

CLT Philosophy Meetup: Liberalism and Tocqueville

January 11 2026

1 Disclaimer

Views expressed by the host are not representational of the group. Tocqueville views are to be worked through not simply agreed with. Please feel free to challenge and provide alternative perspectives respectfully.

2 Opener

Would you rather live in a society with perfect equality or perfect freedom?

3 Liberalism

3.1 Basics

- **Individualism:** The primacy of the individual over collective groups; society is composed of autonomous individuals with distinct interests
- **Liberty:** Commitment to personal freedom—civil liberties, freedom of speech, religion, and association are central
- **Equality:** Belief in equal moral worth of individuals, often expressed through equality before the law and political rights
- **Limited government:** State power should be constrained to protect individual rights, not dominate them
- **Rule of law:** Laws must apply equally to all, ensuring fairness and predictability in governance
- **Consent of the governed:** Legitimate authority derives from the consent of citizens, often through democratic participation

- **Private property:** Protection of property rights as a foundation for liberty and economic independence
- **Free markets:** Advocacy for free trade and minimal government interference in economic affairs
- **Rationalism:** Confidence in human reason and progress, rooted in Enlightenment ideals
- **Tolerance:** Respect for diversity of beliefs, lifestyles, and opinions within society

3.2 Tradition

- **Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)**
 - *Leviathan* (1651)
 - *De Cive* (On the Citizen) (1642)
 - Main ideas: State of nature as war of all against all; social contract to escape chaos; absolute sovereignty necessary for peace; individuals as rights-bearers who consent to authority; foundation for modern political individualism
- **John Locke (1632–1704)**
 - *Two Treatises of Government* (1689)
 - *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689)
 - *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689)
 - Main ideas: Natural rights to life, liberty, and property; government by consent; right to revolution against tyranny; separation of church and state; limited government; property as foundation of liberty
- **Montesquieu (1689–1755)**
 - *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748)
 - Main ideas: Separation of powers; checks and balances; political liberty through institutional design; influence of climate and culture on government; distinction between types of regimes
- **Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)**
 - *The Social Contract* (1762)
 - *Discourse on Inequality* (1755)
 - Main ideas: Popular sovereignty; general will; tension between natural freedom and civil society; critique of inequality and private property; direct democracy

- **Adam Smith (1723–1790)**

- *The Wealth of Nations* (1776)
- *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)
- Main ideas: Free markets and division of labor; invisible hand; limited government intervention in economy; sympathy as basis of moral judgment; connection between commerce and liberty

- **Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)**

- *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785)
- *Perpetual Peace* (1795)
- Main ideas: Autonomy and human dignity; categorical imperative; republican government; cosmopolitan right; enlightenment as emergence from self-imposed immaturity

- **The Federalist Papers (1787–1788)**

- Authors: Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay
- Main ideas: Republican government over large territory; extended republic to control factions; separation of powers and federalism; constitutional design to protect liberty while enabling effective governance

- **Benjamin Constant (1767–1830)**

- *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns* (1819)
- *Principles of Politics* (1815)
- Main ideas: Distinction between ancient (participatory) and modern (individual) liberty; representative government suited to modern commercial society; protection of individual rights against majority tyranny

4 Historical Context

4.1 The French Revolution

- Began in 1789 driven by Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity
- Radical phase (1792–1794): regicide, Reign of Terror, and mass executions
- Attempted top-down transformation through extreme centralization of power
- Ended in Napoleon's authoritarian rule, destroying the aristocratic order but failing to establish stable democracy

4.2 The American Revolution

- Sparked by colonial resistance to taxation without representation; Declaration of Independence (1776) asserted natural rights
- Military victory with French assistance (1783); Constitutional Convention (1787) created federal system with separation of powers
- Built upon existing local institutions and traditions rather than destroying them
- Established stable republican government without radicalism or terror

4.3 Europe in Tocqueville's Time

- Post-revolutionary France grappling with political instability and the dismantling of the aristocratic order
- Central question: Is democracy inevitable, and can it preserve liberty?
- French Revolution's legacy: tension between equality and liberty often resulted in chaos or authoritarianism
- Fear that equality's advance might produce tyranny of the majority and crush individual freedom

4.4 America in Tocqueville's Time

- 1830s America as a "living laboratory"—a society born democratic without an aristocratic past
- Functioning republic with widespread participation, voluntary associations, decentralized power, and local self-government
- Relative equality among white men, though Tocqueville noted the injustice of slavery and Native American treatment
- Liberty sustained through civic engagement, free press, and religion's moral influence, but threatened by conformism, materialism, and individualism

