Voluntary Associations & Democracy

Course Goals:
This course explores the economic, political, and moral functions of voluntary associations in a democracy. Through the careful reading of a variety of sources drawn from political theory, history, law, and political science, we will focus on the following questions: What is the appropriate role of voluntary associations in a free society? Do voluntary associations ever threaten liberal democracy, and if so, how can we minimize their dangers? Are voluntary associations valuable for their own sake— as expressions of the natural desires of individuals to associate freely— or mainly for their functional importance in making democracy work? Which of their functions (sociological, political, religious, economic, charitable, etc.) is most crucial? How has the standing of voluntary associations changed since the time of Alexis de Tocqueville, and what are the likely causes of the alleged decline of American associational life? How (if at all) can a rich and vibrant associational life be regenerated? The format of the course is interactive, centered on course lectures with student reactions and discussion. Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America (available for purchase online) will be our core text, supplemented by short articles and chapters to be distributed by email.

Reading Assignments:

Class #1: Course Introduction
Introduction; No assigned readings

Class #2: Spontaneous Order, Local Knowledge, and Voluntary Associations
F.A. Hayek, “Cosmos and Taxis”
F. A. Hayek, “Individualism: True and False”

Class #3: Liberal and Republican Views of Voluntary Associations
John Locke, A Letter Concerning Toleration, selections
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract, Bk. 2

Class #4: Voluntary Associations in Early America
James Madison, Federalist #10
“Alien and Sedition Acts”
“Speech of George Washington in Congress,” November 19, 1794
James Madison, “Speech in Congress on ‘Self-Created Societies’,” February 27, 1794

Class #5: Civic Associations in Tocqueville’s America
Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Vol. 1, “Author’s Introduction,” Pt. 1, Chs. 2-5;
Pt. 2, Ch. 2.

Class #6: Public Opinion, Democratic Despotism, and Civic Mediation
Class #7: Religion as a Voluntary Association

Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Vol. 2, Pt. 1, Chs. 5-14.

Class #8: Tocqueville Conclusion/In-Class Midterm


Class #9: Fraternal Organizations, Charity, and Private Welfare Assistance


Class #10: The Decline of Civic Voluntarism and Social Capital


Class #11: American Constitutional Law and the Right to Exclude?


Class #12: Final Take-Home Exams Due by Email

Course Requirements for PPOL 310

1) Attendance and active participation are expected at all class meetings.
2) In-class blue book midterm on first half of the course (review sheet distributed in advance)—50%
3) Final take-home exam (questions distributed 1 week in advance)—50%

While there is no formal grade for attendance and class participation, students who regularly distinguish themselves by the quality of their contributions to discussions may expect to receive the higher of two grades when they find themselves midway between, say, an A- and an A, or a B+ and an A-. 