In describing American democracy Alexis de Tocqueville often used the word “particulier,” an adjective that can be translated as “unique,” “particular” or “peculiar.” All three of these English words apply to American democracy in the early republic. From 1800 onwards, some northeastern states began to create the structures and practices of a functioning democracy. Popularly-elected governors, universal male suffrage (without race restrictions), voter turnout reaching 60+ percent of adult male voters and mass deliberation based on an expanding network of newspapers – all of these hallmarks of a democratic polity emerged as features of American politics.

American democracy in the early nineteenth century was certainly “unique.” Nearly alone among the states that had undergone a revolution in the eighteenth century, the United States retained some democratic features into the early decades of the nineteenth century. Yet when democratic revolutions happened in Latin America and in Europe in 1848, the American form of democracy seemed crabbed, idiosyncratic and not altogether worthy of imitation.

The word “peculiar” appears many times in standard English translations of Tocqueville. In describing American democracy from 1787 to 1860, “peculiar” seems most apt. American self-government endured under an inhospitable Constitution framed in secrecy by men fearful of democracy, hostile to political parties and wary of mass deliberation. The democratic institutions and practices that developed in this inhospitable framework were very different in the North and West than they were in the South, where democratic practices scarcely existed. To foreign observers, American democracy seemed unusual and oftentimes downright odd. My purpose is to recover the uniqueness and the oddity of American democracy as it was first invented and practiced.