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THE POLITICS AND BUSINESS OF SELF-INTEREST FROM TOCQUEVILLE TO TRUMP

Richard Ned Lebow

International Political Theory

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The Politics and Business of Self-Interest from Tocqueville to Trump

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To my Dartmouth students who helped with this research.

Contents

List of Figures

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract Self-interest, when narrowly formulated, leads to counterproductive behavior in multiple domains that include driving, business, personal relationships, and politics. This chapter briefly lays out my claim and offers key examples in these several domains. It concludes with an overview of the remaining chapters of the book.

Keywords United States • Self-interest • Selfishness • Counterproductive behavior • Driving • Congress • Sports • Business • Relationships

It is often said that politics ends at the water's edge. Community may end at the curb. Even the most casual observation—confirmed by traffic studies—indicates that throughout America road courtesy is on the decline. Many drivers no longer signal when they turn, and increasing numbers of them run red lights. We have all seen not one, but two or three drivers in a row race through an intersection after the light has turned red.

We run lights to get ahead. To do so we break the law, risk a serious accident, and invite the police to sound their sirens and pull us over. Between 1992 and 1998, fatal accidents at traffic signals increased 18 percent, more than three times the rate of increase for all other fatal crashes during the same period.[1] From 1998 to 2007, an average of 751 people died each year in red-light running crashes. From 2007 to 2011, the total

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red-light running crash fatalities decreased 22 percent because the number of communities that introduced red-light safety cameras increased 135 percent.[2]

The potential benefits of running red lights are not great. We most likely have to stop for another light just down the road, erasing any gain. At best, we may arrive a minute or two earlier at our destination. Since we typically run red lights whether we are in a hurry or not, these few minutes are rarely critical, and hardly worth the associated risks. Yet, we consistently put marginal short-term gains above our long-term interests in health, pocket book, and legal standing. Running red lights, as common as it is, is a quintessential example of irrational behavior.

Who runs red lights? It would be reassuring to think it was mostly older drivers with bad reflexes, or teenagers, who have not yet learned the benefits of traffic safety. The former will sooner or later lose their licenses, as will the latter unless they wise up. Traffic court statistics and interviews with judges and police officers paint a different picture. There is no identifiable class of offenders. People of every age and every walk of life appear before the bench to plead guilty or offer some unpersuasive excuse that may only incite the wrath of the judge.

If running red lights is a nearly universal temptation, it is also symptomatic of a general decline in civility on America's roadways. Police confirm my observation that a high proportion of drivers fail to signal for turns, and that cutting off other cars, especially when changing lanes on the highway, is becoming more frequent. In parking lots, drivers are also more likely to scoot into spaces ahead of others who have been waiting patiently for the vehicle in the desired space to back out. Our rudeness provokes road rage. Every so often it leads to an exchange of obscene gestures or one of those dangerous races down the highway that we have all witnessed.

Dangerous driving would not warrant so much attention if it were an isolated phenomenon. I contend it is only the most readily observable manifestation of a far-reaching process of change that has been under way in our country for some time. Americans have increasingly come to view themselves as autonomous, self-interested actors, whose first, and perhaps only, loyalty is to themselves or their families. This egoistic conception of self has two far-reaching implications for behavior. It makes it difficult for us to formulate our interests rationally. By this I mean the choice of realistic goals and efficient means of achieving them. At the very least, the running of red lights violates the latter condition. It is not instrumentally rational because it assumes considerable risk without much prospect of gain.

The egoistic conception of self encourages us to treat other people as means to our ends, not as ends in their own right. This distinction, introduced by Immanuel Kant, gives formal expression to an idea that lies at the ethical core of many of the world's great philosophical and religious traditions.[3] In the ancient Greek formulation, the world initially appears divided into "me" and "everyone else," or "us" and "them." The "us" are family and friends, and perhaps, a larger kinship group. Our affection for individuals in the "us" category can promote empathy, which is the ability to see ourselves through the eyes of others. By providing an outside perspective on ourselves, empathy encourages us to recognize that we are all fundamentally equal, that none of us has an inherent claim of superiority or priority, and that we should accordingly treat others—including people with whom we have no personal connection—with the same honesty and respect we would like them to show us.[4] If our understandings of ourselves and of our interests narrow, we lose our ability to empathize, and, with it, to treat others honestly and respectfully. In extreme cases, other people are regarded as animals or things that can be used or manipulated as we wish to serve our selfish ends.

Running red lights or cutting others off on the highway is a sign that we have little or no respect for the other drivers we threaten and offend. Putting oneself at the center of the universe removes us from meaningful membership and participation in a community, and by doing so, makes it difficult, if not impossible, for us to formulate our interests intelligently. I attempt to substantiate this claim in the course of exploring the many connections among affection, empathy, community, reason, self-restraint, enlightened self-interest, and happiness.

My diving example offers a vivid and convincing illustration of narrow self-interest and its counterproductive consequences. This kind of behavior extends well beyond the road into a number of important social domains. It is increasingly prevalent in the corporate world, Congress, and American foreign policy. Behavior in any one domain generally influences that in another. As highway courtesy decreases, so too does the way people relate to one another at the workplace. This behavior is a manifestation of a deeper change in how people think about self-interest. Thought affects behavior, which in turn influences what people think about themselves. This recursive interaction is also influenced by discourses. I will show how they have changed to accommodate and further encourage changes in the framing of self-interest.

Driving and sports offer good examples of this process. Most Americans over the age of 16 spend at least part of their day behind the wheel of a vehicle, and younger people, if they are anything like the author at this age, are busy observing all drivers and their vehicles long before they are old enough to obtain a permit or license. How people drive and respond to one another on the road says something important about their values, and may also socialize them into patterns of behavior that are likely to carry over into other walks of life. Driving comes with a distinctive American mythology, famously expressed by Jack Kerouac: "Where goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?"[5] The freedom of the open road, the safety and security of speed limits, the fairness of stop lights, the opportunity of the fast lane, and everyone sharing the same road to get to their own destinations—these all reflect the best of what we think it means to live in America. Yet as we have seen, the realities of the road do not instantiate the expectations of the 1950s.

As much as driving encapsulates the mythology of American life, sports have always served as the country's preeminent metaphor. Vigorous competition, teamwork, meritocratic achievement, the chance of the underdog upset, the "love of the game," "stepping up to the plate" capture much of how Americans see themselves. A popular saying has it: "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball, the rules and realities of the game."[6] Yet in sports, as with driving, mythology and the reality do not correspond. In recent decades, the realities of sports have undeniably drifted farther away from their ideals. Players make it evident that they care more about money than victory; teams are bought instead of built; sportsmanship has declined as fistfights on the field have become more common. Steroid scandals have rocked baseball and other sports, culminating in America's heroic home-run champions shamefully testifying before Congress. While the mythology of sports remains robust, and there are always players who are exemplary and admirable, it is undeniable that there has been a change for the worse.

Business is another key component of quotidian life. The vast majority of adults devote 40-plus hours of the week to making money. The average employed American works 46 hours a week and 36 percent work more than 50 hours.[7] Most of the workforce is salaried and severely restricted in the kinds of initiatives it can exercise. People at the top of business, academic and governmental organizations have more leeway and the upper echelons of the business world has always had its share of buccaneers. The great enterprises of early capitalism like the Dutch and British East India

Companies were the creations of ruthless entrepreneurs who used violence on a large scale. The great corporations of early industrialism, like Standard Oil, US Steel, and the New York Central, were the creations of "robber barons" who resorted to bribery and other unsavory practices to build their enterprises and destroy competition. In the course of the twentieth century, American corporations were gradually brought under the rule of law, first in their domestic operations and then overseas. Most of their boards and senior management came to recognize the economic benefits of accurate accounting and quarterly reports, peaceful, and when possible, harmonious relationships with their workers, and, more recently, non-discriminatory hiring and promotion practices. They even came around to accepting the value of government regulation. As late as 1970, a survey of *Fortune* 500 CEOs found that 57 percent of them believed that the federal government should actually "step up regulatory activities."[8]

In recent decades, great progress has been made in hiring and promoting minorities and women. In other areas, standards appear to have seriously eroded. We say appear because it is very difficult to devise objective measures for these kinds of phenomena. Surveys of corporate executives, government officials and academics who study corporate behavior, and the more limited interviews I have conducted indicate a widespread belief in the spread of corrupt practices. It is even more disturbing that many of the examples insiders and experts point to are in relatively new companies or companies in the fastest growing sectors of the economy. Enron is, of course, the poster child of corporate greed. In January 2001, it was the world's largest energy trader and the fifth largest company in America measured in terms of revenue. In December of that year Enron filed for bankruptcy protection after exposure of its improper accounting forced the company to restate $586 million in earnings. Its shares lost $68 billion in value from their peak in 2000, and thousands of honest and hard-working employees lost their jobs and pensions. Former chief executive Jeffrey K. Skilling and former chairman Kenneth L. Lay were charged by federal prosecutors with conspiracy and fraud for concealing debt in off-the-books partnerships that allowed Enron to boost revenue artificially.

The Enron saga is perhaps unique in its scale and the public interest it engendered. But it is only one example recent corporate scandals that led the failure of such major companies as Arthur Anderson, Adelphia, Hollinger, Tyco, and WorldCom. The collapse of these companies was brought about by the greed of high-ranking executives and board

members who ignored their fiduciary responsibilities to employees and stockholders. Like drivers running red lights, they considered only their own selfish goal of getting ahead, which they pursued by illegal means. They drove their companies into the ground, lied to prop up the stock, and then got caught. They forced these once proud and prosperous enterprises into bankruptcy or receivership. The executives involved amassed great wealth but were ultimately disgraced. Many faced criminal prosecution, and some, like Bernard Ebbers, former CEO of WorldCom, are behind bars. Ken Lay, ex-CEO of Enron died of a heart attack between his conviction and sentencing.

Corporate scandals involve individuals, although their repercussions may ripple through the economy. There is some reason to believe that the sharp downturn in the stock market in 2001 was due to the confluence of corporate scandals and the terrorist attacks of September 11. Both events greatly undermined investor confidence. Most studies of corporate corruption focus on the internal dimension, but there is an external dimension that concerns the relationships between major companies, industrial sectors, and the government. Corruption at this level, I contend, is widespread and perhaps more damaging to the economic health of the country. The September 2005 indictments of GOP lobbyist Jack Abramoff, former White House budget official David H. Safavian, and House Majority Leader Tom Delay of Texas all testify to this phenomenon.[9]

The most serious economic corruption in the 2000s was the subprime mortgage crisis. It created a nationwide banking emergency that contributed to the US recession that lasted from December 2007 to June 2009. It was triggered by a large decline in home prices after the collapse of a housing bubble, leading to mortgage delinquencies and foreclosures and the devaluation of housing-related securities. Declines in residential investment preceded the recession and were followed by reductions in household spending and then business investment. Spending reductions were more significant in areas with a combination of high household debt and larger housing price declines.

The expansion of household debt was made possible by mortgage-backed securities and collateralized debt obligations, both of which held out the prospect of attractive rates of return due to high mortgage interest rates. When the bubble burst several major financial institutions collapsed in September 2008, helping to trigger a severe global recession.[10]

There were many causes of the crisis, with commentators assigning different levels of blame to financial institutions, regulators, credit agencies,

government housing policies, and consumers, among others. The proximate cause was the rise in subprime lending. Between 2004 and 2006, the percentage of lower-quality subprime mortgages year rose from 8 to approximately 20 percent Many of these mortgages were adjustable rate, meaning the interest on them would increase if the prime lending rate went up. Banks pushed these mortgages on customers who could ill afford higher interest rates, and made them attractive—and riskier—by lowering the down payments. In 2005, the median down payment for first-time homebuyers was 2 percent, with 43 percent of those buyers making no down payment whatsoever. The banks then resold these mortgages to unsuspecting investors, unloading their risk while making a good profit. Greed and dishonesty were the underlying cause of the recession and the widespread suffering it created. Events in recent years suggest that many institutions have yet to learn the lessons of the subprime crisis. In June 2014, U.S. Bank agreed to pay the United States $200 million to settle allegations that it violated the False Claims Act by knowingly underwriting thousands of unqualified mortgage loans insured by the Federal Housing Administration.[11]

Relations between business and government have always had the potential for serious corruption. Politicians depend on contributions to finance their reelection campaigns, and many businesses depend on, or profit greatly from, government contracts and legislation. As elections have become more costly, and the financial rewards of favorable legislation much greater, the incentives that politicians and corporate lobbyists have to cooperate have become immeasurably more pronounced. In this form of corruption, corporate executives are not enriching themselves at the expense of their company and its stockholders—both are likely to reap some benefits—they are ripping off the country, and doing so with the compliance of those in the Congress and executive branch ostensibly charged with their oversight and defense of the public interest.

Corruption of this kind became blatant in the Clinton and Bush administrations, to the point where it began to pose a threat to the health of the economy and the well-being of the average citizen. The Bush administration's unsuccessful full court press to "reform" social security was a classic example of a program of this kind. If social security needs fixing, the fairest and easiest way to provide more funds is to increase the level of income on which contributions must be paid. This would push more of the burden on to the shoulders of the wealthy, but would in practice amount to a very small increment of their annual income. Private accounts of the kind

favored by the Bush administration have a bad track record in every country in which they have been tried. The only thing certain about them are the extraordinary boon they would have represented to Wall Street, which would have received trillions of dollars of new funds to manage and invest. The pension of the average wage earner would have been put at risk to fatten the pockets of the already wealthy.

