Understanding Politics — Chapter 4 Student Practice Pack

Civil Society and Democratic Life: Reading Tocqueville

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About this pack and chapter at a glance

This pack helps you work through Chapter 4 of *Understanding Politics* with *Democracy in America* open. Answers, marking guidance and model plans are in the Instructor Pack, available to teaching staff from www.oxterpress.com.

How to use it. Read Chapter 4 and *Democracy in America*: the Introduction to volume I; volume I, part I, ch. 5 and part II, chs 7 and 9; volume II, part II, chs 2–8; and volume II, part IV, ch. 6. Complete the worksheet, take the self-test without the book, then plan and write one essay.

Translation note. Passages here use Henry Reeve's nineteenth-century translation, which is out of copyright. The book quotes Mansfield and Winthrop (2000), whose wording is closer to the French. References follow the book's volume, part and chapter numbering.

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Theme	Tocqueville's claim	The chapter's challenge
Equality of conditions	A social state that weakens inherited rank	Equality among whom? Slavery, Indigenous dispossession, gender
Tyranny of the majority	Opinion can restrict thought more than law	Social disapproval can also challenge injustice
Individualism	A calm withdrawal into private life	Withdrawal can be a response to unresponsive institutions
Associations	Self-government is learned through practice	Associations can exclude or mobilise against democracy (Berman)
Mild despotism	A tutelary power keeps citizens in childhood	Public provision can expand capacity if accountable
Arendt	Politics as action among plural equals	Who has the security and time to appear in public?

Close-reading worksheet

Underline the claim, circle the qualifications, and answer in full sentences.

Passage A: equality and opinion

> *Amongst the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people. (vol. I, Introduction)*

> *I know of no country in which there is so little true independence of mind and freedom of discussion as in America. … In America the majority raises very formidable barriers to the liberty of opinion: within these barriers an author may write whatever he pleases, but he will repent it if he ever step beyond them. (vol. I, part II, ch. 7)*

1. What does 'equality of condition' refer to, and what does it not mean?
2. How can a country with legal freedom of the press have 'little true independence of mind'?
3. What sanctions does an author face for stepping beyond the barriers? Are any of them legal?
4. When does social disapproval become tyranny rather than legitimate criticism?

Passage B: individualism and association

> *Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. (vol. II, part II, ch. 2)*

> *In democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science; the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress it has made. (vol. II, part II, ch. 5)*

1. Why does Tocqueville call individualism 'calm' and 'mature'? Why is that more worrying than selfishness?
2. How does equality encourage individualism?
3. Why does association become the 'mother of science' in democracies specifically?
4. Name one association that teaches self-government and one that does not. What explains the difference?

Passage C: the mild despotism

> *Above this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications, and to watch over their fate. That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident, and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent, if, like that authority, its object was to prepare*

> *men for manhood; but it seeks on the contrary to keep them in perpetual childhood. (vol. II, part IV, ch. 6)*

1. Why is ‘mild’ the most troubling word in the list?
2. What distinguishes authority that prepares people for adulthood from authority that keeps them in childhood?
3. Does the passage condemn public provision as such? Use section 4.3 of the chapter.
4. Which institutions in your own country best resist this tendency?

Self-test

Allow 20 minutes and answer without the book.

1. Tocqueville’s ‘equality of conditions’ refers mainly to:
    - A. The weakening of inherited ranks and expectations of comparable standing
    - B. Equal incomes
    - C. Equal voting rights only
    - D. Common ownership of property
2. The tyranny of the majority operates chiefly through:
    - A. The courts
    - B. The army
    - C. Public opinion and social pressure
    - D. The federal government
3. Individualism differs from selfishness because it is:
    - A. Instinctive and passionate
    - B. A calm, reflective withdrawal into a small private circle
    - C. Confined to aristocracies
    - D. Illegal in democracies
4. Tocqueville’s main remedy for individualism is:
    - A. A strong executive
    - B. Censorship of the press
    - C. Compulsory voting
    - D. Associations and local self-government
5. Tocqueville calls the science of association in democracies:
    - A. Dangerous to liberty
    - B. Unnecessary
    - C. The mother of science
    - D. An aristocratic survival
6. The tutelary power Tocqueville fears is:
    - A. Absolute, minute, regular, provident and mild
    - B. Violent and unpredictable
    - C. Hereditary