5 Tocqueville's Biography

- French political philosopher and historian, born in 1805 to an aristocratic family shortly after the French Revolution
- Studied law in Paris (1823–1826) and became an apprentice judge in 1827
- Traveled to America (1831–32), England (1833), and Ireland (1835)

- Best known for *Democracy in America*, published in two volumes (1835 and 1840)
- Elected to the Constituent Assembly in 1848 after two unsuccessful runs for the Chamber of Deputies (1837, 1839)
- Retired from politics in 1851 and published *The Old Regime and the Revolution* in 1856

6 Tocqueville's Method

Interdisciplinary approach of History, Sociology, Political Science, and Philosophy

6.1 Philosophical Approach

- Influenced by Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Pascal
- Emphasized learning politics through practice rather than abstract theory
- Skeptical of religious dogma and absolute philosophical truths
- Combined historical analysis with teleological thinking—sought first principles (especially equality) that drove social and political change
- Normative concerns: championed human flourishing, liberty, and excellence while lamenting the threat of mediocrity
- Method: blended deductive reasoning from human nature with empirical observation

6.2 Sociological Approach

- Grounded in empirical observation and bottom-up analysis of social structures and relationships
- Macro-sociological focus: examined political institutions, civic associations, religion, and social equality
- Comparative method: contrasted American democracy with European aristocracy
- Cultural sensitivity: emphasized the role of customs, habits, and mores in shaping societies
- Psychological dimension: analyzed how democratic conditions shape character, desires, and behavior

7 Democracy in America and Tocqueville's Core Ideas

7.1 Mores, Virtue, and Bonds

- **"Self-interest well understood"** – Tocqueville's famous formulation: Americans practice virtue not from pure altruism but from enlightened self-interest; they see that serving others serves themselves
- **Mores more important than laws** – The habits, customs, and beliefs of citizens matter more for democracy's survival than constitutional design
- **Religion serves politics** – "Most important is not that all citizens profess the true religion, but that they profess a religion"; religion provides shared moral foundations and restrains individualism
- **Separation of church and state** – But religion thrives in America precisely because it stays out of politics; political separation enables religious influence on mores
- **Ceremonies and social forms** – Rituals, courtesies, and "dressing up" create bonds and shared dignity; on pride: "I would willingly trade several of our small virtues for this vice"
- **Democracy loosens social bonds but tightens natural ones** – Equality weakens hierarchical ties but strengthens family and intimate relationships
- **Women as guardians of mores** – Especially Protestant women in America; they shape moral culture through domestic influence and education

Questions

- What's one unwritten rule in American society that everyone seems to follow? Why does it persist without being law?
- How do mores sustain or undermine democracy? Can you think of examples of each?
- In an increasingly secularized world, what role does religion play in society? What (if anything) can replace its function?
- Can democratic citizens maintain civic virtue, or does equality inevitably lead to self-interest and apathy?

7.2 Equality and Freedom

- **Equality as the driving principle** – Democracy's defining feature; the passion for equality drives all else
- **Diminishing tolerance for inequality** – As equality increases, even small inequalities become intolerable
- **Two faces of equality** – Can seek to raise others up or bring others down; "equality in freedom or equality in servitude"
- **Tension between absolute equality and absolute freedom** – Perfect equality would require restricting liberty; perfect liberty generates inequality
- **Leveling effects** – Excellence reduced but baseline humanity raised; "extremes collapse"

Questions

- Have we achieved equality of conditions? What inequalities remain most visible or troubling?
- Does the pursuit of equality threaten liberty or excellence? Can we have all three?

7.3 Materialism and Restlessness

- **Market economy and material pursuit** – Commercial society makes wealth the primary measure of success
- **Religion as brake on materialism** – Only moral force strong enough to restrain acquisitiveness
- **Instability of conditions** – In democracy, fortunes rise and fall; no one's position is secure
- **Industrial aristocracy** – "A weak kind of aristocracy" emerges in factories; masters and workers have no lasting bonds
- **Perpetual restlessness** – "A vague fear of not having chosen the shortest road"; anxiety amid prosperity

Questions

- Do you think Americans today are more individualistic or more community-oriented? What evidence do you see?
- What tendencies of liberalism promote individualism and isolation? Are these inevitable?