Just as egregious were the tax cuts and benefits in Bush administration budgets. The 2005 budget was typical. It called for cuts that would deny child care assistance to 300,000 children. Another line item would have made it far more difficult for working families with children to obtain food stamps, terminating this benefit for an estimated 30,000 people. Half the funds saved would have been transferred to people with incomes above a million dollars through the mechanism of a tax cut, and almost all the rest would go to people in the $200,000 plus bracket. Paul Krugman calculated that the transfer in income from poor to rich is almost one for one; the number of people who report more than a million dollars of income on their tax returns is the same as the estimated number who will lose their food stamps.[12]

The Trump administration promises to do more for the rich. At the outset, it attempted to kill "Obamacare" and remove medical coverage for 21 million Americans, all in order to reduce taxes for the richest of Americans.[13] In its first 100 days it imposed a ban on carry-on electronic devices on planes from the Middle East, allegedly on security grounds. However, analysts denied the security value of this move and others suggest it was motivated by efforts to punish Middle East airlines and benefit their American and British counterparts.[14] As I write, Donald Trump is submitting his $4.1 trillion budget for 2018 that would slash programs for the poor, from health care and food stamps to student loans and disability payments. Over the next decade, it would cut more than $800 billion from Medicaid, $192 billion from nutritional assistance, and $272 billion over all from welfare programs. It would increase the military budget by 10 percent and spend more than $2.6 billion for border security. It also lowers corporate tax rates, frees banks from the controls imposed after the subprime crisis, and restores the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy.[15]

Inequality was high between the World Wars and fell to all-time lows after 1945. It began growing again in about 1980. Today, the percentage of income going to the richest 1 percent of the population increased almost tenfold in the United States since 1945.[16] In 2012, the net worth of the 400 wealthiest Americans exceeded that of the bottom half of all

Americans.[17] Research indicates that economic gains for the rich have resulted in losses for the middle class and that the latter spends beyond its means to imitate the lifestyle of the wealthy.[18] It also indicates that because of their wealth rich Americans live 15 years longer on average than poorer peers in their age cohort.[19]

Once again, the operative mechanism is greed. It is only held in check by institutional mechanisms and the social commitments of citizens, and especially those who hold office. The latter promote concern for the welfare of others, not just oneself, and instill a sense of shame when one knowingly acts contrary to that welfare. As unrestrained self-interest has become more socially acceptable, this important barrier to greed is gradually coming down. Respect is growing for the "movers and shakers" of the corporate and political world, independently of the means they have used to achieve their ends. Powerful figures from both worlds have become not only allies, but friends. The Clinton administration lobbied Greece on behalf of Enron and the president and first lady befriended a number of contributors who were subsequently indicted for fraud. Enron's Ken Lay was a major contributor to the Bush campaign, was called "Kenny Boy" by the President and was actively considered for Secretary of the Treasury.

The Trump administration has completely blurred the distinction between political office and commercial gain. Law and convention require presidents to build firewalls between themselves and their investments. Trump refused to make public his tax returns and resisted putting his business interests into a blind trust or giving up the pursuit of deals that might enrich him.[20] He mixes business with politics, and while President-Elect closed a deal with Chinese investors in his real estate.[21] His son-in-law, Jared Kushner, blatantly used his White House connection to advance the interests of the family's real estate empire. Shortly after the election he met with Wu Xiaohui, chairman of the Anbang Insurance Group, a Chinese financial behemoth with estimated assets of $285 billion and an ownership structure shrouded in mystery. Wu and Kushner were seeking agreement on a joint venture in Manhattan: the redevelopment of 666 Fifth Avenue. Anbang has close ties to the Chinese state, and the Obama administration officials who review foreign investments for national security risk had previously raised concerns about its efforts to buy up American hotels.[22] Trump aides exploit their closeness to the President for economic gain through legal representation of, consulting with, or lobbying for conservative groups and businesses.[23] Trump's proposed "tax reforms" will benefit him personally.[24]

Narrow self-interest threatens democracy more generally. The founding fathers were deeply worried by the possibility that political leaders would abuse their power and that the republic would devolve into tyranny. They envisaged the separation of powers as a fundamental defense against this possibility. By pitting those in power against each other, they hoped to harness private vice to produce public virtue. In *Federalist* number 10, Madison argued that the size of the country and the diversity of its interests would prevent any single interest, or combination of them, from dominating the Congress. As issues changed, so would the coalitions of interests who supported and opposed legislation. Opponents on one issue would likely be future allies on some other issue, and thus had every incentive to remain on good terms and work out compromises from which all sides gained something. The same was true of representatives from different parties. Those in the majority would inevitably be out of power and in the minority at some point, and would want to be treated well and retain some influence.[25]

For all these reasons, a tradition of comity grew up in the Senate and House of Representatives. Elected officials were socialized into treating each other with courtesy and respect, and rules and traditions developed about how the majority party treated the minority. Some of these rules were self-serving in the narrow sense of protecting the power of senior members of both houses, but especially in the House of Representatives. They were also intended to moderate tensions between parties and creating cooperation across the aisles. The system broke down in the years before the Civil War. Comity reached its nadir in 1856 when Rep. Preston Brooks of South Carolina beat Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts with his cane and nearly killed him after he had made a speech criticizing a pro-slavery friend of Brooks.

Comity survived the Great Depression, the struggle between isolationists and interventionists on the eve of World War II, and the civil rights era, both marked by intense controversy and stark political differences between elected officials in both houses of Congress. Until at least the late 1970s, Republicans and Democrats treated each other with respect, and often generosity. All this has changed in recent decades, in part due to the abuses of power of the Democratic majority in both houses. The subsequent Republican majority more than paid back the Democrats back for their shortsighted behavior. Separation of the powers has also been eroded by the unprecedented primacy of the presidency and executive branch, and made more difficult in the short term by control of the executive and legislature by the same party.

The decline of comity in the Congress has been notable, and reflects a destructive "winner take all" approach to politics.[26] This is not an institutional problem but a reflection of a broader value shift in American society. Compromise and friendships across the aisles flourish when people share common values and practices, respect one another, value the institution of which they are part, and want it to function effectively and responsibly. In their absence, hostility can become acute, as it appears to have between Republicans and Democrats.[27]

The Bush administration challenged the separation of powers by attempting to exercise unqualified control over the executive branch and Congress, the latter through disregard of all the norms of comity. A widely publicized example was its successful effort in the 2004 election to defeat Senate Minority leader Thomas Daschle of South Dakota in violation of the long-standing convention that the party in power makes no national (as opposed to local) effort to unseat the minority leader. His farewell address in November 2004 was boycotted by all but five Republicans. Within the Congress, every effort was made to minimize the influence of surviving Democrats. Such policies might pay handsome dividends in the short term, but, as the founding fathers understood, are decidedly not in the real interests of either the dominant party or the country. Narrow, short-term notions of self-interest have supplanted longer-term, more enlightened conceptions and have had negative effects on both the goals sought by the Republicans and the means it is using to achieve them.

Matters escalated in the Obama administration, where Republicans sought to oppose the President by any means possible. Trump and others spread what they knew were lies about Obama, questioning whether he was born in the United States.[28] They held witch hunt hearings trying, without a shred of evidence, to make Secretary of State Hilary Clinton responsible for the loss of four American lives, and a subsequent cover-up, in a 2012 terrorist attack on the Libyan embassy.[29] In October 2013, in an attempt to kill Obamacare, Republican representatives shut down the federal government for 15 days by refusing to approve the 2014 budget. Over 800,000 federal employees were furloughed and another 1.3 million required to report to work without any certainty of being paid.[30]

Then came the derailing of Obama's Supreme Court nominee, Merrick B. Garland. Republicans, who constituted a majority on the judiciary committee, refused to conduct hearings on the nomination on the specious ground that Garland was nominated in the last year of Obama's presidency. There were 103 prior cases in which an elected President has

faced an actual vacancy on the Supreme Court and began an appointment process prior to the election of a successor. In every instance, the President was able to both nominate and appoint a replacement Justice.[31] Donald Trump nominated Neil Gorsuch for the vacant seat on the Court. Gorsuch was less forthcoming about his judicial philosophy than previous nominees, leading Democrats to filibuster against him. For the first time in history, Republicans resorted to the so-called "nuclear option," to end the filibuster and appoint Gorsuch by a simple majority instead of the required 60 votes.[32] For the foreseeable future Democrats and Republicans will be at loggerheads, with neither side interested in compromise. No real legislation is possible in these circumstances, making the Congress resemble the Weimar Republic in its final years. The immobilization of the German legislature encouraged President Hindenburg to rely on special powers to govern, paving the way for Hitler.

Matters did not improve during the Trump administration, although the Republicans controlled both houses of Congress. Even with these advantages, President Trump could not impose his ban on immigrants from selected Muslim countries or gain congressional support for so-called tax reform, or doing away with the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare). He attributed his failure to the constitutional checks and balances built in to US governance. "It's a very rough system," he said, referring to checks and balances. "It's an archaic system … It's really a bad thing for the country."[33]

Finally, we come to national security. While not immune to the influence of corporate and other special interests, foreign policy is less vulnerable to it than domestic policy. The perceived nature of what is at stake and the related belief that there are severe domestic costs for an administration seen to be playing politics with the nation's security make it certain that key issues will be managed, or at least monitored, by the White House. For these reasons, national security policy tends to reflect an administration's worldview as well as its style of doing business. In their more unilateral approach to national security, the Clinton and Bush administrations represent a striking departure from their predecessors. Since the end of the Cold War, Washington has increasingly broken free of the constraints that served its interests so effectively in the past. These constraints arise from international law, institutional obligations, norms of consultation and policy by consensus among close allies, and more general norms associated with the country's frequently proclaimed commitments to a democratic and peaceful world order.

Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Clinton administration reveled in its "unipolar" moment. Both the President and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright repeatedly referred to the United States as the "undisputed leader" and "indispensable nation."[34] Their policies and rhetoric provoked a strong reaction from close allies. German foreign minister Joschka Fischer, while distancing himself from anti-Americanism, insisted that "alliances between free democracies should not be reduced to following. Alliance partners are not satellites."[35] The Netherlands' minister of foreign trade, Anneke van Dok van Weele, warned that "Washington should stop bossing its friends."[36] As a prominent British diplomat put it, "One reads about the world's desire for American leadership only in the United States. Everywhere else one reads about American arrogance and unilateralism."[37]

American unilateralism became dramatically more pronounced in the Bush administration. The President and his advisors clearly believed they had the power to "go it alone." With the backing of Congress and more than half the electorate, they had no compunction about intervening militarily where no important national interests were at risk. Bush officials proudly asserted that they are remaking the world, and those who oppose them will be left behind in the dustbin of history. A key Bush aide told reporter Ron Suskind: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors … and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."[38]

From the outset, the President and his advisors ignored long-standing consultative procedures, rode roughshod over the interests of its closest allies, and did so with an entirely unnecessary "in your face" rhetoric. In his first year in office, the President acted against the coordinated efforts of America's closest allies on 14 issues, among them its unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, opposition to the United Nations Agree to Curb the Illicit Flow of Small Arms, and active efforts to scuttle the International Criminal Court. The administration considered itself and its country above the rules.

The Bush administration subsequently played fast and loose with the truth in selling its policies to the American public and used military force against Iraq without the backing of the Security Council—and seemingly without any serious consideration of its likely political consequences or implications. It refused to treat captured combatants and

suspected terrorists as prisoners of war in accord with the Geneva Convention, and instead shipped them off to Guantanamo Bay—outside the jurisdiction of American courts—to be held indefinitely and interrogated by legally questionable means. Other suspects were shipped off for interrogation to countries like Uzbekistan, known to extract information by torture. Numerous prisoners, originally in American hands, have died in these countries. Administration policies seriously undermined the standing of the United States in the world community. Public opinion in Europe was extremely sympathetic to the United States after 9/11, reversed itself, and came to consider it a greater threat to world peace than North Korea.[39] In Britain, those with favorable opinions of the United States dropped from 83 percent in 2000 to 56 percent in 2006. In other countries, the United States suffered an even steeper decline.[40] In 2007, a BBC World Service poll of 27 countries found that 51 percent of respondents regarded the United States negatively, a figure surpassed only by their negative evaluations of Iran and Israel, 54 and 56 percent, respectively.[41] Since the onset of the Iraq War, the United States has undergone a shift in its profile from a status quo to a revisionist power.[42]

The Obama administration spoke in a softer voice, struggled, unsuccessfully, to shut down Guantanamo, embraced multilateralism, at least in rhetoric, but continued the previous administration's commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq. It also intervened with European powers in Libya in 2011, initially to protect civilians, but soon to remove the country's dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi. After eight years in office, American forces and their allies were no closer to success—arguably further away—in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Libya is a failed state in which violence is far more pronounced and anti-Western terrorist groups have found a safe haven.[43] The long-term result of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq was an insurgency that spread through much of the region, consuming Syria and Yemen in destructive civil wars, and for a while, allowing the fundamentalist Islamic State (ISIS) to assert control over considerable portions of Syria and Iraq. The administration used airpower against them and other opponents throughout the Middle East.[44]

The point here is not the success or failure of the Obama administration, but rather its continuation of policies that are considered mainstream by the national security establishment and its academic defenders. They assert that the United States is a hegemon and accordingly entitled to special privileges because of its unique ability to uphold political and eco-

nomic order throughout the world. They revel in its role as "the world's policeman," and are prepared to act unilaterally, if necessary, toward this end.[45] In reality, the United States is not a hegemon, is not recognized as one by the rest of the world, and often acts in ways that make the world less secure—as in Afghanistan and Iraq illustrate. The same is true in the economic sphere, where a hegemon is expected to shore up global trade and investment by acting as the lender of last resort. Instead, the United States has become the borrower of the last resort, running up massive trade deficits. It also has monumental corporate debt, which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in April 2017 identified as one of three threats to international economic stability, the others being Brexit, China's credit bubble, and weak European banks.[46] Under Democrats and Republicans alike, the United States has increasingly pursued self-interest of the narrowest kind, and often at the expense of its allies and the global community as a whole.

