Understanding Politics — Chapter 3 Student Practice Pack

Democracy, Equality and the General Will: Reading Rousseau

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About this pack

This pack helps you work through Chapter 3 of *Understanding Politics* with *The Social Contract* open. It moves from reading to writing: a close-reading worksheet, a self-test, short-answer questions and essay practice.

How to use it

1. Read Chapter 3 and *The Social Contract*, Book I and Book II, chs 1–7, with Book III, ch. 15 and Book IV, chs 1–2.
2. Complete the close-reading worksheet before attempting the self-test.
3. Take the self-test without the book, then check your answers against the chapter.
4. Plan at least one essay in full and write it under timed conditions.

Answers, marking guidance and model plans are in the separate Instructor Pack, available to teaching staff on request from www.oxterpress.com.

Translation note. Passages here use G.D.H. Cole's 1913 translation, which is out of copyright. The book quotes Victor Gourevitch's translation (2019). Wording differs, so compare the two on any phrase your argument depends on. References are to book and chapter, which are the same in every edition.

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Chapter at a glance

The chapter asks what makes collective decisions legitimate, moving from Rousseau's general will through models of democracy to Rawls's principles of justice.

	Rousseau	Competing models of democracy	Rawls
Central question	How can people obey law and remain free?	What should democratic procedures do?	What principles should govern society's basic structure?

	Rousseau	Competing models of democracy	Rawls
Key idea	The general will: law aimed at the common interest	Competitive, participatory, deliberative and epistemic accounts	Principles chosen behind a veil of ignorance
Threat to legitimacy	Factions, dependence, representation	Unequal influence, permanent minorities	Arbitrary advantages shaping the terms of cooperation
Key texts	*Social Contract* I.1–9, II.1–7, II.11, III.15, IV.1–2	Schumpeter (1942); Young (2000)	*A Theory of Justice*, secs 1–4, 11–14, 20–25, 46

Key concepts to master: the social compact; sovereign and government; the general will and the will of all; natural, civil and moral liberty; being 'forced to be free'; factions and partial associations; representation; competitive, participatory, deliberative and epistemic democracy; the basic structure; the original position and veil of ignorance; equal basic liberties; fair equality of opportunity; the difference principle.

Close-reading worksheet

Underline the claim, circle the qualifications, and answer in full sentences before returning to the chapter.

Passage A: the problem and the compact

> *The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before. (Social Contract, I.6)*

> *In order then that the social compact may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the undertaking, which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free; for this is the condition which, by giving each citizen to his country, secures him against all personal dependence. (Social Contract, I.7)*

1. Rousseau sets two conditions in I.6. Name them. Why might they seem to conflict?
2. How does 'obey himself alone' become possible if each obeys laws made by all?
3. In I.7, what does compulsion protect the citizen against? How does that change the meaning of 'forced to be free'?
4. Write two sentences: the most defensible reading of I.7, and the most dangerous.

Passage B: the general will and losing a vote

> *There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will; the latter considers only the common interest, while the former takes private interest into account, and is no more than a sum of particular wills. (Social Contract, II.3)*

> *When therefore the opinion that is contrary to my own prevails, this proves neither more nor less than that I was mistaken, and that what I thought to be the general will was not so. (Social Contract, IV.2)*

1. Is the difference between the general will and the will of all a difference in how votes are counted, or in what voters ask themselves?
2. Could a unanimous vote express only the will of all? Explain.
3. Read the rest of IV.2. What conditions must hold before losing a vote shows I was mistaken?
4. Apply this to the chapter's waste-facility referendum. Were those conditions met?

Passage C: representation and equality

> *The people of England regards itself as free; but it is grossly mistaken; it is free only during the election of members of parliament. As soon as they are elected, slavery overtakes it, and it is nothing. (Social Contract, III.15)*

> *No citizen shall ever be wealthy enough to buy another, and none poor enough to be forced to sell himself. (Social Contract, II.11)*

1. Why does Rousseau think sovereignty cannot be represented?
2. Is his criticism of England a criticism of elections, or of what happens between them?
3. How does II.11 connect economic inequality to political freedom?
4. Which modern institutions, if any, answer Rousseau's worry in III.15?

Self-test

Allow 20 minutes and answer without the book. Choose one answer for each question.

1. Rousseau's fundamental problem is to find an association in which:
    - A. Collective wealth is maximised
    - B. The wisest citizens rule
    - C. Each, uniting with all, obeys himself alone and remains as free as before
    - D. The majority is always obeyed

2. The general will differs from the will of all because it:
    - A. Considers only the common interest
    - B. Requires unanimity
    - C. Is expressed by the government
    - D. Is the sum of particular wills
3. ‘Forced to be free’ appears in Rousseau’s discussion of:
    - A. Criminal punishment
    - B. Public education
    - C. Civil religion
    - D. The undertaking that anyone refusing the general will is compelled by the whole body
4. Rousseau distinguishes sovereign from government because:
    - A. Government is always elected
    - B. Sovereignty belongs to the people, while government administers on their behalf
    - C. The sovereign is a monarch
    - D. Government makes the laws
5. Moral liberty, for Rousseau, is:
    - A. Obedience to a law one has prescribed to oneself
    - B. The absence of all law
    - C. The natural liberty of the state of nature
    - D. A right to property
6. Rousseau says the English people are free:
    - A. At all times under Parliament
    - B. Never, because they have a monarch
    - C. Only during the election of members of parliament
    - D. Only when Parliament is dissolved
7. Rousseau distrusts partial associations because they:
    - A. Are illegal
    - B. Are too small to matter
    - C. Weaken the executive
    - D. Turn votes towards sectional rather than common interests
8. On economic inequality, Rousseau argues that:
    - A. It is irrelevant to political freedom
    - B. No citizen should be rich enough to buy another, nor poor enough to sell himself
    - C. All property should be abolished
    - D. Only the poor should vote
9. Schumpeter’s competitive model holds that citizens:
    - A. Choose between competing leaders rather than decide every issue
    - B. Deliberate directly on all laws
    - C. Delegate sovereignty permanently
    - D. Should be selected by lot
10. Deliberative democracy emphasises:
    - A. Aggregating fixed preferences

