

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

Student Name _____ Date _____

[The section that follows is adapted from *Democracy in America*, "[Of the Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States, and its Consequences](#)" Volume 2, Part 2, Chapter 7, translated by James T. Schleifer and published by the Liberty Fund. Read the passage and answer the questions. 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 online dictionary such as Webster where necessary. Be sure to write down your definitions on this sheet.]

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

Text Dependent Question	Evidence Based Answer
Tocqueville talks of the “moral dominion of the majority.” This is an unusual expression. What does it mean and why does it use it?	
What is the first argument for the moral dominion of the majority?	
How did the right of self-government come to be established in America?	
How are the French king and the American people similar?	
What principle is the second idea based upon?	
In the last paragraph of this section, Tocqueville states his conclusion. What is it?	
In stating his conclusion, the author introduces a new theme. What is it?	
What do you think of Tocqueville’s argument in this section?	

Academic Vocabulary

Definition

Moral

Preponderant

Irresistible

Enlightenment

Tocqueville: Lesson One. The Omnipotence of the Majority

Wisdom

Theory

Equality

Legitimate

Monarchy

Inhabitant

Interests