of volume 1 with amplified concerns about sustaining American federalism: whether a complex constitution of dual loyalty can survive a crisis or moment of passion that might pull the peoples of one or more states to abandon the Union for their more familiar home. In closing part 1 he maintains a hopeful stance—namely, that the Anglo-Americans have the geographic, cultural, and historical conditions to sustain federalism’s tensions. One such tension is a complex patriotism. In the War of 1812 several New England states refused the president’s order to mobilize their militias in the federal service (1.1.8, 159–60). The seeds of such a problem lie in the 1787 Constitution, for if the federal government has “real power,” the “love and prejudices of the people” remain mostly with the states. The Union’s sovereignty is mostly “an abstract being ... attached to only a few external objects.” State and local governments rely “on memories, on habits, on local prejudices, on the selfishness of province and

family; in a word, on all the things that render the instinct for one's native country so powerful in the heart of man" (157–58).

Christianity Moderating and Elevating a Democratic Patriotism

Tocqueville then turns more hopeful in the focal discussion of public spirit and our distinctive "reflective patriotism" in part 2 of volume 1. Whereas part 1 emphasized American laws and institutions, part 2 follows Montesquieu by examining mores and political culture. The focal discussion of reflective patriotism is here, marking the second of six elements of America's patriotism. Soon after introducing this concept, Tocqueville emphatically affirms religion's continuing influence in our political culture. This introduces the third element of our patriotism: that the political founding in 1776 absorbed our first founding in the Puritan culture (the first element of our patriotism), perpetuating it in new form. Religious belief and mores are the informal crucial foundation of the independent republic, its "first political institution," moderating extreme tendencies in modern democracy. This argument arises in several sections in a chapter entitled "On the Principal Causes Tending to Maintain a Democratic Republic in the United States" (1.2.9). This itself is the first of two culminating chapters of volume 1, emphasizing main lessons from his analysis. This chapter builds toward the thesis of its penultimate section, "That the Laws Serve to Maintain a Democratic Republic in the United States More than Physical Causes, and Mores More than Laws" (1.2.9, 292–95). Patriotism naturally arises in this discussion of mores; as Tocqueville defines them, they are "the whole moral and intellectual state of a people" encompassing not only "habits of the heart" but also their various "notions," opinions," and "sum of ideas" composing "the habits of the mind" (1.2.9, 275).

Religion remains central in this chapter, requiring three subsequent sections, starting with "Religion Considered as a Political Institution; How It Serves Powerfully the Maintenance of a Democratic Republic Among the Americans" (1.2.9, 275–77). The early thesis of the section on the Puritan "Point of Departure" (1.1.2) prepares for identifying the third element of American

patriotism as its religious basis. This in turn prepares for the final explicit discussion of patriotism in the volume, in the epic closing chapter on the fate of America's three races and America generally. Tocqueville there reinforces patriotism's fourth element, our sense of exceptionalism. In volume 2, his discussion of our fundamental civic and political orientation to enlightened self-interest will echo this complex character of religious mores, as beliefs and habits, both head and heart; these elements are crucial for moderating and elevating the rationalist, self-interested, materialist traits of the modern democratic soul. In volume 2 he introduces patriotism's fifth and sixth elements, enlightened self-interest and schooling. If they remain properly balanced, they might sustain patriotism against rising threats.

Tocqueville suggests the whole analysis of "The Principal Causes" sustaining America's democratic republic (not just the sections on religion) reinforces his point-of-departure thesis: The blending of religion and liberty in American mores is the key to this democratic republic. The chapter opens by recalling that early analysis and renames this first founding the "Providential" cause sustaining our republic:

[It is] the first and the most efficacious of all the causes to which the current prosperity of the United States can be attributed. . . . their fathers had long since brought equality of conditions and of intelligence onto the soil they inhabited, from which the democratic republic would one day issue as from its natural source. This is not all; with a republican social state, they willed to their descendants the most appropriate habits, ideas, and mores to make a republic flourish. When I think about what this original fact produced, it seems to me that I see the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who landed on its shores, like the whole human race in the first man. (1.2.9, 266–67)

He further emphasizes that Americans are fortunate that "their fathers" gave them "the love of equality and of freedom";

furthermore, it is “extraordinary” that their “social state as well as their laws” stem from this foundation (267).