7.4 Tyranny of the Majority

- **Omnipotence of the majority** – In democracy, the majority holds absolute power—more total than any king; few legal safeguards against its will
- **Tyranny through social pressure** – Operates through public opinion and conformity, not just laws; creates a “moral empire” over thought itself
- **Self-censorship and ostracism** – “You are free to think differently, but you are henceforth a stranger among your people”; social death replaces legal persecution
- **Intellectual mediocrity** – Fear of standing out produces conformity of opinion; absence of great writers despite freedom
- **Danger increases with equality** – Greatest where democratic equality is most complete

Questions

- Do you think social pressure to conform is a serious threat to freedom today? How does it operate?
- Can you think of examples where majority opinion silences minority views—either through law or social pressure?
- Is social pressure a legitimate form of tyranny, or simply democracy in action?

7.5 Democratic Despotism (Soft Tyranny)

- **A new form of servitude** – Paternal, mild, but degrading; “an immense tutelary power” that keeps citizens in perpetual childhood
- **Trading freedom for comfort** – Citizens gradually surrender liberty for security and convenience; consent to their own subjection
- **Absolute but gentle power** – “Absolute, detailed, regular, provident, and mild”; degrades rather than torments
- **Passive citizenship** – Citizens reduced to “a flock of timid and industrious animals” focused on private pleasures
- **Equality’s role** – Democratic peoples particularly susceptible due to love of equality and individualism; isolated individuals turn to the state

Questions

- Do we see evidence today of citizens trading freedom for convenience or security? Where?

- How do we distinguish between helpful government services and the kind of “tutelary power” Tocqueville warns against?
- Do modern welfare states represent Tocqueville’s “soft despotism,” or do they enhance freedom?

7.6 Centralization of Power

- **Democratic tendency toward centralization** – Democracy naturally tends toward administrative centralization
- **Weakness of individuals** – Equality makes citizens weak and isolated as individuals; only the state appears strong enough to solve collective problems
- **Decay of intermediate institutions** – Local institutions and intermediate bodies decay; citizens appeal constantly to central government
- **Self-reinforcing cycle** – Centralization both cause and effect of majority tyranny

Questions

- How does Tocqueville’s view of centralization relate to contemporary debates about federalism and local control?
- What role should the federal government play versus state and local governments?

7.7 Remedies: Local Institutions and Associations

- **Township government** – Provides practical school of self-governance; gives citizens taste of power and responsibility
- **Jury service** – Educates people in rights and teaches practical judgment; makes every citizen a participant in governance
- **Voluntary associations** – Counteract individualism and governmental centralization; citizens learn to cooperate
- **Direct participation** – Local involvement prevents political apathy and teaches civic skills
- **Bulwark against tyranny** – Decentralization serves as defense against tyranny of both majority and state

Questions

- How many local institutions or community groups do you actively participate in? Has this changed over time?

- If local participation is declining, what fills that space in people's lives—and does it provide the same democratic benefits?
- What role do local institutions play in preventing tyranny of the majority?

7.8 Other Safeguards

- **Independent judiciary** – Power of judicial review protects rights against majority will
- **Legal profession** – Lawyers serve as an “aristocratic element”; reverence for precedent and forms restrains democratic passion
- **Free press** – Despite its own tendency toward conformity, serves as check on power
- **Religion** – Moral check on materialism and majority power; provides shared moral foundations
- **Federal system** – Dividing sovereignty prevents concentration of power

Questions

- Which of Tocqueville's proposed remedies seem most effective today? Which least?
- Are there new forms of association or institutions that might serve similar protective functions?
- What institutions or practices today might protect minority opinions from majority pressure?

8 Bonus Material

8.1 Historical and Material Conditions

- **Anglo-American inheritance** – Americans brought English institutions and love of liberty
- **Puritan influence** – Work ethic, local self-government, moral earnestness
- **No feudal past** – America's exceptionalism: equality of conditions from the start
- **Frontier and land availability** – Geographic expansion enabled independence and opportunity
- **Public education** – Widespread literacy and civic education

- **Jacksonian democracy** – Expansion of white male suffrage; rise of mass democracy

Questions

- Could another country copy the American government and get the same results? What would be required?

9 Images



Figure 1: Alexis de Tocqueville

References

- [1] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p.120
- [2] Cheryl B. Welch, *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, cambridge university press, 2006, p.120



Figure 2: Chateau in Normandy France