UNDERSTANDING POLITICS · CHAPTER 3

Democracy, Equality and the General Will

Reading Rousseau, with Rawls

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OPENING PUZZLE

The majority has decided

The vote

A fair referendum places a waste facility in a poorer neighbourhood.

The objection

Residents already bear more than their share of environmental burdens.

Ask: does a fair count settle whether the decision is legitimate?

> *“Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.”*

Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, I.1

Rousseau asks what could make the chains legitimate, not how to break them.

> *“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.”*

Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, I.6

Two conditions at once: protection and undiminished freedom.

> *“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.”*

Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, II.3

The general will is a standard about what voters ask, not a rule for counting votes.

> *“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.”*

Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, I.7

Read the final clause: compulsion by law protects against domination by persons.

> *“When therefore the opinion that is contrary to my own prevails, this proves neither more nor less than that I was mistaken.”*

Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, IV.2

Only if the vote asks about the general will, and its marks remain in the majority.

Conditions of a free people

No factions

Partial associations turn votes into sectional wills (II.3).

No dependence

“No citizen shall ever be wealthy enough to buy another” (II.11).

General laws

Law must address citizens as a body, never named individuals (II.6).

> *“The people of England regards itself as free; but it is grossly mistaken; it is free only during the election of members of parliament.”*

Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, III.15

Discuss: is the problem elections, or what happens between them?

MODELS OF DEMOCRACY

Four answers to what democracy is for

Competitive

Citizens choose leaders (Schumpeter).

Deliberative

Legitimacy through reasons exchanged among equals.

Participatory

Wider involvement builds capacity.

Epistemic models add a fourth answer: inclusion improves decisions. Young asks who deliberation excludes.

RAWLS · THE ORIGINAL POSITION

> *“No one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does any one know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities.”*

Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, sec. 3

A device for fair justification, not an instruction to forget who we are.

RAWLS · THE TWO PRINCIPLES

Justice in the basic structure

1. Equal liberty

Equal basic liberties for all, with priority.

2(b). Fair opportunity

Prospects should not depend on social background.

2(a). Difference principle

Inequalities must benefit the least advantaged.

Priority runs 1, then 2(b), then 2(a) (sec. 46).

COMPARISON

Rousseau and Rawls on legitimate collective decisions

	Rousseau	Rawls
Source of legitimacy	Common authorship of law	Fair terms chosen impartially
Role of voting	Evidence of the general will, under conditions	Procedure constrained by principles
Main danger	Factions and dependence	Arbitrary advantages

SEMINAR TASK · 25 MINUTES

Was the waste-facility decision legitimate?

1. Group A answers as Rousseau, using II.3, II.11 and IV.2.
2. Group B answers as a deliberative democrat, using Young.
3. Group C answers from behind the veil of ignorance.

THIS WEEK’S ESSAY

Can a person be ‘forced to be free’?

Plan

Define freedom. Read I.6–8 together, including I.7’s final clause.

Test

Press Berlin’s objection and the problem of who identifies the general will.

Judge

Conclude clearly and say what would change your verdict.

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