Tocqueville just briefly mentions laws as a cause of our democratic-republican success, stating he will not recapitulate his part 1 analysis; he then turns to mores and the three sections on religion. “Religion Considered as a Political Institution” makes the claim informing all three: It “serves powerfully” to maintain among Americans a democratic republic (1.2.9, 275). Next, “Indirect Influence That Religious Beliefs Exert on Political Society” addresses our distinctive patriotism by emphasizing how Christianity moderates its rational element. The bold claim is that precisely when religion is not directly addressing politics, its influence “is more powerful still” and “best teaches Americans the art of being free” (278). America is “the place in the world where the Christian religion has most preserved genuine powers over souls; and nothing shows better how useful and natural to man it is in our day, since the country in which it exercises the greatest empire is at the same time the most enlightened and most free” (278). This prepares an implicit reference to reflective patriotism. Whether or not Americans truly believe the Christian dogmas they confess, all want to be seen as Christian; religion thus “reigns without obstacles.” He reminds us that he already noted the effect that for Americans “everything is certain and fixed in the moral world,” while “the political world seems to be abandoned to the discussion and attempts of men” (1.2.9, 278). This leads to a Montesquieuan statement on “the spirit of the Americans.” In the nexus of mores and politics,

the human spirit never perceives an unlimited field before itself: however bold it may be, from time to time it feels that it ought to halt before insurmountable barriers. Before innovating, it is forced to accept certain primary givens and to submit its boldest conceptions to certain forms that delay and halt it. . . . Up to now, no one has been encountered in the United States who dared to advance the maxim that everything is permitted in the interest of society. An

impious maxim—one that seems to have been invented in a century of freedom to legitimate all the tyrants to come.

So therefore, at the same time the law permits the American people to do everything, religion prevents them from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything.

Religion, which, among Americans, never mixes directly in the government of society, should therefore be considered as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not give them the taste for freedom it singularly facilitates their use of it. (1.2.9, 279–80)

Tocqueville then highlights patriotism in a political culture where “Americans so completely confuse Christianity and freedom in their minds” that Easterners fund missionaries for Western territories from “fear that religion will be lost in the midst of the woods.” They want these future states to share a commitment to “be as free” (280–81). Thus “in the United States religious zeal constantly warms itself at the hearth of patriotism. You think that these men act solely in consideration of the other life, but you are mistaken: eternity is only one of their cares” (281).

Yet it is precisely here that *Democracy* raises its first alarm about declining religious belief. The rationalist and materialist attack on religion from the Enlightenment reinforces other obstacles to belief, such that “all is well in America except precisely the religious spirit I admire” (281). The great many who sincerely profess Christianity mostly overlook that American society in fact is “an arena where religion must constantly struggle against a thousand relentless enemies;” receiving “wounds” from a materialist, anti-theistic atmosphere (287). After these sections on religion he returns to hope, declaring sound mores—to include religion—the basic cause of our political success. The “importance of mores” is “a central point”; it is “the end of all my ideas,” he states (1.2.9, 295). This conclusion about his political science, and America, implies that religion is still largely healthy here and that there may be time and capacity for buttressing belief. The concluding section

of this telling chapter paints, in contrast, a dark portrait of Europe's politics, given the consequences of "[r]eligion having lost its empire over souls" there (1.2.9, 299).

This indeed is the approach Tocqueville takes toward mores and religion in the volume's final chapter, on the three races, and into volume 2, in many comments on religion across its four parts. Christian belief and mores are a pillar of the success of our political society (1.2) and our civil society with its social mores (all four parts of the volume), both the political and civil dimensions of society and mores being crucial pillars for our laws and political institutions. Nonetheless, volume 2 amplifies his warning on declining religious belief, and thus its reduced capacity to moderate and elevate political mores and activity. This provokes his striking claim that enlightened statesmen in modern democratic republics should act to reinforce and prioritize religious belief among the people.

