UNDERSTANDING POLITICS · CHAPTER 4

# Civil Society and Democratic Life

*Reading Tocqueville, with Arendt*

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OPENING PUZZLE

# A thriving association

## What it does

Members organise, raise funds and win a local campaign.

## What it hides

Leaders are unaccountable and newcomers are kept out.

**Ask:** is this association good for democracy?

## TOCQUEVILLE · THE STARTING FACT

> *“Nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people.”*

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I, Introduction

A social state, not equal wealth: the decline of inherited rank.

> *“I know of no country in which there is so little true independence of mind and freedom of discussion as in America.”*

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I, part II, ch. 7

The sanctions are social, not legal: isolation, lost opportunity, silence.

> *“Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures.”*

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. II, part II, ch. 2

Calm and reasonable: that is what makes it politically dangerous.

> *“In democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science.”*

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. II, part II, ch. 5

Without aristocratic patrons, citizens can act only by combining.

> *“Town-meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach.”*

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I, part I, ch. 5

Freedom is learned by practising it.

> *“That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident, and mild. … It seeks on the contrary to keep them in perpetual childhood.”*

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. II, part IV, ch. 6

Mildness removes the resistance that harsher rule provokes.

TESTING ASSOCIATIONS

# When civil society harms democracy

## Weimar

Dense associations mobilised against democracy (Berman, 1997).

## Bonding

Trust within groups need not extend to outsiders.

## Voice and exit

Can members contest leaders, and leave at bearable cost?

EQUALITY AMONG WHOM?

# The limits of Tocqueville’s account

## Race

The three races chapter locates the danger in Black Americans’ presence, not in slavery.

## Gender

Public independence rests on unpaid domestic work.

## Empire

Liberty at home coexists with domination abroad.

> *“Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else.”*

Arendt, *The Human Condition*, ch. I

Participation is a form of freedom, not only a means to better policy.

COMPARISON

# Why participation matters

| | Tocqueville | Arendt |
|---|---|---|
| **Value** | Builds habits of self-government | Is itself a form of freedom |
| **Danger** | Individualism and mild despotism | Politics reduced to administration |
| **Remedy** | Associations and local liberty | Spaces of appearance |

SEMINAR TASK · 25 MINUTES

# Is the association in the puzzle good for democracy?

1. Group A argues yes, using Tocqueville on association.
2. Group B argues no, using Berman and voice/exit.
3. Group C judges with Arendt: does it create a space of appearance?

THIS WEEK’S ESSAY

# Is Tocqueville optimistic about democracy?

### Plan

Identify equality as the starting fact and the three dangers.

### Test

Weigh the remedies against Berman and the three races chapter.

### Judge

Argue that the account is conditional, and say what the conditions are.

1,500 words maximum · Student Pack: essay questions