

Worksheet: “Tyranny of the Majority”

Student Name _____ Date _____

The section is taken from Volume 1, Part 2, Chapter 7, of *Democracy in America*, [“Of the Tyranny of the Majority.”](#) The recent critical edition published by the Liberty Fund, translated by James Schleifer, is freely available online and has been used. Read the following passage and answer the questions at the end of the selection. Note that important academic vocabulary has been bolded in the passage and listed at the end of this worksheet. You should try to figure out the meaning of the words from the context and consult a good online dictionary such as Webster where necessary. Be sure to write down your definitions on this sheet.

An Important Footnote

In Baltimore, at the time of the War of 1812, a striking example was seen of the excesses to which the **despotism** of the majority can lead. At this time the war was very popular in Baltimore. A newspaper that was strongly against the war aroused the **indignation** of the inhabitants by its conduct. The people gathered, broke the presses, and attacked the newspaper office. Some wanted to call the militia, but it did not answer the call. In order to save the unfortunate journalists, who were threatened by the public furor, it was decided to put them in jail, like criminals. This precaution was useless; during the night, the people gathered again; the magistrates were unable to get the militia to come; the prison was forced open; one of the journalists was killed on the spot; the others were left for dead; the guilty, brought before a jury, were acquitted.

I said one day to an inhabitant of Pennsylvania: “Please explain to me why, in a state founded by Quakers and renowned for its **tolerance, emancipated** Negroes are not allowed to exercise the rights of citizens. They pay taxes; isn’t it just that they vote?”—“Don’t insult us, he answered, by thinking that our legislators have committed such a gross act of injustice and intolerance.”—“So, among you, Blacks have the right to vote?”—“Undoubtedly.”—“Then, how come at the polling place this morning, I did not see a single one in the crowd?”—“This is not the fault of the law,” the American said to me; “Negroes, it is true, have the right to present themselves at elections, but they abstain voluntarily it seems.”—“That is very modest of them.”—“Oh! it isn’t that they refuse to go, but they are afraid that they will be mistreated there. Among us, it sometimes happens that the law lacks force when the majority does not support it. Now, the majority is imbued with the greatest prejudices against Negroes, and magistrates do not feel they have the strength to guarantee to the latter the rights that the legislator has conferred.”—“What! The majority which has the privilege of making the law, also wants to have that of disobeying the law?”

Tyranny of the Majority

I regard as **impious** and **detestable** this **maxim** that in matters of government the majority of a people has the right to do anything, and yet I consider that the will of the majority is the origin of all powers. Do I contradict myself?

Tocqueville: Lesson Two. The Tyranny of the Majority

... I think that a social power superior to all others must always be placed somewhere, but I believe **liberty** is in danger when this power encounters no obstacle that can check its course and give it time to moderate itself.

Omnipotence in itself seems to me something bad and dangerous. Its exercise seems to me beyond the power of man, whoever he may be; and I see only God who can, without danger, be all powerful, because his wisdom and his **justice** are always equal to his power. So there is no authority on earth so respectable in itself, or vested with a right so sacred, that I would want to allow it to act without control or to dominate without obstacles. So when I see the right and the ability to do everything granted to whatever power, whether called people or king, democracy or aristocracy, whether exercised in a monarchy or a republic, I say: the seed of **tyranny** is there and I try to go and live under other laws.

What I most criticize about democratic government as it has been organized in the United States, is not its weaknesses as many people in Europe claim, but on the contrary, its irresistible strength. And what repels me the most in America is not the extreme **liberty** that reigns there; it is the slight guarantee against **tyranny** that is found.

When a man or a party suffers from an injustice in the United States, to whom do you want them to appeal? To public opinion? That is what forms the majority. To the legislative body? It represents the majority and blindly obeys it. To the executive power? It is named by the majority and serves it as a passive instrument. To the police? The police are nothing other than the majority under arms. To the jury? The jury is the majority vested with the right to deliver judgments. The judges themselves, in certain states, are elected by the majority. However iniquitous or unreasonable the measure that strikes you may be, you must therefore submit to it

Suppose, in contrast, a legislative body composed in such a way that it represents the majority, without necessarily being the slave of the majority's passions; an executive power that has a strength of its own; and a judicial power independent of the two other powers; you will still have a democratic government, but there will no longer be hardly any chances for **tyranny**.

I am not saying that at the present time in America **tyranny** is frequently practiced; I am saying that no guarantee against **tyranny** is found there, and that the causes for the mildness of government must be sought in circumstances and in mores, rather than in laws.

| Text-Dependent Questions | Evidence-Based Answers |
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| What do we learn about American democracy from the footnote? How are the two examples different? How are they related or similar? | |
| Why does Tocqueville consider it an “impious and detestable... maxim that in matters of government the majority of a people has the right to do anything”? | |
| Why is omnipotence bad for individuals and governments? | |

Tocqueville: Lesson Two. The Tyranny of the Majority

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| What recourse does a minority have according to Tocqueville when it suffers from an injustice at the hand of the majority? | |
| What alternative does he suggest? | |
| Does the infrequency of examples of tyranny in America count against his thesis? Why or why not. | |

Academic Vocabulary

Definition

Despotism

Indignation

Tolerance

Emancipation

Tyranny

Impious

Detestable

Maxim

Liberty