The Trump administration offers a revealing contrast. Trump's campaign promised to "Make America Great Again," and to put its interests first in dealing with other nations. In foreign policy especially, he framed American interests in terms of narrow self-interest. He would build a wall to keep out immigrants and make Mexico pay for it, stay in NATO only if the other allies paid their fair share of its military costs, and stop foreign aid that bought American little to no influence. Democrats and many of his Republican opponents accused him of being ignorant and isolationist. With Hilary Clinton in the lead, they reaffirmed America's leading role in the world and their commitments to pursue an active, if not aggressive, foreign policy. Most criticized Obama for not intervening in Syria after its dictator Bashar al-Assad crossed the red line he drew in 2012 by using chemical agents against civilians.[47]

On April 5, 2017, Trump ordered the navy to launch 59 cruise missiles against the al-Shayrat airfield in Syria, the base from where Syria launched a horrific sarin gas attack earlier that week.[48] Many of Trump's opponents hailed this action as necessary to uphold international norms and preserve any semblance of order. Fareed Zakaria, previously an outspoken critic, declared, "I think Donald Trump became president of the United States" last night. Nicholas Kristof, an aggressive conservative Trump critic, said he "did the right thing" by bombing Syria. NBC anchor Brian Williams, whose *11th Hour* has regularly been critical of Trump, repeatedly called the missiles "beautiful," to a noisy backlash on Twitter. Antony Blinken, a deputy secretary of state under Obama, offered his support and called for

"smart diplomacy" to follow.[49] This turnaround by critics indicates just how important America's assertion of authority has become to them and how they unquestionably—and quite erroneously, in my view—equate it with the national interest.

In his first six months in office, Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Climate Treaty; attempted to repair the damage he did raising doubts about the value of NATO; tried and failed to have China restrain North Korea in its development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles capable of delivering them; threatened to punish China for dumping of steel on foreign markets, reversed himself on the "One China" policy, whose possible rejection he had suggested he might use to extract concessions from Beijing; implemented a short-lived ban on "in cabin" laptops on selected Middle Eastern airlines; took sides in the dispute in the Gulf region between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, triggering a serious regional crisis; visited Poland and implicitly lent support to its right-wing and anti-human rights government; flip-flopped repeatedly on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); curried favor with President Putin of Russia, and appeared at their meeting at the G-20 summit to accept his word that Russia made no attempt to interfere with the American presidential election; negotiated a limited cease-fire in Syria with the Russian president; continued the prior administration's support of forces fighting ISIS in Iraq; broke with existing US policy by meeting with and lending legitimacy to Turkish president and dictator of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.[50] In keeping with his belief that understanding and compromise are for weak "chumps" he has asked Congress for greatly increased military spending and proposed a 30 percent cut in the State Department. He and his Secretary of State Rex Tillerson want to eliminate some 2300 State Department jobs, and leave key ambassadorship unfilled. The Secretary of State and State Department officials have largely been excluded from inner policymaking circles.[51]

Most of these policies represent a sharp break from prior practice and have been disconcerting to America's principal allies—Britain, Germany, France, South Korea, among others—and the country's diplomats and other members of national security establishment. They appear to represent ignorance of foreign affairs, the influence of economic interest groups who have the ear of the President, confusion and infighting among his advisors, and efforts by the President to throw his weight around, as promised in his campaign, to use America's power to advance its interests. He has indeed tried to pressure allies to contribute more to NATO and

China to use its leverage to restrain North Korea, without any success. One of the distinguishing features of the kind of selfishness I am writing about is the inability of actors to formulate interests intelligently. In pursuit of gain, they not infrequently fail to gain what they are after but lose influence or standing in the process. Trump's foreign policy to date provides ample confirmation of this expectation.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Trump's foreign policy to date has been his attempt to befriend Vladimir Putin. He lavished praise on the Russian president, spoke admiringly of his former career in the KGB, said he was a better leader than Barrack Obama, supported his annexation of the Crimea, and wanted to end sanctions against Russia. He openly contradicted the consensus in the American intelligence community that Moscow interfered in the 2016 presidential election democracy. He repeatedly dismissed such claims a "fake news" and part of a "political witch-hunt." Trump and is associates had developed numerous ties with Putin and the Russians well before the election, enough to warrant an investigation by a special prosecutor.[52] Commentators and independent analysts worried that Trump was so committed to friendship with Putin that he was allowing himself to be manipulated by him.[53]

For decades Republicans were the most outspoken opponents of communism and the Soviet Union. In the last three years, the Republican right has become a great admirer of Putin and his domestic and foreign policies.[54] In a February 2017 Gallup Poll, more than three in ten Republicans had a favorable view of Putin; this was almost three times the percentage who said the same in 2015. Twice as many independents have a favorable opinion of Putin as did two years ago.[55] One explanation for this change is Trump's praise for Putin. On this and other issues, changes in Republican attitudes track more and more closely with that of Trump. Republicans like Trump, so they like who Trump likes. The same seems to hold true in France, where the French right has followed Marine Le Pen in their praise of Putin.[56] There is another substantive explanation for pro-Putin opinion in the United States and France. Trump, Le Pen, and their supporters admire Putin because he is a strong man, has no truck with democracy or the rule of law, is committed to advancing his country's interest by any means, and does not shirk from using violence at home and abroad. For Trump, Le Pen, and the American and French right, Putin is attractive because he is the quintessential leader driven entirely by self-interest—his own and his country's—and unconstrained by constitutions, courts, or norms.

Our brief survey of driving corporate and governmental corruption, Congress, and national security policy suggests that subtle but cumulative changes in the conceptions we have of ourselves can have long-term, dramatic, and even catastrophic economic and political consequences for our society as a whole. This argument runs directly counter to the conventional wisdom—better described as the religion—of capitalist America that attributes the extraordinary affluence of our country to the cumulative efforts of each of us to pursue his or her self-interest as we see fit. The supposed benefits of unrestricted egoism provide the justification for the rollback of governmental programs, regulations, and taxation long demanded by the right, begun by the Bush administration, and now being implemented with a vengeance by the Trump administration on the grounds that such "meddling" stands in the way of economic growth. It also involves a reversal in US foreign policy, and the befriending of dictators like Putin, Recep Erdoğan of Turkey, the military junta of Egypt, and Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines.

Structure of the Book

Chapter 2 examines in detail the concept of self-interest and how it became associated with material well-being. I turn to the nineteenth-century French writer Alexis de Tocqueville for the distinction between self-interest well understood and individualism. The former leads people to recognize the extent to which their interests are connected with and often enabled by those of the community. The latter reflects a narrowing of the self, withdrawal from community, and pursuit of short-term and often counterproductive goals, at its expense. Tocqueville praised early nineteenth-century Americans for their expansive and collective sense of interest and how it built the solidarity and cooperation that sustained democracy. He worried that growing affluence would promote individualism, and with it, undermine the self-restraint and concern for others, and threaten the democratic order. Tocqueville's analysis is prescient and structures the empirical chapters that follow.

Chapter 3, the first of four data chapters, analyzes presidential inaugural and state of the union speeches from Franklin Roosevelt to Donald Trump. These are the presidential speeches that attract the widest audiences and on which presidents and their speechwriters lavish the most attention. They are an excellent barometer of public attitudes, values, and expectations. My quantitative and qualitative analysis indicates a shift in

the narratives of self-interest beginning in the late 1960s that accelerates down to the present decade. Initially justifying their policies with reference to long-term national interests, presidents increasingly appeal to individual citizens on the basis of their short-term economic interests.

Chapter 4 continues this analysis, but with television situation comedies (sitcoms) as its subject. Like presidents and their speechwriters, the producers and writers of these programs have every incentive to portray behavior and values that resonate with their intended audiences. This is essential—along with humor, simple plot formats, and appealing characters—if they are to win high ratings, attract more sponsors, make them pay more for advertising, and generate bigger profits for their producers and networks. Sitcoms are less constrained in language, subject, and tone than presidential speeches because they are commercial and their characters do not have to meet the expectations of esteemed public persona. I analyze at least one sitcom for each decade from the 1950s through the current decade, from *I Love Lucy* to *Modern Family* and *Duck Dynasty*. Like presidential speeches, they reveal a shift from self-interest well understood to individualism, but also, in the most recent decade, a reaction against it.

Chapter 5 analyzes popular songs from the 1950s to the present. Songs are arguably more responsive to changing values than either presidential speeches or sitcoms. The rhetoric of presidential speeches is constrained by all the expectations that surround high public office. Sitcoms are a commercial genre, dominated by profit, making its moguls generally more cautious than adventurous and anxious to avoid offending political authority, sponsors, or any significant segment of their audience. Music is also commercial, but a more pluralistic form of entertainment that targets niche markets, and especially young people. For most of the period under study there were only three major television networks, limiting programming to a narrow bandwidth of acceptability. As youth sets most social trends, popular music, like the Internet, is usually ahead of the curve as far as media go in reflecting changes in social patterns and behavior in American society. My analysis indicates a striking shift in the formulation of self-interest in the direction of individualism.

Chapter 6 reviews and compares my findings and uses them to assess the realism of Tocqueville's fears of individualism and it social and political consequences. Tocqueville chose to study America because he thought it at the cutting edge of change. I contend that he is right with respect to formulations of self-interest, and suggest that changing conceptions of them are an important underlying cause of the political crisis the Western world now faces.

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CHAPTER 2

Self-Interest

Abstract In his renowned *Democracy in America*, nineteenth-century French aristocrat and political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville offers an insightful account of the ways in which equality and self-interest well understood combine to make Americans independent and civic-minded and democracy a successful form of government. He distinguishes between self-interest well understood and individualism, the latter a form of extreme selfishness that threatens to destroy democracy by encouraging people to advance what they perceive as their interests at the expense of the community, and in ways that are counterproductive to the goals they seek and the community on which they depend. The chapter sets up the conceptual framework for the empirical chapters that follow.

Keywords Tocqueville • Self-interest • Federalist papers • United States • Equality • Modernity

There is nothing natural about people acting primarily on the basis of individual self-interest. Individual identity is historically conditioned, took millennia to emerge, and has been regarded as unnatural by most societies for most of its existence. According to Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen, self-interest was first used as the fundamental principle of an economic model in the late nineteenth century.[1] Some economists date it

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later, to Joseph Schumpeter's 1942 book on political and economic behavior.[2]

From ancient Greece to the beginning of the modern era, self-interest was considered destructive of individuals and society alike if not held closely in check by reason and the firm hand of government. The belief that it is beneficial for society is an entirely modern concept, and found its first great expression in Mandeville's famous 1705 tract, *The Fable of the Bees*. He analogized society to a beehive, with honey the collective product of the individual actions of bees. Subtitled, *Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, it revealed the age's ignorance of insect behavior by charmingly attributing motives to individual bees. The metaphor nevertheless captured the public imagination, and to this day, the beehive remains the quintessential symbol of thrift and productivity.

Adam Smith offered a more sophisticated understanding of self-interest, and with it, a mechanism—the famous "invisible hand"—by which some kinds of self-interested behavior could have unintended but benign consequences for society. Smith's conception was so intellectually powerful and ideologically appealing to the commercial classes that it became the core text of the emerging liberal movement. Its principles, we have seen, spread beyond economics to politics, where they influenced the constitutional engineering of the founding fathers.

In contrast to many of his contemporary disciples, Smith distinguished between mere appetite and enlightened self-interest. Like Hobbes, he understood that untrammeled pursuit of the former would quickly lead human beings back to a state of nature, where they would be fearful for their life and possession, and where the kind of cooperation, investment, and planning so necessary for economic growth would be all but impossible. He thought the economic sphere was particularly vulnerable to this kind of excess, where it led to either chaos or order in the form of monopolism. He condemned European exploitation of less developed societies as the most extreme contemporary example of the latter, and a vivid illustration of the destructive consequences of unchecked greed.[3]

Smith was adamant that "A society cannot subsist unless the laws of justice are tolerably observed."[4] Unlike Hobbes, who relied on a Leviathan in the form of a powerful sovereign, Smith harked back to Aristotle and the stoics for his understanding of the human psyche and the possibility of developing effective internal constraints. These constraints were based on sympathy and the need for self-esteem. Sympathy leads us to identity with the feelings and needs of others by imagining how we would feel in their

circumstances. It encourages charity and self-restraint. The love and admiration we feel for others also leads us to emulate their qualities. We are to some degree impartial observers of our own character and conduct and are only happy when the approbation of others confirms our own self-evaluation. "Their praise," Smith argues, "necessarily strengthens our own sense of our own praise-worthiness." We are accordingly encouraged to control our passions to maintain our dignity. In the right circumstances people are strongly motivated to act morally out of self-respect and the dread of inward disgrace.

Tocqueville

French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville traveled around the United States in 1831–1832 and published a two-volume work in 1835 and 1840 based on his observations and interviews. He was drawn to America by its seeming ability to construct a peaceful democratic order.[5] After a nine-month visit, he came away convinced that America offered both hope and a cautionary tale to his countrymen. It proved that moderate democracy (i.e., popular government) was possible, but he warned that it carried with it the seeds of a new form of tyranny. John Stuart Mill rightly described *Democracy in America* as "the first philosophical book ever written on Democracy, as it manifests itself in modern society."[6] It quickly became a classic, and is the most widely quoted book about the United States.

