

Lesson One. Worksheet A: Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States and Its Effects

Student Name _____ Date _____

[The section that follows from *Democracy in America*, "[Of the Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States, and its Consequences](#)," Volume 2, Part 2, Chapter 7, is translated by James T. Schleifer and published by the Liberty Fund. Read the passage and answer the questions at the end. Note that important academic vocabulary has been bolded in the passage and listed at the end of this worksheet. You should try to figure out the meaning of the words from the context and consult a good dictionary such as Webster where necessary. Be sure to write down your definitions on this sheet.]

The very **essence** of democratic governments is that the **dominion** of the majority be **absolute**; for, in democracies, nothing outside of the majority can offer resistance. Most of the American [state] constitutions have also sought to **augment** this natural strength of the majority artificially. (1)

Of all political powers, the legislature is the one that most willingly obeys the majority. The Americans have wanted the members of the legislature to be named *directly* by the people, and for a *very short* term, in order to force them to submit not only to the general views, but also to the daily passions of their **constituents**.

They have taken the members of the two houses from the same classes and named them in the same way; in this way, the movements of the legislative body are almost as rapid and no less **irresistible** than those of a single assembly.

Within the legislature thus constituted, the Americans gathered together nearly the entire government.

At the same time that the law increased the strength of powers that were naturally strong, it weakened more and more those that were naturally weak. It gave to the representatives of the executive power neither stability nor **independence**; and, by subjecting them completely to the **caprices** of the legislature, it took from them the little influence that the nature of democratic government would have allowed them to exercise.

In several states, the law delivered the **judicial** power to election by the majority; and in all, it made the existence of the judicial power dependent, in a way, on the legislative power, by leaving to the representatives the right to fix the salaries of judges annually.

Customs have gone still further than the laws.

In the United States, a custom is spreading more and more that will end by making the guarantees of representative government empty; it happens very frequently that the voters, while naming a deputy, trace a plan of conduct for him and impose on him a certain number of definite **obligations** from which

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he cannot deviate in any way. Except for the **tumult**, it is as if the majority itself **deliberated** in the public square.

Tocqueville's Footnote 1.

We have seen, at the time of the examination of the federal constitution, that the law-makers of the Union made contrary efforts. The result of these efforts was to make the federal **government** more **independent** in its sphere than the government of the states. But the federal government is scarcely in charge of anything except foreign affairs; the state governments really run American society.

Text-Dependent Question	Evidence-Based Answer
What does the word "omnipotence" in the title mean? Look it up in a good dictionary if you do not know its meaning.	
Tocqueville's first sentence is the underlying principle for his entire argument. Try to put his thought in your own words. How does it relate to the title of the chapter?	
What level of the government is Tocqueville referring to in his second sentence?	
Read footnote 1. What is he saying here about the difference between state constitutions and the federal constitution?	
State three ways that the state constitutions increase the power of the majority. What is Tocqueville's view of these features?	
Give two ways that the state constitutions weakened the other branches of the government?	
What "custom" does Tocqueville identify in the last paragraph?	

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<p>According to <i>Federalist No. 10</i>, good representatives are supposed to “refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.”</p> <p>Why might the custom of pledged delegates negate this possibility?</p>	
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Academic Vocabulary

Definition

Omnipotence

Essence

Dominion

Absolute

Augment

Constituents

Irresistible

Independent

Caprices

Judicial

Obligation

Tumult

Deliberate

Resistance

Augment

Custom