This advocacy of the statesman's concern to support religious belief first arises in closing volume 1, on the prospects for America's three races, which includes patriotism (1.2.10). Returning to warning, patriotism arises in a subchapter entitled "What Are the Chances the American Union Will Last? What Dangers Threaten It?" (348–79). Considerations of space require a briefer analysis than this long chapter deserves. It assesses the character and national trajectory of the Americans—whether they might self-destruct, unable to moderate the excesses in their national character, dominating all the valuable land of North America from ocean to ocean (as he predicts) while ruthlessly subduing the native peoples and spreading slavery.¹⁶ Tocqueville raises reflective patriotism and its need for moderation and elevation by religion, after the disturbing sections "Indian Tribes" and "Black Race" (1.2.10, 302–48). A section on prospects for the Union and the dangers threatening it (348–790)—in Lincoln's phrasing, on perpetuating our constitutional order—raises reflective patriotism as crucial. He holds the Federalist view that the federal government is weak relative to the states, that the Union faces real danger of dissolution (352–53; see also 1.1.8). Yet he emphasizes the strong material interests of states and citizens to sustain the Union, chiefly the

greater commerce and prosperity gained by common policies benefiting all Americans and thus also, with its navy, conveying strength in relations with foreign powers (355–58). After this “tight bond” arising from interests, he turns to shared American opinions and beliefs, echoing his focus on mores. Here, too, are strong grounds for binding the Union despite diversity across the vast federal republic. This second factor binding the Union points to reflective patriotism. His reintroduction of the term, however, is more critical:

The inhabitants of the United States speak much of their love for their native country; I avow that I do not trust this reflective patriotism founded on interest, and which interest, by changing its object, can destroy.

Nor do I attach very great importance to the language of the Americans when they express the intention daily of preserving the federal system that their fathers adopted.

What maintains a great number of citizens under the same government is much less the reasoned will to live united than the instinctive and in a way involuntary accord resulting from similarity of sentiments and resemblance of opinions.

I shall never agree that men form a society by the sole fact that they recognize the same head and obey the same laws; there is a society only when men ... have the same opinions ... [and] the same facts give rise in them to the same impressions and the same thoughts. (1.2.10, 358)

Yet Tocqueville concludes that the Americans, even across twenty-four states, “constitute a unitary people.” Evidence for this “real” American society begins with religious beliefs: “Although the Anglo-Americans have several religions, they all have the same manner of viewing religion” (358). He rests his case for this ground of unity with one sentence. Earlier discussions of religion’s importance for the existence and persistence of American constitutional democracy have been emphatic; the brevity of the invocation thus reinforces its weight.

Tocqueville's second category of evidence for America as one people rests on shared views on "the general principles that ought to rule human societies," undergirding the disagreements on policies, even on forms of government. Here, patriotism's fourth and fifth elements—American exceptionalism, and enlightened self-interest—arise from its religious elements, the first and third. The beliefs he lists echo his Point-of-Departure thesis and view of religion as a political institution, including belief that "the origin of all legitimate powers is in the people," and shared views of "freedom and equality" (1.2.10, 358). Moving beyond "political and religious ideas" to "philosophical and moral opinions," Americans all hold basic principles that "universal reason," as "the sense of all," should guide judgment on what is permitted or forbidden, true or false, and that "one's self-interest well understood" or enlightened self-interest is a sure guide to what is just and honest (359). The summary point on one real American society includes patriotism:

For fifty years it has been constantly repeated to the inhabitants of the United States that they form the only religious, enlightened, and free people. They see that up to now, democratic institutions have prospered among them, while they have failed in the rest of the world; they therefore have an immense opinion of themselves, and they are not far from believing that they form a species apart in the human race. (1.2.10, 359)

Yet Tocqueville then shifts from Americans' confidence and patriotic exceptionalism to the starkly different characters of the North and South, with grim reflections on a civil war over slavery. A section on whether the Union will last, and dangers to it, closes with foreboding: The sovereignty and perpetuation of the Union is "in peril," and he cannot foresee the result (379). Are Americans hubristic in their exceptionalism, and patriotism? Do they fail to see that the complex, federal republicanism they are attempting includes real dangers to the Union even amid shared belief in

republicanism? Yes, a patriotism necessary to sustain the Union supervenes the stronger patriotism felt toward one's state; but will the latter adequately nourish the former?