- B. Rule by experts
- C. The exchange of reasons among free and equal participants
- D. Frequent referendums

11. Iris Marion Young argues that deliberation should:
    - A. Exclude emotional appeals
    - B. Be limited to representatives
    - C. Follow strict rules of argument
    - D. Accommodate forms of communication such as narrative and testimony
12. For Rawls, the primary subject of justice is:
    - A. Individual acts of charity
    - B. The basic structure of society
    - C. International trade
    - D. Private contracts
13. The veil of ignorance hides from the parties:
    - A. Their place in society and their natural assets
    - B. General facts about society
    - C. The principles available to choose from
    - D. The idea of justice itself
14. The difference principle permits inequalities that:
    - A. Reward effort
    - B. Maximise total welfare
    - C. Benefit the least advantaged compared with feasible alternatives
    - D. Arise from free exchange
15. Rawls's principles have which order of priority?
    - A. Difference principle, then liberty
    - B. Fair opportunity, then liberty
    - C. All equal weight
    - D. Basic liberties, then fair equality of opportunity, then the difference principle

Short-answer questions

Answer each in 100–150 words. Define the term, give a textual reference, and state one difficulty.

1. Why does Rousseau reject force as a foundation of political right (I.3)?
2. Explain the difference between the general will and the will of all.
3. Distinguish natural, civil and moral liberty (I.8).
4. What does Rousseau mean by 'forced to be free', and what is the danger in the idea?
5. Why must law be general in its object (II.6)?
6. Why does Rousseau think sovereignty cannot be represented?
7. How does economic dependence threaten the general will?
8. Distinguish competitive from deliberative democracy.
9. What does the veil of ignorance exclude, and why?
10. Explain the difference principle using the chapter's 20–40–100 and 25–35–60 example.

Essay questions

Plan answers to at least two and write one in full: 1,500 words for a tutorial essay, or 45 minutes under exam conditions.

1. Can a person be ‘forced to be free’?
2. Does the general will make majority rule legitimate?
3. Is Rousseau’s hostility to representation compatible with modern democracy?
4. Is political equality possible without economic equality?
5. Should democracy aim at the common good or at fair procedures for disagreement?
6. Would parties behind the veil of ignorance choose Rawls’s principles?

Planning an answer

1. **Define the key term.** ‘Free’, ‘legitimate’ and ‘equality’ each need a stated meaning before you argue.
2. **State your thesis in the first paragraph.** Say what you will conclude and on what condition.
3. **Reconstruct the strongest version of the argument.** Quote precisely and cite book and chapter.
4. **Press one or two serious objections.** Depth beats a list.
5. **Give the best reply, then judge.**
6. **Conclude by returning to the question.**

What a first-class answer does

- Reads ‘forced to be free’ in the context of I.7’s guarantee against personal dependence, not as an isolated slogan.
- Distinguishes the general will as a standard from majority voting as a procedure, and uses IV.2’s conditions.
- Connects Rousseau to a modern problem, such as referendums, factions or unequal influence, without anachronism.
- When using Rawls, separates the device (the original position) from the principles and asks which assumptions do the work.

Common weaknesses to avoid: treating Rousseau as a straightforward totalitarian or a straightforward democrat; equating the general will with whatever the majority wants; describing the veil of ignorance as asking citizens to forget who they are.

Glossary flashcards and further reading

Cover the right-hand column and test yourself.

Term	Definition
Social compact	The agreement by which each gives himself wholly to the community on equal terms (I.6)

Term	Definition
Sovereign	The people as a collective body making general laws
Government	The agent that administers the laws on the sovereign's behalf (III.1)
General will	The will directed at the common interest of citizens as members
Will of all	The sum of private wills, each aimed at private interest (II.3)
Moral liberty	Obedience to a law one has prescribed to oneself (I.8)
Partial associations	Factions whose shared interest distorts the general will (II.3)
Competitive democracy	Citizens choose between rival leaders (Schumpeter)
Deliberative democracy	Legitimacy through reasoned exchange among equals
Basic structure	The major institutions distributing rights and advantages (Rawls)
Veil of ignorance	Hides each party's social position and natural assets
Difference principle	Inequalities must benefit the least advantaged
Fair equality of opportunity	Similar talent and willingness should yield similar prospects regardless of background

Further reading

- Rousseau, J.-J. (2019) *The social contract and other later political writings*. 2nd edn. Edited and translated by V. Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bertram, C. (2004) *Routledge philosophy guidebook to Rousseau and The Social Contract*. London: Routledge.
- Rawls, J. (1999) *A theory of justice*. Rev. edn. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, secs 1–4, 11–14, 20–25.
- Swift, A. (2019) *Political philosophy: a beginners' guide for students and politicians*. 4th edn. Cambridge: Polity, chs on democracy and social justice.
- Young, I.M. (2000) *Inclusion and democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, ch. 2.