    - D. Temporary and weak
7. Tocqueville compares township institutions to:
    - A. Churches
    - B. Armies
    - C. Law courts
    - D. Primary schools
8. Social capital refers to:
    - A. Personal wealth
    - B. Networks, trust and norms that facilitate cooperation
    - C. Government grants to charities
    - D. Shares in public companies
9. Sheri Berman's study of Weimar Germany shows that:
    - A. Associations always strengthen democracy
    - B. Germany had little associational life
    - C. Dense associational life can mobilise citizens against democracy
    - D. Political parties were banned
10. Bridging ties differ from bonding ties because they:
    - A. Cross social boundaries
    - B. Exist only online
    - C. Are always stronger
    - D. Exclude outsiders
11. 'Voice' and 'exit' describe members' ability to:
    - A. Vote in national elections
    - B. Join several groups
    - C. Lobby government
    - D. Contest decisions within an organisation and leave it
12. For Tocqueville, mores are:
    - A. Written laws
    - B. Habits of the heart and the whole moral and intellectual state of a people
    - C. Religious doctrines
    - D. Economic interests
13. For Arendt, action depends on:
    - A. Plurality
    - B. Expertise
    - C. Property
    - D. Violence
14. Arendt's space of appearance arises:
    - A. Only in parliaments
    - B. Through markets
    - C. Wherever people act and speak together
    - D. In private households
15. Arendt's responses to the unpredictability and irreversibility of action are:
    - A. Law and punishment

- B. Planning and control
- C. Voting and representation
- D. Promising and forgiveness

Short-answer and essay questions

Short answers (100–150 words each)

1. What does Tocqueville mean by equality of conditions?
2. How does the tyranny of the majority differ from legal oppression?
3. Distinguish individualism from selfishness.
4. Why does local self-government matter to Tocqueville?
5. What is social capital, and what is one limitation of the concept?
6. Explain Berman's argument about Weimar Germany.
7. What do voice and exit tell us about an association's internal democracy?
8. Why does the mild despotism keep citizens 'in perpetual childhood'?
9. Explain Arendt's distinction between labour, work and action.
10. How do promising and forgiveness respond to the problems of action?

Essay questions

Plan two and write one: 1,500 words, or 45 minutes under exam conditions.

1. Is Tocqueville optimistic about democracy?
2. Does participation necessarily teach democratic habits?
3. Can civil society become a threat to democracy?
4. Is the tyranny of the majority a real danger in contemporary democracies?
5. Does Tocqueville's account of American democracy survive its treatment of race and empire?
6. How does Arendt's account of public action differ from Tocqueville's defence of associations?

What a first-class answer does

- Identifies the conditions under which Tocqueville expects freedom to survive, rather than labelling him optimistic or pessimistic.
- Uses Berman or the voice-and-exit framework to test associations, not to dismiss them.
- Treats race, empire and gender as tests of the theory's scope, with textual evidence from the three races chapter.
- Distinguishes Arendt's value of action itself from Tocqueville's value of the habits action produces.

Glossary flashcards and further reading

Term	Definition
Equality of conditions	A social state without fixed inherited ranks

Term	Definition
Tyranny of the majority	Domination of thought and conduct by majority opinion, not only law
Individualism	Calm withdrawal into a private circle, leaving public life to others
Associations	Voluntary groups through which citizens act together
Mores	Habits of the heart; the moral and intellectual state of a people
Administrative centralisation	Central management of local affairs, weakening civic capacity
Mild (soft) despotism	A tutelary power that provides for citizens while keeping them dependent
Social capital	Networks, norms and trust that facilitate cooperation (Putnam)
Bonding and bridging ties	Ties within a group versus ties across social boundaries
Voice and exit	Members' ability to contest decisions and to leave
Plurality	Arendt: people are alike enough to understand one another, distinct enough to differ
Space of appearance	Arendt: the public realm created when people act and speak together

Further reading

- Tocqueville, A. de (2000) *Democracy in America*. Edited and translated by H.C. Mansfield and D. Winthrop. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Putnam, R.D., Leonardi, R. and Nanetti, R.Y. (1993) *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Berman, S. (1997) 'Civil society and the collapse of the Weimar Republic', *World Politics*, 49(3), pp. 401–429.
- Arendt, H. (1998) *The human condition*. 2nd edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, chs I and V.