Lincoln warned of national suicide shortly after these observations, in 1838; and a civil war nearly destroyed the Union twenty-five years after volume 1 was published. These facts suggest Tocqueville's warnings should be heeded today, when Americans also show low levels of patriotism toward republican self-government in our national Union. Further urgency to consider this complex view of a rational yet religiously supported patriotism arises from today's reality that we are much less religious than in the 1830s, entailing less efficacy for religion as our first political institution instructing us on principles of self-government, moderating and elevating our patriotism. Arguably a major cause of our civic disintegration is neglect of both religious belief and civic education in a reflective patriotism toward our constitutional order. Tocqueville hoped both would be great American advantages but noted their need of nurturing.

Indeed, as *Democracy* continues to consider the prospects for perpetuation of the American constitutional republic, it turns toward a more hopeful fact:

For the forty-five years the Union has existed, time has done justice to a host of provincial prejudices that at first militated against it. The patriotic sentiment attaching each American to his state has become less exclusive. . . . More and more all are brought together into a common type. Each year thousands of men who have left the North spread into all parts of the Union: they bring with them their beliefs, their opinions, their mores; and as their enlightenment is superior . . . they are not slow to take hold of affairs and to modify society. . . . This continuous emigration from the North to the South . . . favors the fusion of all provincial characters into a single national character. (1.2.10, 369–70)

Yet just as he did in closing part 1, Tocqueville oscillates between hope and foreboding on America's character and fate; his worries about a patriotism for the Union persist. By the 1830s federal power "is decreasing" relative to the first decades after establishment of the Constitution and new government (1.2.10, 370). The "very prosperity" and collective security produced, on the Federalist plan, itself "began to make people lose sight of the cause that had produced it; the danger having passed, Americans no longer found in themselves the energy and patriotism that had helped to ward it off" (371). A still graver problem is democratic populism and demagoguery exploiting the shift in popular opinion. Once complacency toward the Union arose, "party men, who live on the passions of the people, began exploiting it to their profit" (371). Tocqueville explicitly critiques Jacksonian democratism and implicitly the Jeffersonian program spawning it; his foreboding about the Union's prospects deepens. Yet hopefulness returns: "I nevertheless believe that we are still far from the time when the federal power ... will be extinguished." Because "[t]he Union is [established] in mores," and once it is evident "that the weakness of the federal government compromises the existence of the Union, I do not doubt that a movement of reaction in favor of its force will be seen to rise" (378). Further, "a change of [domestic] opinion, an internal crisis, a [foreign] war could suddenly give it back the vigor it needs" (378).

Tocqueville offers one further section on perpetuation before turning this last chapter of volume 1 to a more hopeful topic, considering the "Causes of the Commercial Greatness of the Americans (1.2.10, 384–96). Then his conclusion to the chapter (and thus the volume) makes a striking prediction: In the future just two powers will dominate the globe: the Russians standing for autocracy and despotism, the Americans for freedom (395–96). The path from ambivalence about our prospects to this prescient and bullish view runs through the penultimate section, covering our republican institutions and "their chances of longevity." His answer is more hopeful for republicanism than for the Union, however, and it instructs American statesmen and citizens on their

responsibility to perpetuate their free institutions and mores. This prescriptiveness also defines volume 2's approach to reflective patriotism, including an emphasis on its sixth element, schooling.

Tocquevillean Remedies and America's Nonpatriotic Civic Culture Today

Republicanism has better prospects than the Union because a culture of Christian liberty is America's natural political character. Tocqueville again emphasizes patriotism's first and third elements, its Christian foundation: "Republicans in the United States prize mores, respect beliefs, recognize rights." They believe "a people ought to be moral, religious, and moderate to the degree it is free" (1.2.10, 379). This is a just, viable political order because reigning above the majority "in the moral world" are "humanity, justice, and reason; in the political world, acquired rights. The majority recognizes these two barriers" (379–80). The difficulty, Tocqueville declares—as "I have already said, and I repeat"—is "the current movement of American society . . . to be more and more democratic" (383). In its first half century America frequently "changed laws," but "the foundation of the Constitution [was] respected." This epic chapter sustains from this point on a largely positive view of America's prospects, including his prophecy on becoming the world's strongest embodiment of liberty. Yet the admixture of warnings about unhealthy tendencies carries into volume 2, and all such maladies bear on sustaining American patriotism. His greatest concerns there address three features of America still evident today: first, the rise of a new kind of materialism and individualism, yielding an anti-civic alienation in a democratic people; second, the weakening of Christian belief under increasing egalitarianism and materialism; third, the rise of a new, tutelary administrative centralism or soft despotism that lulls us into giving up active liberty and self-government. Tocqueville's prescience about the dominance of an egalitarian and materialistic intellectual culture suggests that we also consider the probity of his proposed remedies for deterring or redressing these illiberal, anti-civic trends.