Tocqueville was familiar with the writings of Adam Smith, and also what French philosophers Condillac and Montesquieu had to say about self-interest. Condillac described enlightened self-interest as "self-interest well understood," a concept that Tocqueville elaborates. He considers it a doctrine "marvelously accommodating to the weaknesses of men" because it "turns personal interest against itself, and to direct the passions, it makes use of the spur that excites them." By focusing on their longer-term goals, men develop the incentive to exercise restraint and to make "little sacrifices each day" in pursuit of longer-term goals. The cumulative effect of these sacrifices is to form "a multitude of citizens who are regulated, temperate, moderate, farsighted, masters of themselves; and if it does not lead directly to virtue through the will, it brings them near to it insensibly through habits."[7]

Tocqueville was struck by how much more enlightened Americans were in this regard than his compatriots. The French wanted to keep whatever they had for themselves. Americans were anxious to explain how

"enlightened love of themselves constantly brings them to aid each other and disposes them willingly to offers some time and wealth to the good of the state." Each citizen is prepared to "sacrifice a part of his particular interests to save the rest." In doing so, they recognize that they were ultimately helping and enriching themselves.[8]

Like Aristotle, Machiavelli, and other representatives of the Republican tradition, Tocqueville makes a fundamental distinction between democratic and aristocratic constitutions. But, unlike Aristotle, he considers them historically specific regimes, each associated with a different set of conceptions people have about themselves and their society. Democracy had a bad reputation among the ancients. Plato described it as the precursor to tyranny and Aristotle considered it the worst form of government. Many of Tocqueville's contemporaries associated it with the French Revolution, and the very word democracy conjured up images of class war, anarchy, and violence. Tocqueville believed that democracy had great potential, and, aside from tyranny, the only possible regime in a world where equality was becoming the dominant ordering principle.[9]

Tocqueville differed in this regard from most of the American founding fathers. They feared the demos and wanted to minimize its power through representative institutions, checks and balances, and federalism. Tocqueville put more trust in the practices of daily life than he did in the power of institutions. Mores, customs, and manners, as Montesquieu described them, were the inherited set of religious, social, and political practices that defined the society and its practices. They were neither created by reason nor particularly responsive to its dictates. "Society is all pervasive," Tocqueville wrote to a friend, "the individual takes the trouble to be born; for the rest, society takes him in its arms like a nurse."[10]

For Tocqueville, the most beneficial of these practices were religion and self-interest well understood. He described religion as the foremost of American institutions, and one that provided a nice counterpoint to the law. The law allows the American people "to do everything," while religion "prevents them from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything."[11] Self-interest well understood led Americans to extend their definition of themselves to incorporate their community, if not their nation. It directed their energies into socially useful channels. Religion and self-interest well understood were more the product of socialization and practice than of reflection and reasoning. They lead to virtue not through the exercise of the will, but through the inculcation of good habits.

Unlike Burke and other conservatives, Tocqueville did not conceive of social practices as organic or "natural." They were artificial and constructed. He saw voluntary associations as particularly important in this regard because they were the principal mechanism in shaping citizens' understandings of society and providing them with the organizational skills and confidence necessary for self-government. "A man understands the influence that the well-being of the country has on his own; he knows that the law permits him to contribute to producing this well-being, and he interests himself in the prosperity of his country at first as a thing that is useful to him, and afterwards as his own work."[12] Through participation in such associations, "the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed."[13] Tocqueville goes so far as to describe the art of association as "the mother science." He envisages associations as a supplement to government, just as he understands government to be essential to their development and functioning.[14]

Democracy in America can be read as an attempt by Tocqueville to convince his fellow Europeans that democratic government could be moderate if infused by a spirit of civic-mindedness that muted class conflict and restrained the pursuit of material self-interests.[15] His arguments bear a superficial resemblance to those who regard the untrammeled pursuit of self-interest as beneficial for society. Constant, Guizot, Madison, and Mill were all confident that reason could constrain the passion for material possessions that liberalism had unleashed when it undermined traditional authority. Tocqueville was not persuaded. He understood how difficult it is for reason to constrain appetite or spirit in the long term. He put less trust than utilitarians in the efficacy of instrumental reason. These Enlightenment writers, he wrote, live in "an ideal city of the imagination" where "everything appeared simple and coordinated, uniform, equitable, and in conformity with reason."[16]

Tocqueville offers a jaundiced and amusing account of how self-interest came to be viewed so positively. It was always present as a motive, he insists, but never publicly acknowledged by the aristocracy. They spoke only of the beauties of virtue and forgetting about oneself while serving God, all the while furtively calculating what was in their best interest. When the power of the aristocracy declined, and society and government became more democratic, "moralists became frightened at this idea of sacrifice" and no longer dared offer it to the human mind. They were "reduced to inquiring whether the individual advantage of citizens would not be to work for the happiness of all." When these so-called philosophers

discovered instances where individual interest benefited the general interest, they brought them to light, and little by little such observations were multiplied. "What was only an isolated remark becomes a general doctrine, and one finally believes one perceives that man, in serving those like him, serves himself, and that his particular interest is to do good."[17]

Tocqueville nevertheless makes some genuflections in the direction of countervailing passions and the invisible hand. In an unpublished fragment of *Democracy in America*, he acknowledges the possibility that one could "use Democracy to moderate Democracy."[18] In the published version, he insists that self-interest well understood has the power to "turn personal interest against itself, and to direct the passions, it makes use of the spur that excites them."[19] He invokes a weak form of the invisible hand in his quasi-utilitarian defense of self-interest well understood. It has a leveling effect in two different and reinforcing ways. By legitimating self-interest, it encourages everyone to work for their own betterment, and simultaneously discourages the pursuit of such goals as glory and power. It thus "prevents some men from mounting far above the ordinary level of humanity," while keeping many others from becoming indolent or poor. Tocqueville urges his readers to adopt a system level view of its effects: "Consider some individuals, they are lowered. View the species, it is elevated."[20]

For Rousseau, savage man is distinguished from primitive man by his cognitive abilities. As these develop, the strong passion associated with *amour de soi* (love of self) gives way to the weaker and more disruptive ones arising from *amour propre* (self-esteem that depends on the assessments of others). For Tocqueville, moderns are also distinguished by their cognitive abilities; they prompt people to establish categories and typologies and to conceive of general ideas and clusters of related ideas. This kind of reflection ultimately leads people to reject all social distinctions and the hierarchies they sustain.[21] Modern people are distinguished from their predecessors by their "ardent, insatiable, eternal and invincible" passion for equality." Freed from the social constraints of the old regime, they become creatures of boundless energy with ceaseless "thirst for gain."[22] Tocqueville describes the principle of equality as *une pensée mère*, or underlying force that shapes the context of modern life and his study of it in America.[23]

Tocqueville is struck by the extent to which equality and its unalloyed expression in self-interest has been universally accepted in America, where it is "the foundation of all actions." Americans repeatedly invoke

"enlightened love of themselves" to explain why they come to each other's aid, willingly pay taxes, and devote time to public service. The doctrine of self-interest is so entrenched that even when citizens act altruistically out of natural sympathy for others, they hasten to explain their behavior in terms of self-interest. He wryly comments that "they would rather do honor to their philosophy than to themselves."[24] If we compare this description to the earlier one of aristocrats who acted entirely out of self-interest but justified their behavior—even to themselves—on the basis of altruism, we see the striking opposition Tocqueville intends between the old order and democracy. Modernity is "healthier" in a double sense: people acknowledge their commitment to their self-interest, and those motivated by "self-interest well understood" are paradoxically more likely to act altruistically. Tocqueville's invocation of "natural sympathy" as the cause of this altruism stands Rousseau on his head. Rousseau associates it with *amour de soi*, and laments its passing, or at least decline, as the result of civilization. Tocqueville envisages the possibility of strengthening "natural sympathy," and given its association in Rousseau with a past golden age, raises the possibility of recapturing some of its better features if equality and democracy become universal practices.

Tocqueville's beliefs about modernity and its consequences are complex and deeply ambivalent. He considers the pursuit of riches politically useful but intellectually and spiritually stultifying. "Self-interest well understood" has the comparative advantage of being clear and uncomplicated; it is capable of attaining its goals without much calculation, and is thus "within the reach of all intellects."[25] It holds out the prospect of improving the general level of society and reducing the likelihood of war because "commerce is the natural enemy of all violent passions."[26] The spread of equality has a general leveling effect, making wealth the only social distinction that is acknowledged. It does away with other goals, formerly associated with the spirit, or *thumos*, that drove men to excel in hope of achieving honor and fame. Tocqueville laments the decline of the spirit and growing dominance of the appetite, which make society both "agitated" and "monotonous."[27]

Following Plato and Aristotle—and his more immediate predecessors, Rousseau and Smith—Tocqueville believes that the appetite for wealth, once aroused, can never be satisfied. The more riches people obtain, the more they want, and the more they defer gratification in search of additional wealth. In America, material well-being has made people less happy because "the poor are consumed with obtaining wealth, and the rich with

the fear of losing it." Those who possess fortunes "have enough material enjoyments to conceive the taste for these enjoyments and not enough to be content with them. They never get them except with effort, and they indulge in them only while trembling. They therefore apply themselves constantly to pursuing or keeping these enjoyments that are so precious, so incomplete, and so fleeting."[28]

Tocqueville diagnoses a similar pathology with respect to equality. When hierarchy is the ordering principle of society, people are generally oblivious to the strongest inequalities. The more equality becomes enshrined as a goal, and the more it is achieved in practice, the least inequality is immediately perceived and deeply resented. Paradoxically, the "desire for equality always becomes more insatiable as equality is greater." People "constantly believe they are going to seize it, and it constantly escapes their grasp. They see it from near enough to know its charms, they do not approach it close enough to enjoy it, and they die before having fully savored its sweetness."[29]

There is a darker political side to equality and democracy. The benefits of equality are apparent at the outset as they furnish a "multitude of little enjoyments daily to each man." The evils that equality brings only become manifest "little by little; they insinuate themselves gradually into the social body."[30] The first of these evils is the tyranny of the majority. As citizens become more equal and alike they are less likely to follow blindly the opinions of another man or class. Their similarity with others gives them "an almost unlimited trust in the judgment of the public." The very equality that makes them independent of their fellow citizens leaves them "isolated and without defense against the action of the greatest number."[31] In the absence of meaningful debate, citizens can easily be misled by politicians, especially by those who advocate unlimited expansion of popular power. Instead of restraining officials, elections can become the vehicle for destroying real democracy.[32] Democracy has the potential to "extinguish the intellectual freedom that the democratic social state favors, so that the human spirit, having broken all the shackles that classes or men formerly imposed on it, would be tightly chained to the general will of the greatest number."[33] This transformation, Tocqueville believes, is already under way in the United States, where the majority furnishes citizens with "a host of ready-made opinions, and thus relieves them of the obligation to form their own." He laments: "I do not know any country where, in general, less independence of mind and genuine freedom of discussion reign than in America."[34]

The tyranny of the majority is initially developed in volume one of *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville revisits the concept in the conclusion

to volume two, where he suggests the most likely way despotism could come about would be through the depoliticizing tendencies of individualism. As people withdraw into their private lives, political skills and interests decline, making the population politically passive and vulnerable to exploitation by those who cater to their most immediate pleasure. He struggles to find a name for this kind of despotism because it is like nothing that has preceded it. It is more extensive but milder than traditional forms of tyranny, and "degrades men without tormenting them."[35] Sheldon Wolin astutely observes that Tocqueville understands the tyranny of the majority as simultaneously the triumph of democracy and its parody. Its distinctive characteristic "is not regimentation but privatization, not Brezhnev drabness but glitter and lavish consumption."[36] Following Wolin's lead, it is probably best to think of Tocqueville's individualism as "privatism" because there is nothing positive about it—as there is with the common understanding of individualism. Rather, it represents a withdrawal into the private sphere with a loss of interest or commitment to community.

