

## Lesson One. Worksheet B (teacher version) Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States and Its Effects

[The section is taken from Volume 2, Part 2, Chapter 7 of [Democracy in America](#), “Of the Tyranny of the Majority.” The recent critical edition published by the Liberty Fund, translated by James Schleifer and freely available online, has been used. However, the text has been rearranged and academic vocabulary terms have been bolded and defined. Students should be encouraged to look up words they do not know as this will help them better understand the passage.]

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Several particular circumstances in America also tend to make the power of the majority not only **predominant**, but **irresistible**.

The **moral** dominion of the majority is based in part on the idea that there is more **enlightenment** and **wisdom** in many men combined than in one man alone, more in the number than in the choice of legislators. It is the **theory** of **equality** applied to minds. This doctrine attacks the pride of man in its last refuge. Consequently the minority admits it with difficulty and gets used to it only with time. Like all powers, and perhaps more than any other, the power of the majority thus needs to last in order to seem **legitimate**. When it is beginning to be established, it makes itself obeyed by force; only after living under its laws for a long time do you begin to respect it.

The idea that the right to govern society belongs to the majority because of its enlightenment was carried to the soil of the United States by the first **inhabitants**. This idea, which alone would be enough to create a free people, has today passed into the customs, and you find it in the least habits of life.

The French, under the old **monarchy**, held as a given that the king could do no wrong; and when he happened to do something wrong, they thought that the fault was with his advisors. This facilitated obedience marvelously. You could murmur against the law, without ceasing to love and respect the law-maker. Americans have the same opinion about the majority.

The moral dominion of the majority is based as well on the principle that the **interests** of the greatest number must be preferred to those of the few...

So in the United States the majority has an immense power in fact and a power of opinion almost as great; and once the majority has formed on a question, there is, so to speak, no obstacle that can, I will not say stop, but even slow its course and leave time for the majority to hear the cries of those whom it crushes as it goes.

The consequences of this state of affairs are harmful and dangerous for the future.

**Tocqueville: Lesson One. The Omnipotence of the Majority**

<b>Text-Dependent Question</b>	<b>Evidence-Based Answer</b>
Tocqueville talks of the “moral dominion of the majority.” This is an unusual expression. What does it mean and why does it use it?	He means that the majority, or “the People” has the moral authority in America. This is also called “popular sovereignty”, the view that the voice of the people is the voice of God.
What is the first argument for the moral dominion of the majority?	<p>Americans believe that public opinion (“many men combined”) is superior to individual opinion (“one man alone”). At a certain point the sheer weight of the mass overwhelms that of any individual, however superior, including the elected legislators.</p> <p>In this, the Americans apply the principle of equality to the mind, to intelligence, i.e., to those areas where individuals are not equal. Tocqueville suggests how the psychological weight of public opinion impacts even these sense of superiority that more intelligent individuals have (“attacks the pride of man in its last refuge.”) After a while, citizens come to agree that the rule of public opinion is the legitimate one worthy of respect.</p>
How did the right of self-government come to be established in America?	Tocqueville is talking about the New England Puritans as well as the early settlers to Virginia. The very nature of both settlements in lands so distant from England encouraged not only self-government and self-reliance but a kind of equality of conditions.
How are the French king and the American people similar?	Neither can do wrong, according to opinion. If there is a mistake it is the result of others.
What principle is the second idea based upon?	The interests of the majority ought to prevail over those of a minority however understood.
In the last paragraph of this section, Tocqueville’s conclusion is stated. What is it?	The majority in America has great power by law, in fact and over public opinion.

**Tocqueville: Lesson One. The Omnipotence of the Majority**

In stating his conclusion, the author introduces a new theme. What is it?	Rulers with so much power and no legitimate opposition will not even see the minorities in their way as they “crush” them.
What do you think of Tocqueville’s argument in this section?	Answers will vary but they should cite evidence and evaluate the two key arguments.

**Academic Vocabulary**

**Definition**

<b>Moral</b>	concerning right and wrong
<b>Preponderant</b>	most important
<b>Irresistible</b>	overpowering
<b>Enlightenment</b>	emphasis on reason and science
<b>Wisdom</b>	good sense and judgement
<b>Theory</b>	general principles of explanation
<b>Equality</b>	same rights, social status
<b>Legitimate</b>	lawful
<b>Monarchy</b>	one person rule
<b>Inhabitant</b>	one who lives in an area
<b>Interests</b>	rights, titles or legal shares