The primary remedy is sustaining Christian belief and—in volume 2’s pluralistic spirit—any metaphysical theistic tradition.¹⁷ Part 1 of volume 2 addresses American Christianity’s accepting, yet elevating, democratic instincts; how Catholicism is surprisingly prospering here; and why democracy’s friends should combat its tendency toward a rationalist pantheism replacing Christianity (2.1.5, 2.1.6, and 2.1.7). Part 2 suggests how Christianity can elevate self-interest well understood; how religion helpfully turns Americans to metaphysical enjoyments; and how reminding democrats about the horizon of eternity is important (2.2.9, 2.2.15, and 2.2.17). On education, Tocqueville strongly endorses the classics—“How the Study of Greek and Latin Literature Is Particularly Useful in Democratic Societies”—and recommends poetry for elevating mind and soul toward ideals and the metaphysical. This is the sixth element of reflective patriotism: schooling in higher meanings and duties, drawing from classical, biblical, and metaphysical sources. These counsels on metaphysical elements to civic culture sharply contrast with the volume’s opening view that pragmatism and materialism dominate the “Philosophical Method” of Americans (2.1.15, 2.1.17, and 2.1.1). Yet part 2 returns to that pragmatic trait when praising Americans for the way they “Combat Individualism with Free Associations” and with the doctrine of “Self-Interest Well Understood” (2.2.4 and 2.2.8). These are the elements of Tocqueville that Robert Putnam restored to wider attention in his analysis of the “bowling alone” decline in American associational life. Less widely noted is the fact that Putnam’s sequel to that work featured religious belief and culture persisting into the twenty-first century as a defining feature of American life—indeed, of a healthy form of American politics and culture.¹⁸

Tocqueville does not cite patriotism in analyzing self-interest well understood. He refers to “several places in the work” showing that Americans “almost always know how to combine their own well-being with that of their fellow citizens.” Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop cite volume 1, part 2, chapter 6, as the focal discussion of reflective patriotism as “public spirit” (see 2.2.4, 501, note). The American doctrine behind reflective patriotism is

explained in volume 2 as “man, in serving those like him, serves himself, and that his particular interest is to do good” (501). Americans “are pleased to explain almost all the actions of their life” with this doctrine; for “enlightened love of themselves constantly brings them to aid each other” and to “willingly sacrifice a part of their time and their wealth to the good of the state” (502). Now, however, he objects: “I think in this it often happens they do not do themselves justice; for one sometimes sees citizens in the United States as elsewhere abandoning themselves to the disinterested and unreflective sparks that are natural to man; but the Americans scarcely avow that they yield to movements of this kind; they would rather do honor to their philosophy than to themselves” (2.2.4, 502).

Why would Americans serve or sacrifice for others heedless of gain? Emotions of Old World patriotism remain (1.2.6), but the more likely cause is Christian belief in a commandment to love and serve others. For Tocqueville, enlightened self-interest is better than the degraded individualism, materialism, and soft despotism to which Americans might succumb; but the people are better than their rationalist doctrine. He warns that their reflective patriotism will need to rely on its first and third elements—the American blend of religion and liberty, the political institution of Christian mores—to survive amid rising individualism and materialism. This dilemma leads him to urge statesmen and other leaders to teach Christian doctrines, or metaphysical beliefs, to perpetuate our civic and political order. Statesmen and governments must “act every day” as if they believed in “the dogma of the immortality of the soul” by “conforming scrupulously to religious morality in great affairs.” This is the only way to ensure “they are teaching citizens to know it, love it, and respect it in small ones” (2.2.15, 521). In an age when “irreligion and democracy meet in an unhappy convergence, philosophers and those who govern ought constantly to apply themselves to moving back the object of human actions” by teaching citizens that “only by resisting . . . little everyday passions” will they “come to satisfy the general passion for happiness that torments them” (2.2.17, 523). His striking counsel is that

[g]overnments must apply themselves to giving back to men this taste for the future which is no longer inspired by religion and the social state, and without saying so, they must teach citizens practically every day that wealth, renown, and power are the prizes of work, that great successes are found at the end of long-lasting desires. . . .