The tyranny of the majority puts into sharper perspective Tocqueville's distinction between "self-interest well understood" and "individualism." The former is a product of democratic culture and essential to its survival. The latter is pathological, an extreme form of selfishness, and also a product of equality and democracy. In democratic societies, "devotion toward one man becomes rarer: the bond of human affections is extended and loosened." Individuals increasingly develop the habit "of always considering themselves in isolation, and they willingly fancy that their whole destiny is in their hands." If this process continues, Tocqueville, envisages a bleak future:

> I see an innumerable crowd of like and equal men who revolve on themselves with repose, procuring the small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn and apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others: his children and his particular friends form the whole human species for him; as for dwelling with his fellow citizens, he is beside them, but he does not see them; he touches them and does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone, and if a family remains for him, one can at least say that he no longer has a native country.[37]

In the *Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, published in 1856, Tocqueville is more specific in linking the threat of tyranny to the nature of modernity. In his introduction to this volume, he promises to

> show how a government, both stronger and more autocratic that the one which the Revolution had overthrown, centralized once more the entire administration, made itself all-powerful, suppressed our dearly bought liberties, and replaced them by a mere pretense of freedom; how the so-called "sovereignty of the people" came to be based on the votes of an electorate that was neither given adequate information nor an opportunity of getting together and deciding on one policy rather than another; and how the much vaunted "free vote" in matters of taxation came to signify nothing more than the meaningless assent of assemblies tamed to servility and silence.[38]

Tocqueville became increasingly pessimistic about the future of the United States. Sectionalism and division over slavery threatened the survival of the Republic, and so did the apparent decline of civic values. It was an open question as to whether people would withdraw into their private worlds of individual interest or sustain civil society through participation in associations. He wanted to believe that the future belonged to democracy, not tyranny. He identified three factors that helped to sustain democracy in the United States: the unique physical situation in which providence placed the country, the laws, and the habits and mores of the people.[39] With regard to the laws, he praises the federal structure of the government, the liveliness of township institutions, and the independence of the judiciary.[40] The first two check central authority, while the judiciary restrains and channels majority opinion.[41] Pluralism and decentered authority depend at least as much on civic involvement as they do on the formal constitutional structures. And by civic involvement, Tocqueville meant participation in public affairs and government with the general interest of the community in mind. Every example he offers in his discussion of associations (i.e., building public highways, raising churches, holding festivals, distributing books, opposing intemperance) concerns citizens coming together for the betterment of their community.[42]

Tocqueville's differentiation of public spirit from economic interest as motives for political action bears more than a passing resemblance to Rousseau's distinction between the general will and the will of all.[43] In contrast to Rousseau, Tocqueville explicitly distinguishes economics from politics. The general argument of *Democracy in America* is that diligent pursuit of individual economic self-interest contributes to the general welfare, but that unrestrained pursuit of wealth is damaging to the political culture because it leads people to withdraw from public life and devote their energy and attention to private goals. This weakens civil society and

risks making politics a struggle for obtaining economic advantages instead of a vehicle regulating economic activity in accordance with the broader needs of the nation. The sectional issues that threaten the Republic have become acute precisely because of this transformation; the great political parties are no longer based on principles but on "material interests."[44]

Tocqueville's remedy is the political education of the bourgeoisie. As the dominant class in America, it must provide guidance for the society through the example of its lifestyle and direct political leadership. Its pressing need is to develop a role conception independent of and above its economic interests. He hammers away at this theme in *Democracy in America*, and it reappears in his later writings. Aristocracy is out of the question in America, but the higher bourgeoisie might be persuaded to internalize its positive values: courage, pride, principled ambition, and the desire for distinction coupled with a sense of duty and love of liberty.[45] The judiciary, by which he meant the courts, judges, and lawyers, came closest to realizing these values and is the closest thing Americans have to an aristocracy.[46]

Tocqueville acknowledges that the values and ambitions he wants to instill in the American political class are all manifestations of the concept of honor. The feudal honor of the aristocracy derived from bravery in battle, but he insists this is only one kind of honor. "Every time men assemble in a particular society, an honor is established among them right away, that is to say, a collection of opinions proper to them concerning what should be praised or blamed."[47] The concept of honor taps into the universal drive for recognition associated with the spirit and can reasonably be adapted to democratic societies. American honor is characterized by "the peaceable virtues that tend to give a regular appearance in the body social and that favor business." Chastity is also an important form of honor because it sustains "the inner order of the family."[48]

To modern readers, Tocqueville's arguments appear either prescient or quaint. He is a liminal figure, caught between the old aristocratic order based on hierarchy and inherited privileges, and the new bourgeois society whose organizing principle was equality. He described himself as "nicely balanced between the past and the future."[49] On one level this is an accurate depiction. Like Thucydides and Montesquieu, Tocqueville is a representative of the old order who is reconciled to the emergence of the new, and strives to create a synthesis of the best of both worlds.[50] His arguments also suggest imbalance in the sense that they expose rather than

resolve tensions—even contradictions—between the old and new and within the new. He understands that equality has become the supreme principle of democracies and that people "want equality in freedom, and if they cannot get it, they still want it in slavery. They will tolerate poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not tolerate aristocracy."[51] Yet, he hopes to resurrect values associated with the aristocracy and imbue the political class with them in order to check the worst consequences of equality and the individualism to which it gives rise.

Tocqueville understands that the values associated with honor would set the political class apart from other Americans and establish a visible if open hierarchy, and that all hierarchies, except those based on wealth, are anathema to Americans. He also recognizes that he is bucking the tide as aristocratic values were dying out among the political elite. He acknowledges that "The race of American statesmen has shrunk singularly in a half century," leaving only "a small number of remarkable men" on the political scene in comparison to the greatness of the founding fathers.[52] For all their faults, the Federalists were motivated by grand ideas and goals, and for that reason out of touch with the people after independence was won. Their successors, the Jeffersonian Republicans, are successful, he notes, because they speak the language of the people and appeal to their material interests.[53]

Tocqueville did not foresee the industrialization of America, but he did predict the likely emergence of an entrepreneurial class that would acquire wealth and power on the basis of their intellectual and management skills. This new elite would not have the same sense of moral responsibility as the best of the old nobility because there was no genuine bond between wealthy industrialists and the poor workers. He warns that the emerging manufacturing aristocracy "is one of the hardest that has appeared on earth; but it is at the same time one of the most restrained and least dangerous." These modifiers are left unexplained and unjustified.[54]

By the logic of Tocqueville's arguments, the emergence of a dominant technocratic class, unrestrained by either traditional mores or governmental regulation, could be expected to lead to a society openly committed to the principle of equality, whose citizens were "free" in the sense of being autonomous, and, for that reason, more enslaved. If so, the promise of modernity would turn out to be a cruel joke and "the kind of oppression with which democratic peoples are threatened will resemble nothing that has preceded it in the world."[55]

Conclusion

Tocqueville recognizes the liberating effects of reason, how it energizes human beings freed from the constraints of hierarchy and brings about a deep commitment to equality. He welcomes reason's assault on hierarchy, but hopes that religion and mores can survive in the modern world and constrain the more destabilizing consequences of economic self-interest. His emphasis on religion, traditions, and mores is in tune with the Counter Enlightenment, although, as noted, he sees nothing natural or organic about inherited practices. "What has always struck me in my country," Tocqueville wrote to a friend, "has been to see ranged on one side the men who prized morality, religion, order; and on the other those who live liberty [and] the equality of men before the law. This spectacle has struck me as the most extraordinary and the most deplorable ever offered to the eyes of man; for all these things that we thus separate are, I am certain of it, indissolubly united in the sight of God."[56]

Tocqueville is an optimist *and* a pessimist. If balance prevails—if appetite and spirit can be constrained and educated—democracy will endure, spread to other developed countries, and bring about a bright future for humankind. If not, the Western world at least will fall under the sway of a new and more dangerous kind of tyranny. On this issue, there is no middle ground, and the closest Tocqueville comes to finding one is acknowledging the possibility of both outcomes in his prediction that Russia (tyranny) and the United States (democracy) are harbingers of the future.

Rousseau and Smith observed that standing in society is increasingly attained through the acquisition of material goods. Tocqueville countered with his observation that in democratic societies like America, the wealthy had strong incentives to hide rather than their display their wealth. This is certainly no longer true, and very wealthy people who live simple lifestyles are regarded as strange by ordinary people—the very class of people whom Tocqueville argues would greet lavish displays of wealth with great hostility. Instead, they are enthralled. *People Magazine*, the television series "The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," and other productions that showcase profligate luxury attract millions of readers and viewers. Media moguls cater to the desire of the less well-off to imagine themselves as rich and famous, something, most of them understand, possible only in escapist fantasies. To the detriment of society, the motives of appetite and spirit have increasingly been collapsed in theory and practice.

Tocqueville nevertheless has much to teach us. He struggles to find a middle position that avoids the naïve expectations of the Enlightenment and its present-day standard bearers—neoliberal exponents of globalization—and the deep pessimism of the Counter Enlightenment—expressed most forcefully by its postmodernist critics. His ideal is a syncretic order that combines the best of the old with the best of the new, that seeks to broaden the horizons of the bourgeoisie political class while simultaneously opening its ranks to newcomers. He recognizes the difficulty of creating such a society; its initial success in America was due as much to its physical isolation and absence of an aristocracy as it was to the spread of principles of equality. He understands its fragility, as it is dependent on self-interest well understood, brings individuals to the realization that their interests are best served when the community as a whole prospers. Self-interest well understood is in turn dependent on an identity that is partially collective and long term in its vision.

Following Plato and Aristotle, Tocqueville stresses the way in which good practices, including those associated with self-interest well understood, are established and maintained by appropriate role models and self-reflection. They are not enforced by the state, nor could they be. At best, community pressure can encourage compliance by conferring respect on those who act in its interest, and withholding it from those who do not.

Tocqueville acknowledges that self-interest well understood is vulnerable to counterexamples and arguments that encourage citizens to limit their commitments to themselves or their families and think of their interests in purely material terms. The discourse of modern economic theory, which defines interest in individual terms and foregrounds instrumental rationality, is such an argument, especially in its most extreme form: the laissez-faire economics of the Hayek–Friedman school.

Even more damaging—because they reach larger audiences—are the kinds of assertions to which we are increasingly exposed about the individual and collective benefits of greed. Economic theory is a recondite subject, accessible only to a highly trained, college-educated elite. Anybody can proclaim the benefits of greed, and often the people who do—among them prominent evangelical ministers, neoconservative journalists, and Republican legislators—have at best a simplistic understanding of laissez-faire economic theory. The two discourses are nevertheless mutually sustaining. My analysis will accordingly focus on discourse and practice, the ways in which dominant narratives undermine self-interest well understood and what, if anything, can be done to sustain and strengthen it. Is

Tocqueville's strategy of encouraging honor through public service a viable option? Or do we require more radical means of encouraging citizens to look beyond their material interests, not only because this is necessary to sustain democracy, but because it is the only route to true happiness.

Notes

1. Amartya Sen, "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6, no. 4 (1977), pp. 317–344, attributes this innovation to F. Y. Edgeworth, Mathematical Psychics, published in 1881.
2. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1942); Jane J. Mansbridge, "The Rise and Fall of Self-Interest in the Explanation of Political Life," in Jane J. Mansbridge, ed., *Beyond Self-Interest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 3–24.
3. T. W. Hutchison, "Adam Smith and *The Wealth of Nations*," *Economic Journal*, Vol. 86, no. 343 (1976), pp. 481–492.
4. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), especially Part III.
5. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, eds., Harvey C, Mansfield and Debra Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), I, "Introduction," pp. 3–15.
6. John Stuart Mill, "M. de Tocqueville on Democracy in America," in John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill,* volume XVIII*: Essays on Politics and Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963–91), pp. 47–90.
7. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. II, part 1, ch.1, p. 403. II, pt. 2, ch. 8, p. 501.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., I.2.9., p. 301. "I feel myself brought to believe that there will soon no longer be room in them [European nations] except for either democratic freedom or the tyranny of the Caesars."
10. Letter to Charles Stoffels, 21 April 1830, cited in Edward T. Gargan, *Alexis de Tocqueville: The Critical Years, 1848–1851* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1955), p. 4, n. 7.
11. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, I.2.9, p. 280.
12. Ibid., I.2.6, p. 225.
13. Ibid., II, 2.5, II, 4.7, pp. 489–492, 666–673.
14. Ibid., II.2.5., p. 492. Mansfield, "Introduction," p. lxxii, rightly accuses Tocqueville of exaggerating the importance of associations.

15. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Introduction, pp. 12–13, is fairly explicit about his goal.
16. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Régime and the French Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1955), pp. 138–142, for his view of writers who value pure reason above political observation and experience.
17. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II.2.8, pp. 500–501.
18. Ibid., I, "Introduction," pp. 5–7.
19. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II, pt. 2, ch. 8, p. 501.
20. Ibid., II.2.8, p. 502.
21. Ibid., II.1.3, pp. 411–412.
22. Ibid., II.2.1., p. 482.
23. Ibid., Introduction, pp. 5–6; Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds; The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 141–143, for a discussion of this concept.
24. *Democracy in America*, II.2.8, pp. 501–502.
25. Ibid., II.2.8, p. 502.
26. Ibid., II.3., 21, p. 609.
27. Ibid., II.3.17, pp. 587–588.
28. Ibid., II.2.10, p. 507.
29. Ibid., II.2.14, pp. 513–514.
30. Ibid., II.2.1, pp. 480–481.
31. Ibid., II.1.2., pp. 409–410.
32. Ibid., I, 2.2, p. 169.
33. Ibid., II.1.2., pp. 409–410.
34. Ibid., I.2.7, pp. 235–238.
35. Ibid., II.4.6., p. 662.
36. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two*, p. 569.
37. *Democracy in America*, II.4.6, p. 663.
38. Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French* Revolution, p. xi.
39. *Democracy in America*, I.2.9, pp. 264–265.
40. Ibid., p. 274.
41. Ibid., I.1.2., pp. 40–41.
42. Ibid., I.2.4., pp. 180–181; II.2.5, p. 489.
43. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin, 2006), Book 1, ch. 6, Book 11, ch. 3. The general interest refers to the common interest, and the will of all to the collection of private interests.
44. *Democracy in America*, I.2.2., p. 169.
45. Ibid., I.2.10, p. 383; II.4.7. Sharon R Krause, *Liberalism Without Honor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), for a more extensive discussion of this topic.
46. Ibid., I.2.8, pp. 251–258.

47. Ibid., II.3.18, pp. 589–599.
48. Ibid., II.3.9, pp. 563–565.
49. Letter to Reeve, 22 March 1837, Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. J-P Mayer 4th ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1951–), VI, no. 8, pp. 37–38.
50. Richard Ned Lebow, *Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 26–34, 284–304, for an elaboration of this theme.
51. *Democracy in America*, II.2.1, p. 482.
52. Ibid., I.2.5, p. 188, I.2.2.
53. Ibid., I.2.2.
54. Ibid., II.2.20, pp. 530–532.
55. Ibid., II.4.6., p. 662.
56. Quoted in George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 751.

CHAPTER 3

Presidential Speeches

Abstract Presidential inaugurals and state of the union addresses are carefully crafted to appeal to the widest audience in language they understand and approve. Using quantitative and qualitative analyses of these speeches from the Truman to Trump administrations the chapter shows how framings of self-interests have consistently narrowed—regardless of the party of the President—to reflect more selfish framings.

