

State and Society

FRIDAY, 10/21

Hook argues that democracy is a way of life and that a commitment to democratic political institutions also is a commitment to adopting democracy as an ethical theory and social philosophy.

- 1) How does Hook define “democracy,” that is, what makes a social and/or political institution “democratic.”
- 2) Does Hook think that democracy is a feasible (that is, possible and sustainable) form of political and social organization? Why, or why not?
- 3) Given this definition, what features of Clarkson, from the student's perspective, are democratic, and how would Clarkson have to change to become more democratic.

MONDAY, 10/24

Rand argues for an essentially libertarian political theory. She claims that all that is needed for the people in a political order to subordinate themselves to moral law (that is, to conduct themselves in a moral way) is a set of clearly defined rights.

- 1) What rights does she claim we have? Do these capture all of the rights that you believe **you** have?
- 2) What do you think about what she thinks about the direction in which the country is heading?

WEDNESDAY, 10/26

Nielsen presents what the editors label the “moral case” for socialism.

- 1) How does Nielsen define “capitalism” and “socialism?” How do these definitions compare to your usual way of thinking about these two terms?
- 2) Nielsen compares and contrasts the strengths and weaknesses of “pure” capitalism and “pure” socialism. What are these? And, which has the greater balance of strengths over weaknesses?

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT #7 – Due in class Wednesday, 10/26
Answer Question #2 above.

FRIDAY, 10/28

De Tocqueville argues that political democracies are tyrannical (potentially, if not always actually) because majority opinion is an unchecked and absolute power. One manifestation of this tyranny is the suppression of differences of opinion.

- 1) Do you see any examples of this in contemporary U.S. society? That is, are there cases where the majority opinion has forced the dissenting minority opinions into silence?
- 2) PACs (political action committees) and lobbyists are often seen as a corruption in the U.S. political system. However, they function to counter the will of the majority and promote the goals of special interest groups (which always number in the minority). Would de Tocqueville therefore see them as a positive force in U.S. politics?

MONDAY, 10/31

Davis and Downs develop two different challenges to democratic political systems.

Davis. Democratic political systems assume that rational people will choose to cooperate with each other, because they understand that the best outcome for a group often is based on individual compromises. I give up a little of what I want, you give up a little of what you think is best for you, and lo and behold, things turn out the best for both of us. One of the ideas behind democracy is that this is so clearly true, that every rational person will base his or her behavior on it.

Davis presents us with a scenario famous in game theory – the Prisoner’s Dilemma. The Prisoner’s Dilemma appears to indicate that it is never rational for people to cooperate in the way that is necessary for democracy to work and, therefore, that democratic government can never be a rational activity.

Try to nail down the argument by constructing charts for Cases 2 - 5.

Is there a way out of this challenge to democracy?

Downs questions whether it is rational to be an informed voter. Reflect on his point in relation to some cases.

Case 1:

You plan to vote in the Potsdam Village elections. You have been reading the local paper every day, and you listen to the local news on radio. You know that the Republican candidate for mayor has said many things about the Village needing to understand students rather than passing laws against them. You also know that Republicans tend to think about most things the way you do.

There is going to be a candidate's night **tonight** where you can go and get in depth information about each candidate – even talk personally with them. You feel that with this information you could be sure of making the "right" choice. You also have a big test tomorrow and need to study for it.

Which is the rational decision, go to the meeting and become an informed voter or stay at home and study? You will cast your vote in either case.

Case 2:

You are on a committee to set the tuition at Clarkson. You know you have the deciding vote. Getting the tuition “right” is important for you since you are a student. You have the choice of studying the material about the tuition tonight or going downtown to the bar.

Which is the rational choice?

Case 3:

I read a daily newspaper and watch the news from time to time. When national elections come around, I do not do any special studying of the issues; I just always vote against the incumbent. If there is no incumbent, I just vote against the party of the last person in office.

Is this rational voting behavior? Can democracy prosper if everyone behaves this way about voting?

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT #8 – Due in class Monday, 10/31

Both de Tocqueville and Downs make powerful criticisms of democratic political institutions: de Tocqueville argues that they will necessarily become tyrannical, and Downs says no one who rationally optimizes the use of their time will ever make the effort to be an informed voter, which would make the results of elections and referenda essentially irrational. For **one** of these thinkers, what do you think about their conclusions?