I therefore do not doubt that in habituating citizens to think of the future in this world, one would bring them little by little and without their knowing it to religious beliefs.

Thus the means that permit men up to a certain point to do without religion is perhaps, after all, the only one remaining to us to lead the human race by a long detour back toward faith. (2.2.17, 524; cf. 1.2.5, 190–91, on education, religion, and mores)

America's civic decay today, with flagging civic knowledge and patriotism in younger cohorts, suggests Tocqueville's prescience about decline in the religiously inspired mores that sustained our patriotism. Yet these higher mores, and a complex patriotism, persisted through great crises for well over a century after these warnings and had prominent advocates into the late twentieth century. Inspiring moments of statesmanship, and patriotic art, suggest that the higher ethos transcending enlightened self-interest could still be invoked. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural are still widely regarded and taught. Consider also the third verse of Katharine Lee Bates's "America the Beautiful" (1893), capturing the self-sacrificing heroism of Union soldiers in the Civil War. This so resonated with the pianist-singer Ray Charles, descendent of slaves, that he began his famous rendition, first recorded in 1972, with this third verse—thus emphasizing the blend of patriotic sacrifice and Christian mercy that once inspired many Americans, and might again. He brought new inspiration in his soulful, jazz-and-gospel tribute:

O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved
And mercy more than life!

In calling us to blend metaphysical and religious principles with the rational, materialist, and pragmatic elements of our character, Tocqueville calls Americans to revive a capacity for blending and balancing, for moderation, deep in our character. Lincoln's perpetuation address to the Young Men's Lyceum blends advocacy of a cold, rational civics in the Constitution and laws with a closing profession of faith in George Washington and Christianity. Smith's 2021 argument for an enlightened patriotism sees a high middle ground between a narrow nationalism of some on the American right and a cynical, sophisticated disdain for America of some on the left. In the spirit of Tocqueville, Lincoln, and America's founders at their best, we must recover a greatly needed patriotism grounded in a discursive, informed civics; in religious and moral elements of our tradition; and in walking the path of the civic virtues it invokes, including civil disagreement and civic friendship among Americans of divergent views.¹⁹ The national-consensus report on K–12 civics, *Educating for American Democracy*, forged a consensus around the importance of reflective patriotism, and its recommendations have had some success in guiding reforms to, and a higher priority for, civics in schools and districts across the country.²⁰

Tocqueville pays philosophers the compliment of suggesting they are akin to “those who govern” (2.2.17, 253). Thus, his admonition closing *Democracy in America* rests more heavily on today's academics, educators, intellectuals, and other elites: Have we set our constitutional democracy on the path “to servitude or freedom, to enlightenment or barbarism, to prosperity or misery”? (2.4.8, 676). Leaders in these sectors shape thinking in the media, religious communities, and the broader culture. We must improve the prospects for America finding consensus on a renewed civics encompassing a thoughtful love of country and other civic virtues,

all grounded in serious civic knowledge. That consensus must be strong enough to support substantial changes to priorities in schools and higher education. Our elite culture, and main educational culture in K–16, emphasizes only the final two elements of reflective patriotism, and narrowly conceived at that: a rational enlightened self-interest, and schooling. We need to rediscover how to blend in the other four elements: metaphysical foundations supporting republican liberty and equality, a shared culture of hope, participation in self-government, and pride in America. This is the only way to meet the charge rightly laid down by Johns Hopkins president Daniels, that we educators undertake what we owe our democratic republic.