Keywords United States • Presidents • Inaugural and state of the union addresses • Self-interest

When, how, and why did popular discourses move away from something close to what Tocqueville considers self-interest well understood in the direction of what he calls individualism? In this and the next three chapters I tackle the how question by tracking four important discourses over six decades: presidential speeches, television situation comedies (sitcoms), popular music, and comic strips. They indicate a shift in their portrayal of self-interest that begins in the late 1960s and accelerates in recent decades. Presidential addresses are the subject of this chapter. Content analysis reveals that instead of justifying their policies with reference to long-term national interests, presidents increasingly appeal to individual citizens on the basis of their short-term economic interests.

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My quantitative and qualitative analyses of presidential speeches, sitcoms, songs, and comics tell us something about the process by which discourses evolve. Key to change is the interaction between words and deeds. As behavior becomes more at odds with established norms, the meanings of words and phrases change to bridge this gap. These new constructions allow, even encourage, the behavior in question. New meanings and phrases represent a form of hypocrisy, which becomes increasingly pronounced. At a certain point, it no longer succeeds in reconciling words and deeds and new discourses emerged to "normalize" behavior that has by now become increasingly acceptable. With respect to self-interest, alternative discourses offering a benign take on greed became prominent in the 1980s. They were developed by intellectuals in and outside the academy and include neoliberalism, neoconservatism, rational choice, and evolutionary biology.

My sample of presidential addresses includes all inaugural and state of the union addresses from Franklin Delano Roosevelt, elected for a fourth term in 1944, to Donald Trump, elected in 2016. These are the presidential speeches that attract the widest audiences and on which presidents and their speechwriters lavish the most attention. President George W. Bush's 2006 State of the Union Address was televised on the four major broadcast networks (NBC, ABC, CBS, and FOX), three cable news networks (CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC), and three Spanish language cable networks (Telemundo, Telefutura, and Azteca America). It was viewed in more than 30 million homes, or 35 percent of television-owning households.[1] President Obama's second inaugural address, delivered in January 2009, had a record television audience of 38 million.[2] President Trump caused a huge political stir by insisting—contrary to fact—that more people attended his inauguration than any previous one.[3] Trump's efforts, and those of his press secretary, to sustain their quickly discredited claim offer evidence of the importance administrations attach to inaugurations and their culminating speeches.

Presidential speeches are intended to influence people—the wider public as well as the Congress—so their authors exercise great care in the language they use, the values to which they appeal, and the policies they advocate. Successful presidents and their speechwriters have a finely honed skill at putting their fingers on the public pulse; this is, after all, a precondition of political success. For all these reasons, presidential inaugural and state of the union speeches are an excellent barometer of public attitudes, values, and expectations. As Franklin Roosevelt so ably demonstrated in

his inaugural, state of the union and "Fireside Chats," all of which were broadcast live on radio, speeches can be a powerful vehicle for molding public opinion and mobilize the country in support of desired ends.

I analyzed all 85 State of the Union and Inaugural Addresses delivered by US presidents since 1945.[4] I used a software package developed by Dartmouth Professor Emeritus of Mathematical Social Sciences Joel Levine.[5] Called "Data Without Variables," it compares the frequency of word usage in multiple documents. The program takes multiple text documents and locates each text on a field as a function of their use of words and the frequency. It then rearranges the words in relationship to each of their texts. The more frequently a word appears in any text, the closer it is displayed to that text in the non-Euclidean landscape of the field.[6]

The program provides totals for every word used by a president, a very long list indeed. The first step is to eliminate words that have no connection with interest, directly or indirectly. I removed words that were neutral or not germane to the political messages of the speeches. I then combined words that conveyed the same or very similar meanings. For example, "fair," "fairly," and "fairness" were combined under "fairness," "women," "women's," "ladies," under "women," and "child" and "children" under "children."[7] Of the words that remain, very few, if any, have inherent meaning. Most words only take on meaning in context, so their use within a speech must be examined to see what purpose they might be intended to serve. Words like "proud," "immigrants," "social security," "fairness" can have radically different meanings or opposing valences.

Once important words are identified—but before they are coded for meaning—their frequency is calculated and displayed on a grid.[8] In Table 1, the red text is used to identify key words in inaugural addresses and the green for state of the union addresses. The words in inaugurals are more tightly clustered together than those of state of the unions. There is a general progression within the cluster of inaugural addresses from the upper right—self-interest well understood—to the lower left, that is, individualism. Presidents from the late 1940s through the 1960s—Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon, and Johnson—are grouped fairly closely together in the center right despite party differences. Presidents from the 1980s to 2008—Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Clinton, and George Bush—anchor the lower left (Fig. 3.1).

From 1948 to 2008, decade in office, not party affiliation, offers the best account for their location. The only significant outlier is Jimmy

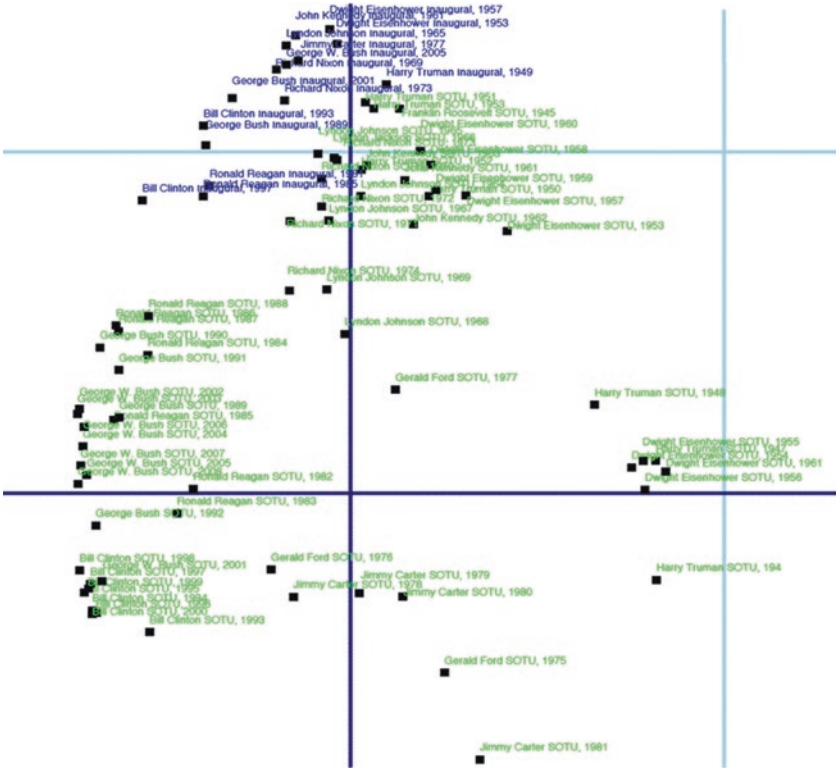

Fig. 3.1 Presidential addresses

Carter. This distribution provides support for my supposition that presidential speeches are carefully attuned to public attitudes and values. To the extent that presidents seek to maximize their support, they choose language calculated to appeal to the center of the electorate. As the distribution of voters shifts in response to changes in attitudes and values, we would expect to see a corresponding change in presidential language.

There is more diversity in the language of state of the union addresses, although there is a similar progression in the horizontal access over the decades. Truman and Eisenhower anchor the far-right side of the field—self-interest well understood—while Reagan, both Bushes, and Clinton are toward the far-left side, that is, individualism. Once again, this distribution suggests a bipartisan time-based shift in the language of presidential addresses. As we will see, Presidents Obama and Trump depart in opposite

directions from this trajectory. Obama's two inaugurals addresses are slightly above the line in their appeals to self-interest well understood. Trump's inaugural is considerably below the line and a more blatant appeal to individualism.

The most significant differences in the field are found in the vertical axis. State of the Union addresses by the presidents between 1945 and 1961—Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, Kennedy, and Nixon—are grouped closely together. Not far beneath them are addresses by Nixon and Johnson. Some distance away, in the lower half of the vertical axis are those of more recent presidents. Most speeches of most presidents are located in reasonable proximity to one another.

Party affiliation has some impact on location, but only for the most recent presidents. In the center left of the field, Reagan and Bush senior speeches are generally the highest on the vertical axis, with Bush junior and Bill Clinton in the middle. Carter dominates the bottom-center space, with his Republican contemporaries, Nixon, Ford, and Reagan, on average occupying a higher vertical position. There is no noticeable difference among earlier presidents. Partisan linguistic polarization is a recent phenomenon. It may reflect the increasing polarization with both major parties and to a lesser degree among the public opinion more generally.[9] To the extent that the Congress and public become polarized, presidents may gain less from using language likely to appeal to the middle. They may judge it more politically advantageous to appeal to their respective constituencies, and especially to those most interested in politics. This later group is more toward the extreme than the center of both parties.

When we turn from the speeches to the words in them, the presidential clusters are even more suggestive of a shift in the framing of interest. All presidents assert that their policies are beneficial to the country, but for our purposes there is an all-important difference between policies that are justified in the name of national versus individual interests. The speeches at the right end of the horizontal axis—those by Truman and Eisenhower—employ the most words that suggest justification or appeals on the basis of national versus individual interests. An example is the use of "antitrust" by Truman in his 1946, 1948, and 1949 State of the Union addresses. In each speech, Truman defends his policy as beneficial to the national economy, making no attempt to sell it to the voter on the basis of what it will do directly for his or her pocketbook. In his 1946 address, he is asking people to continue to defer their gratification for material rewards—salaries rose sharply during the war but production of civilian goods had been sharply curtailed—to permit stronger, long-term economic growth (Fig. 3.2):

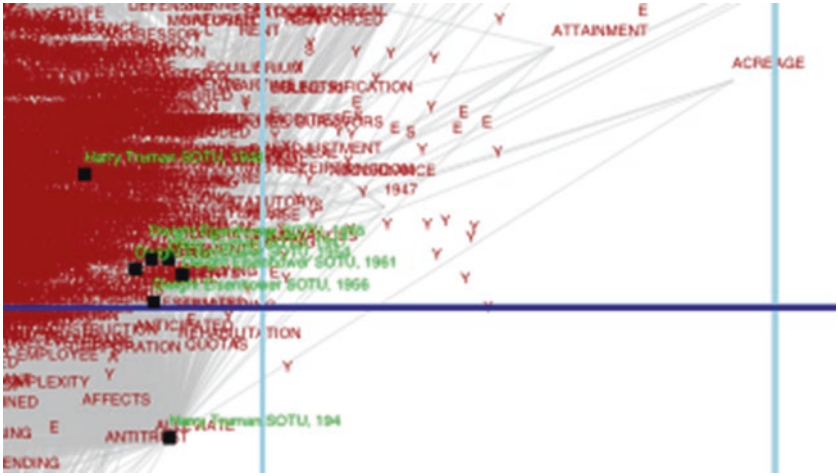

Fig. 3.2 Word distribution: Harry Truman

> The Government must now take major steps not only to maintain enforcement of antitrust laws but also to encourage new and competing enterprises in every way. The deferred demand of the war years and the large accumulations of liquid assets provide ample incentive for expansion. Equalizing of business opportunity, under full and free competition, must be a prime responsibility in the reconversion period and in the years that follow. Many leading businessmen have recognized the importance of such action both to themselves and to the economy as a whole.[10]

Truman notes that many businessmen support the regulation he has in mind because they understand its benefit to the economy as a whole, implying a strong association on their part between their individual and the national interest. Another telling and frequently used word by Truman and Eisenhower is "rehabilitation." They utilize it in 1946 and 1955, in two different but telling contexts. Truman invokes it to describe postwar rebuilding efforts:

> By joining and participating in the work of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration the United States has directly recognized and assumed an obligation to give such relief assistance as is practicable to millions of innocent and helpless victims of the war. The Congress has earned the gratitude of the world by generous financial contributions to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.[11]

Once again, Truman subsumes individual interests—in this case, those of the United States—to the more general interest of the world community. By providing aid to "innocent and helpless victims" of war, the United States will earn their gratitude. There is no mention, as there was in the previous example, of any expected material reward, even in the long term. The President obviously believed that Americans would respond positively to this appeal even though many might understand it to require some material sacrifice on their part.

Eisenhower uses "rehabilitation" in reference to the needy at home and in defense of his support for joint state–federal welfare programs:

> With the States, we are providing rehabilitation facilities and more clinics, hospitals, and nursing homes for patients with chronic illnesses. Also with the States, we have begun a great and fruitful expansion in the restoration of disabled persons to employment and useful lives.[12]

In his commitment to expand access to health care to disabled persons and those with chronic diseases, Eisenhower is advocating policies that are unlikely to benefit the vast majority of his audience. He rests his appeal on their assumed desire to aid the nation at large. Presidents Truman and Eisenhower both assume a majority of voters to be motivated by the equivalent of self-interest well understood. They feel no need to spell out the connection between individual and community interests or how individuals are better able to realize their potential through membership in and support for the wider community.

Lack of space precludes tracing the evolution of presidential discourses decade by decade. Instead, let me turn briefly to the middle group of presidents to show how much discourses concerning self-interest changed in successive decades. Figure 3.3 represents the left cluster of our field and the words used in their State of the Union Addresses by Presidents Ronald Reagan, Bush *père*, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush *fils*. The most striking feature of this section of the field is the frequency of second-person pronouns.

It begins with Ronald Reagan who makes repeated references to the individual citizens. He starts all but the final two of his seven State of the Union Addresses with a second-person pronoun. These speeches mark the first time a State of the Union Address is directed specifically at the individual television viewer. The viewer is conceptualized as an autonomous and egoistic actor and appeals to him or her are almost entirely on the

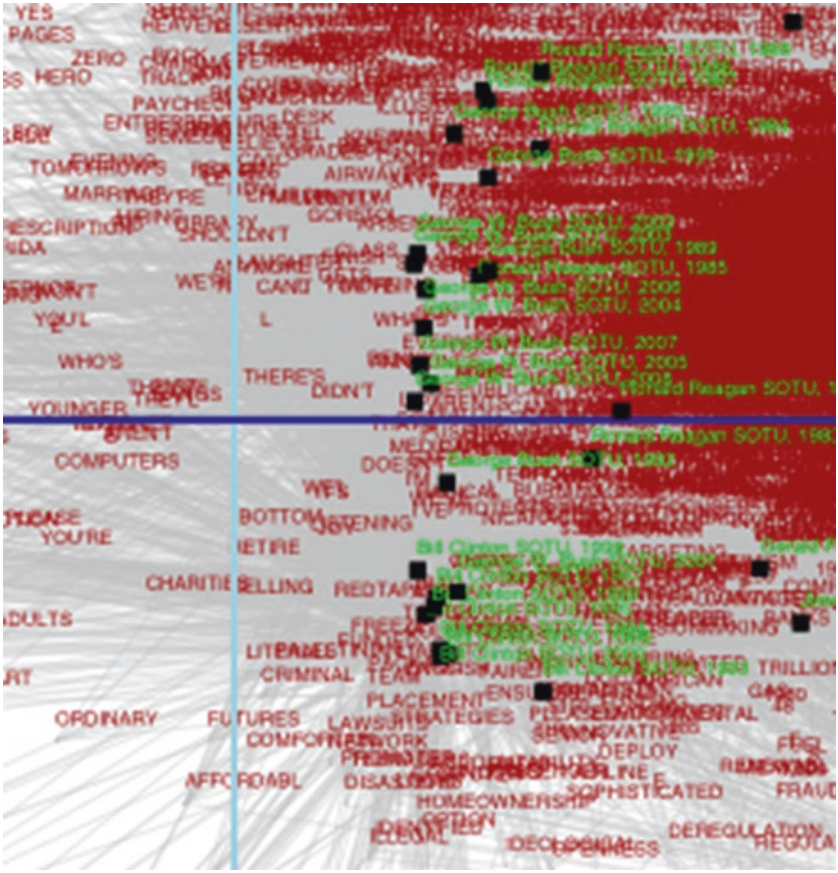

Fig. 3.3 Word distribution: Presidents Reagan through George W. Bush

basis of self-interest. In his 1984 State of the Union, Reagan assures the viewing audience: "You are not forgotten; we will not rest until each of you can reach as high as your God-given talents will take you."[13] In his 1987 State of the Union, he appeals to the ambitions of young viewers, saying "Our revolution is the first to say the people are the masters and government is their servant. And you, young people out there, don't ever forget that. Someday you could be in this room, but wherever you are, America is depending on you to reach your highest and be your best—because here in America, we the people are in charge."[14]

The presidents in this cluster also invoke individuals in a negative sense far more than did their predecessors. They speak of deviant individuals, the threat they pose, and what must be done to them. This is evident in their use of the word "criminal," which, like second-person pronouns is found near the center of the cluster. Take the following example from the senior George Bush's1989 State of the Union:

> I mean to get tough on the drug criminals. And let me be clear: This President will back up those who put their lives on the line every single day—our local police officers. My budget asks for beefed-up prosecution, for a new attack on organized crime, and for enforcement of tough sentences—and for the worst kingpins, that means the death penalty. I also want to make sure that when a drug dealer is convicted there's a cell waiting for him. And he should not go free because prisons are too full. And so, let the word go out: If you're caught and convicted, you will do time.[15]

Bush singles out "a drug dealer," a "he" against whom he issues a direct threat. Bush not only plays on individual fears, but continues and extends Reagan's framing of the State of the Union address as a conversation between the president and an autonomous, egoistic individual. There are no references to a common American identity, common desire for safety or common interests, only references to individual interests.

This trend toward individualism is not confined to Republicans; it is almost as evident in the speeches of Bill Clinton. His frequent use of the word "paycheck" reveals how much more individualistic his rhetoric is than that of the previous Democratic President, Jimmy Carter. Take this excerpt from Clinton's 1999 State of the Union:

> Tens of millions of Americans live from paycheck to paycheck. As hard as they work, they still don't have the opportunity to save. Too few can make use of IRA's and 401k plans. We should do more to help all working families save and accumulate wealth. That's the idea behind the Individual Development Accounts, the IDA's. I ask you to take that idea to a new level, with new retirement savings accounts that enable every low and moderate income family in America to save for retirement, a first home, a medical emergency, or a college education. I propose to match their contributions, however small, dollar for dollar, every year they save. And I propose to give a major new tax credit to any small business that will provide a meaningful pension to its workers. Those people ought to have retirement as well as the rest of us.[16]

This is an undisguised appeal to the self-interest of the individual citizen. There is no reference to the general economy or common prosperity. Instead, Clinton makes the case for his policies on the basis of their supposed payoffs to individual families. Presidential rhetoric now openly embraces the language of self-interest and the values of individualism, as understood by Tocqueville. References to the common good or wider community have all but disappeared from presidential speeches.

The same pattern is evident when we turn to a comparative qualitative analysis of presidential speeches on a single topic. We have chosen energy conservation because every president since Harry Truman has given at least one major speech on the subject. When we parse these speeches for what they reveal about self-interest they indicate a general shift in how presidents understand their audience, the basis of their appeals, and the nature and time line of the benefits energy conservation can be expected to bring. This evolution is the form of step changes in three discrete historical periods (1945–1963, 1969–1981, and 1989 to the present). At least one Democratic and Republic president is represented in each period.

Between 1945 and 1963, presidents couch their appeals to the national community and ask everyone to work together to do their part. The frame of reference and rhetoric are something of a holdover from the World War II and presumably motivated by the expectation that they would prove effective in inspiring the kind of self-sacrifice and collective behavior required. Presidents may also have been counting on some degree of peer pressure, as they did with gasoline and food rationing during the War, to help bring about higher levels of compliance. Presidents Truman and Eisenhower offer no economic incentives to encourage energy conservation by citizens. Their reward will be helping to preserve the "American way of life" by keeping the air clean and fuel supplies abundant. Most interesting of all are the long-term nature of these benefits. Both presidents insist that they will lead to a higher quality of life for our descendants.

The second period of national concern over energy is in the late 1960s and increased dramatically after the 1973 OPEC oil embargo and the rapid price rise in petroleum products that it triggered. Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter address themselves to Americans individually rather than to the nation at large. They appear to have little expectation that people will make sacrifices voluntarily on behalf of the community or that the community can be aroused to generate the kind of social pressure that had been so helpful in the past. Perhaps for this reason

they no longer call for voluntary action but legislation that will make compliance mandatory for businesses and citizens alike. Presidents still speak about the benefits of conservation, but portray them as more immediate. Conservation will make Americans more confident about the future, provide a greater sense of purpose, and make them feel they have more control over their lives.

After 1989, energy conservation once again becomes an important national concern. In 2008, oil reached a new high in price, well over $100 a barrel. Conservation has also taken on a broader meaning with global warming now taken seriously by almost everyone and with it the widely recognized need to reduce carbon emissions. Once again presidents of both parties addressed the nation and have appealed directly to the material well-being of individual citizens. There has been no talk of community, only of the short-term financial benefits businesses and individuals could reap from conservation. They will have more money to spend on other things if they spend less on energy. Republican presidents favor voluntary compliance, while Democrats are more likely to put their trust in legislation. Democrat and Republican presidents alike prefer tax incentives to taxes and penalties. Global warming, with its longer-term and serious consequences for human survival, has not been a major focus of presidential addresses. When it is addressed, to date presidents are adamant that they will not require sacrifices of the American people that would allegedly make American business less competitive abroad.

President Obama also addresses energy in his 2009 inaugural address. However, he notes the problem only in passing and his focus is not on cost but on the environment. He promises support for programs that "will harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories."[17] There are no references to energy in his second inaugural. It is always possible that this shift reflects an improved economy, where less sacrifice is required by individuals. However, concern for saving energy, while largely economic in earlier decades, is driven more by the environment in recent ones. This is evident in the Obama inaugural referred to above. To the extent that people believe—more Democrats do than Republicans—that climate change constitutes an existential threat there is all the more reason to describe the fight against in communal terms. It is accordingly all the more striking that so much of the pro-environmental presidential and other political rhetoric is framed in selfish terms. People are repeatedly told of the need to protect their grandchildren (Fig. 3.4).

Word Distributions	
Obama	Trumph
america	america
jobs/economy/workers	jobs/work/workers
education	great
together	protect
world	world
right	families
just	united
families	rights
tax	citizens
want	just

Fig. 3.4 Word distribution: Presidents Obama and Trump

The word counts of the two presidents are similar in many ways. The most frequent references of both presidents are to "America," "Americans," the "country," and "nation." I scored these collectively under the rubric "America." There is a big drop for both leaders between "America" and the next frequently used words, and here is where differences become apparent. Obama's next most common words are "education," "jobs," "together," "right," and "economy." They reflect his, and more generally, the Democratic Party's concern for ordinary people, their economic future and security, and the importance of education toward that end. Obama then speaks of "rights" and "justice," and somewhat less about "giving, "caring," and "health"; "rights" and "justice," when examined in context, refer to applications to the principle of equality. "Giving" and "caring" emphasize the importance of community and the responsibility of all Americans—and the government—to come to the aid of the needy, oppressed, and stigmatized. They reflect self-interest well understood.

For Trump, "America" is followed by "jobs" and "workers" and then "great," the last in keeping with his campaign slogan to "Make America Great Again." Next comes "protect," used in the context of protecting Americans from immigrants, terrorists, and foreign dumping injurious to American business. Afterwards come many of the same words used by Obama, although, as we shall see, there are important differences in their valence and application. Trump often uses them to construct a series of "us" and "others," with some of the "others" being immigrants and the American political establishment.

The qualitative analysis is more revealing. Obama invokes traditional American values as the key to addressing new challenges. In doing so, he emphasizes self-interest well understood, as these values put a premium on contribution and sacrifice for the community—now extended from the nation to the world:

> Our challenges may be new, the instruments with which we meet them may be new, but those values upon which our success depends, honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism—these things are old.
>
> These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history.
>
> What is demanded then is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character than giving our all to a difficult task.[18]

Both Obama inaugurals stress the diversity of America, and how this constitutes "a strength, not a weakness." It has allowed the country to overcome the kinds of suspicions and fears that encourage hatred. "As the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace." He extends the olive branch to Islam, telling the Muslim world: "we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

Trump's inaugural offers a sharp contrast in its emphasis on division and individualism. He opens by throwing down the gauntlet with the claim that politicians have exploited the people:

> For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished—but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered—but the jobs left, and the factories closed.
>
> The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation's capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land.[19]

Trump insists that "January 20th 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again. The forgotten men and

women of our country will be forgotten no longer." His appeal is to individualism, what Americans can expect to get from their country and government. This includes good schools, safe neighborhoods, and good jobs. "These are the just and reasonable demands of a righteous public."[20]

If politicians are portrayed as villains, so too are foreigners:

> For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military; we've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own; and spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay.
>
> We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon.
>
> One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions upon millions of American workers left behind.
>
> The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed across the entire world.
>
> But that is the past. And now we are looking only to the future. We assembled here today are issuing a new decree to be heard in every city, in every foreign capital, and in every hall of power.[21]

Trump goes on to insist that "We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs." From this day forward, "it's going to be America First." Americans in turn must follow "two simple rules: Buy American and hire American."[22]

Trump's inaugural breaks new ground in the populist binaries it sets up between politicians and people and Americans and foreigners. It depicts a hierarchical world, which America is rightfully at the top, but deprived of the advantages of this position by crafty foreign businesses and government. Wily and out-of-control politicians have abetted this process and must be restrained. Past presidents attempted to speak to all Americans and to minimize the partisan nature of politics and the antagonisms it arouses. Trump speaks only to his supporters—less than half of the voters—and stokes these differences and antagonisms. It is perhaps the most dramatic evidence of his narrow framing of self-interest.

Presidents and their speechwriters vary in their ability to sense the concerns of the American electorate and to speak a language that resonates with them. Given the increasing polarization of the country, recent presidents like Obama and Trump must make choices about which audience

they wish to address. It is not surprising, therefore, that these presidents differ greatly in the values they choose to represent as well as the language they use toward this end. The latter, to be sure, also reflects differences in cognitive complexity and speaking styles. Obama's talks are longer and more sophisticated if direct in their appeal and simple in their choice of vocabulary. They develop ideas, not merely throw them out, and make explicit appeals to shared values. Trump speeches, by contrast, consist for the most part of short sentences, are emphatic and without nuance, lack elaboration or detail, flit from one theme to another. They also resort to frequent repetition.

My computer-assisted analysis is for the most part unaffected by these differences as it focuses on individual words, their repetition, and how they relate to or represent particular values. This analysis reveals a relatively consistent shift away from self-interest well understood to individualism. It is most pronounced in recent decades, regardless of the political party of the president or his score in cognitive complexity. Jimmy Carter is something of a throwback, Barrack Obama somewhat less so. Donald Trump represents something of a forward leap in the direction of individualism. These outliers do not alter the fact of a 60-year trend. As presidential speeches intend to speak to people in their own language and values, they represent a good barometer of a broader shift on the part of the American people.

Notes

1. "Media Advisory: Audience Estimates for President Bush's 2006 State of the Union Address." Nielsen Media Research. February 1, 2006. http://www.nielsenmedia.com/nc/portal/site/Public/menuitem.55dc65b4a7d5adff3f65936147a062a0.
2. Nikita Vladimirov, "Trump inaugural TV ratings lower than Obama, Reagan: report, *The Hill*, 21 January, http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/315507-trump-inaugural-ratings-are-lower-than-obamas-and-reagans (accessed 4 April 2017).
3. Matt Ford, "Trump Press Secretary Falsely Claims: 'Largest Audience Ever to Witness and Inauguration, Period," *Atlantic*, 21 January 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/inauguration-crowd-size/514058/ (accessed 4 April 2017).
4. *The American Presidency Project*. Santa Barbara: University of California—Santa Barbara, 1790–2008. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/. Most of

the analysis and coding of speeches from 1944 to 1996 was conducted by then Dartmouth student, Dylan Matthews.