Notes

1. Ronald Daniels, with Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 112–13, 120. This article abbreviates a chapter from my *Teaching America: Reflective Patriotism in Schools, College, and Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2026).
2. Martha Nussbaum, with Kwame Anthony Appiah, Benjamin R. Barber, Sissela Bok, et al., *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*, ed. Joshua Cohen (Beacon Press, 1996); “Teaching Patriotism: Love and Critical Freedom,” in *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 204–39, 249–56.
3. Steven B. Smith, *Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes* (Yale University Press, 2021). Smith discusses critiques of patriotism by Nussbaum and by George Kateb at 38–45.
4. See William Damon, “Restoring Purpose and Patriotism to American Education,” in *How to Educate an American: The Conservative Vision for Tomorrow’s Schools*, ed. Michael J. Petrilli and Chester E. Finn Jr. (Templeton Press, 2020), 75–85; Jeffrey Sikkenga and David Davenport, *A Republic If You Can Teach It: Fixing America’s Civic Education Crisis* (Republic Book, 2024), 25–43.
5. Megan Brenan, “American Pride Remains Near Record Low,” *Gallup*, July 2, 2024.
6. “Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for All Learners,” iCivics, March 2, 2021, <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/>.

7. I discuss this in “Civic Preparation of American Youth: Reflective Patriotism and Our Constitutional Democracy,” *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 705, no. 1 (2023): 36–52.
8. Derek Bok, *Higher Expectations: Can Colleges Teach Students What They Need to Know in the 21st Century?*² (Princeton University Press, 2020); Daniels with Shreve and Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy*.
9. Damon, “Restoring Purpose and Patriotism”; Bok, “Helping Students Find Purpose and Meaning in Life,” in *Higher Expectations*, 80–94.
10. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and tr. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (University of Chicago Press, 2000 [1835, 1840]), “On Public Spirit,” vol. 1, part 2, chap. 6, pp. 225–27. Subsequent references are presented parenthetically by volume, part, chapter, and page numbers (e.g., 1.2.3, 40–41).
11. “On the Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions,” Lyceum Address, January 27, 1838, [https://contextus.org/Abraham_Lincoln%2C_Lyceum_Address_\(1838\).1?lang=en](https://contextus.org/Abraham_Lincoln%2C_Lyceum_Address_(1838).1?lang=en).
12. I am indebted to James Stoner for helping me to discern these six elements.
13. James W. Ceaser, “Alexis de Tocqueville and the Two-Founding Thesis,” *Review of Politics* 73, no. 2 (2011): 219–43.
14. See also Ewa Atanassow, “Patriotism in Democracy: What We Can Learn from Tocqueville,” in *Tocquevillian Ideas: Contemporary European Perspectives*, ed. Zbigniew Rau and Marek Tracz-Tryniecki (University Press of America, 2014), 39–58; and Trevor Shelley, “A Political Science of Mores: Tocqueville on Citizenship and Civic Leadership,” in *Citizenship and Civic Leadership in America*, ed. Carol McNamara and Trevor Shelley (Lexington Books / Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 69–82.
15. Tocqueville’s phrase is *patriotisme réfléchi*; see the *Historical-Critical Edition of Democracy in America*, ed. Edward Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, 4 vols. (Liberty Fund, 2010), 2:384. James Schleifer uses “thoughtful patriotism”; Arthur Goldhammer, in the 2004 translation of *Democracy in America* (Library of America, 2004) uses “considered patriotism.”
16. Harvey C. Mansfield, in *Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), notes the theme of greatness and pride in *Democracy*, including patriotism; see, e.g., 102–14.
17. I discuss these ideas further in “Religion and Liberty in America: The Moderate Spirit of Montesquieu and Tocqueville,” in *Democracy in*

Moderation: Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Sustainable Liberalism (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 208–17, including recent scholarship.

18. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000; second edition 2020); Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon & Schuster, 2010; second edition 2012).
19. Smith, *Reclaiming Patriotism*, chap. 5, “Enlightened Patriotism,” and chap. 6, “Reclaiming Patriotism.”
20. See Danielle Allen, Paul Carrese, and Louise Dubé, “The Challenges of Crafting Excellence in Civics and History for All,” *State Education Standard* (National Association of State Boards of Education) 25, no. 4 (2025), <https://www.nasbe.org/the-challenges-of-crafting-excellence-in-civics-and-history-for-all/>.