5. Joel Levine, Aaron Klein and James Mathews, "Data Without Variables." *Journal of Mathematical Sociology*, 23, no. 3 (2001), pp. 225–273.
6. To generate the field, one adds the squares of changes in the X and Y positions of the two points (the speech and the word), multiplies by 1.5, and then takes the square root to determine the degree of association.
7. A difficult choice involved combining "gay" and "LGBT," as it made a comparison between Clinton and Trump, who used the word "gay," but not "LGBT." Another defensible choice, I believe, was combining "everyone" and "everybody," and both with "community."
8. This procedure was carried out by Dylan Matthews and Jennifer Ross.
9. See, for instance, McCarty, Nolan, Poole, Keith T. and Rosenthal, Howard, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
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CHAPTER 4

I Love Lucy to Modern Family

Abstract Sitcoms attract some of the largest television audiences. This chapter conducts a qualitative and quantitative analysis of how leading sitcoms of each decade from the 1950s to the present represent self-interest. Similar to presidential speeches, they reveal an increasingly narrow and selfish understanding. Interesting too is the way they treat, and often rely on, hypocrisy for their humor. Here too there is a shift that "normalizes" previously frowned upon selfish behavior.

Keywords Sitcoms • Self-interest • Selfishness • Hypocrisy

My second discourse is television sitcoms. Like presidents and their speechwriters, the producers and writers of these programs have every incentive to portray behavior and values that resonate with their intended audiences. This is essential—as are humor, simple plot formats, and appealing characters—if they are to win high ratings, attract more sponsors, make them pay more for advertising, and generate bigger profits for their producers and networks.

Sitcoms are less constrained in language, subject, and tone than presidential speeches because they are commercial and their characters do not have to meet the expectations of esteemed public persona. These shows

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also have more freedom because they focus for the most part on the non-political behavior and beliefs of individuals, families, and small groups in diverse social settings. One critic contends that the TV sitcom "is a virtual textbook that can be 'read' to help lay bare the mores, images, ideals, prejudices, and ideologies shared—whether by fiat or default—by the majority of the American public."[1] This is the kind of exaggeration one associates with show biz, but there is undeniably a kernel of truth to the claim. Successful sitcom characters are idealized by many viewers and can become important role models for the young. Sitcoms mirror American culture and help define and redefine it.

I have analyzed at least one sitcom for each decade from the 1950s through the current decade.[2] These include *I Love Lucy* (1950s), *Leave It to Beaver* (1960s), *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *All in the Family*, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (all 1970s), *The Cosby Show* and *Cheers* (1980s), *The Simpsons* and *Seinfeld* (1990s), and *Sex and the City* (2000s), and *Modern Family* and *Duck Dynasty* (2010s). This choice of sitcoms reflects their popularity. Each of these shows was the most popular sitcom for all or part of the decade in which it ran. In the 1970s and 2010s, there was no single sitcom that was meaningfully more popular than others, so I coded more than one. In the 2010s I chose *Modern Family* and *Duck Dynasty* because they were the most popular, respectively, with Clinton and Trump voters in 2016.

Problems of selection bias are not serious in the 1950s and 1960s because sitcoms in these decades share a common format and reflect the same values. Selection problems do not really arise until the 1990s. In this and successive decades there is greater diversity in format and values. My choice of *Seinfeld* and *Sex in the City* reflects their commercial appeal, but also how their characters became cultural icons who were widely referred to in the media. Arguably, *The Simpsons* also meets these criteria, but I excluded all cartoon shows because they are not expected to portray families and their values in any realistic way; much of their humor derives from doing the opposite. Mr. Burns, the lead villain of *The Simpsons*, behaves in way that provokes laughter, but would elicit horror and shock if he were a real person.

All but three of my sitcoms focus on families. This distribution is to be expected as family life has such a central place in American life.[3] In the 1950s, television networks had only Nielsen ratings to determine general viewership. Accordingly, they could not target specific audiences and

conceived of their mass audience as family units.[4] The family also evoked symbols and images with which advertisers wanted to be associated. With the Cold War at its height, the family was envisaged and portrayed in sitcoms as a reassuring and conformist safe haven in a wider world where Communist and other dangers lurked.[5]

The 1970s *Mary Tyler Moore Show* was the first sitcom not family-centered, and was considered revolutionary at the time. It also featured a female heroine who was single and committed to her professional life. Episodes revolved around her office and romantic life. *Seinfeld*, a subsequent non-family-based sitcom, is about the interactions among four friends living in Manhattan. It was followed by *Sex in the City*, also considered avant-garde, because it features four, very independent single women in New York City looking for love, support, and the occasional one-night stand. The characters of *Seinfeld* and *Sex in the City* constitute surrogate families. For this reason, it is not far-fetched to compare the interactions of the men and women on these programs to the characters in more traditional sitcom families.

For Tocqueville, the American family was as important as it was impressive. He reasoned that democracy and social equality created looser social ties among citizens but strengthened the family.[6] "As mores and laws become more democratic," he wrote, "the relations of father and son become more intimate and sweeter, rule and authority are met with less; confidence and affection are often greater; and it seems that the natural bond tightens while the social bond is loosened."[7] The European aristocracy, by contrast, produced more authoritarian father–son relationships and maintained a hierarchy across generations by giving special privileges and inheritances to eldest sons. Everyone's role in the European family was clearly defined, as it was in society more generally. In the absence of this kind of hierarchy in America, brothers formed close bonds without a source of friction and boys enjoyed an "intimate familiarity" with their fathers. Their independence allowed them a smoother and earlier entrance into manhood.[8]

While Tocqueville applauded American democracy for its relaxed authority structures in the family and their close-knit ties, he would probably be dismayed by the extent to which these structures have continued to loosen in modern America. With current divorce rates hovering near 50 percent and young children often spending hours a day at day care centers while both parents fulfill the demands of their careers—or hold down multiple jobs to pay the mortgage and put bread on the table—the American

nuclear family suffers from strained relationships and appears to have lost much of the cohesiveness that so impressed Tocqueville. The nuclear family is itself a declining norm, as more couples never marry and more children are raised in single-parent homes. The 2000 census revealed that there were 105.5 million households in America of which only 52 percent consisted of married couples.[9] According to the 2010 census, the unmarried partner population numbered 7.7 million, a 41 percent increase over 2000, and a figure increasing four times as fast as the overall household population.[10]

To some degree, sitcoms mirror this transformation. The nature of the genre and its need to entertain generally constrains producers from portraying truly dysfunctional behavior. An important and revealing exception is the last episode of *Seinfeld* where the four principal characters watch a mugging on the streets of Manhattan and do nothing to help the victim. They are subsequently arrested and sentenced to jail when the character witnesses they call to testify on their behalf recall their behavior in past episodes and denounce them for their callousness. Sitcoms with a cartoon format, like *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, can take more liberties because of the unreal nature of their characters and settings, but this does not keep them from being highly controversial. Sitcoms like *Seinfeld* push the envelope of acceptability. They stand in sharp contrast to early sitcoms, most of which portray close-knit Tocquevillean families. In *Henry Aldrich*, the first radio sitcom, and *The Goldbergs*, *I Remember Mama*, *Father Knows Best*, *The Life of Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave It to Beaver*—pioneer TV programs of this genre—relations among family members are close and parents rule by example, sage advice, and gentle remonstrance. This classic format remained commercially viable as late as *The Cosby Show* of the 1980s.

Efforts in recent years by cable channels to revise the family sitcom niche have not done well. *The Bill Engvall Show* and *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*, both on TBS, and CW's *Everybody Hates Chris*, never achieved high ratings. *Engvall*, with a 2008 average of 2.4 million viewers, is considered a success by TBS. This is a small fraction of the audiences pulled in by earlier family sitcom hits like *Roseanne*, *Grace Under Fire*, or even *Home Improvement*. The Cosby Show at its peak in the late 1980s averaged 63 million viewers.[11]

Family sitcoms made something of a comeback with *Duck Dynasty* and *Modern Family*, but neither is traditional in format. Both treat extended rather than nuclear families. *Modern Family*, premiered in 2009, and

deliberately violates conventional family norms. Jay Pritchett's family includes his much younger second wife; his cerebral stepson; his two neurotic adult children, one a gay man with a family of his own; and their spouses and children. The show won 20 Emmy Awards in its first eight seasons, including the outstanding comedy five seasons in a row. Its audience is a representative example of a city sitcom; it is most popular in the liberal, urban centers of Boston, San Francisco, and Santa Barbara, and least so in the rural parts of Kentucky, Mississippi, and Arkansas. *Duck Dynasty* ran from 2012 to 2017, and is about the Robertson clan of West Monroe, Louisiana. They became wealthy from producing items for duck hunters, beginning with a wooden duck call whistle. The Robertson men are bearded and Christian, self-proclaimed Rednecks, and assert traditional male values in often self-defeating ways. The men are the central characters, but unlike traditional sitcoms it is generally the women who know best. The show broke several ratings records on cable television. The fourth-season premiere in 2016 drew 11.8 million viewers, making it the most watched cable series in history.

While most sitcoms have placed family units, or their surrogates, in similar kinds of situations over the decades there are noticeable changes in how self-interest has been represented. "Relevancy" programming in the 1970s created the first sitcom about a single woman—*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*—but was careful to make her adhere to traditional values and behavior in her relations with the opposite sex. *All in the Family* made fun of patriarchy. Archie Bunker, the father of the family, expected to be treated with respect and his wife routinely surrounded him with the trappings of power: his can of beer opened and handed to him and the chair in front of the television kept reserved for him. His daughter Gloria and her husband Michael not only reject Archie's authority but also make fun of his claims. The show was somewhat adventurous in its treatment of racial prejudice and the generational divide. It treated both afflictions as the result of ignorance, lack of empathy and narrow, if not downright selfish, conceptions of self-interest.

By the 1990s, self-interest well understood was constantly challenged by the charmingly dysfunctional behavior of nuclear and surrogate families. Although I did not code cartoons, consider Homer Simpson. He is a bumbling patriarch governed by his appetites. Like earlier sitcom "deviants," his mishaps nevertheless end up reinforcing the value of love and caring within the nuclear family. These rather pat resolutions nevertheless allow themselves to be read as a parody of the standard sitcom trope. So

too does the ending of *Seinfeld*, which is not intended to pass judgment on its characters as much as it is a parody of the genre of sitcoms.

In the decades when the family was inviolate, sitcoms were more likely to explore deviant behavior through minor characters who were outside the nuclear family. Here it was more acceptable to have people motivated by narrow self-interest with regard to other people and institutions, or acting in ways that challenge conventional norms and practices. The Fonz in *Happy Days*—1974 to 1984—is the quintessential example. He gave the appearance of being a rebel without really being one in practice, and provided a counterpoint to the "square" Cunningham family in a way that affirmed their values.

This pattern continues in more recent sitcoms where rebellious behavior is incorporated into the nuclear family. Really unacceptable behavior is still restricted to non-family members. Homer Simpson's boss, Montgomery Burns, owner of the Springfield Nuclear Plant, is a striking example. He is an outrageously selfish businessman who values profits over the well-being, even the lives, of his employees and the town in which they live. Burns provokes laughter on the part of most viewers because he is such an extreme stereotype of the grasping capitalist that even in the Bush era of buccaneer capitalism it was difficult to take him seriously.

The first decade of this century gives evidence of a sharp transformation; self-interest well understood makes only fleeting appearances in sitcoms. There is a near total reversal in the sources of discomfort and humor. In the 1950s, self-interest or callousness, always mild and short-lived, was played for laughs, and in a way that reinforced self-interest well understood. In *Seinfeld* and *Sex in the City*, altruism and sacrifice are the butt of jokes. In the lost library book episode Jerry's efforts to set an old wrong right sets off a hilarious set of encounters that reveal the inaccuracy of his memory, short-term and self-centered goals, and the unintended consequences of practical jokes.

Self-interest and its evolution in sitcoms are readily tracked through its manifestation in individual programs. I begin with *I Love Lucy*. Starring Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz, Vivian Vance, and William Frawley, it ran from October 1951 to May 1957, and was extended for three more seasons in the format of 13 one-hour specials. It was the most-watched show in the United States in four of its six seasons and the first to end its run while still at the top of the ratings. This feat was later duplicated by only the *Andy Griffith Show* and *Seinfeld*.

The main character, Lucille Ricardo, is a mischievous, if naïve, housewife who desperately wants to escape the confines of her role. Her husband Ricky, an up-and-coming Cuban-American singer, is the provider of the family. The other couple on the show, Fred and Ethel Mertz, are very similar. Ethel is Lucy's best friend, confidant, and accomplice, often against her better judgment. Fred is the least dynamic character of the four and comes across as a no-nonsense type of man who never questions social conventions and constantly puts Lucy and Ethel down for their antics. The show appears to affirm the postwar expectation that wives would stay at home while husbands go to work to support the family. Ricky aspires to lead as normal a life as possible and wants Lucy to provide him with all the comforts of home. More sophisticated viewers at the time might have understood *I Love Lucy* as a clever and subtle critique of sexism and its infantilizing effects on women. Whether this was the attention of the writers is moot.

Lucy's rebellious streak provides the plot for almost every episode. It invariably finds expression in humorous and absurd schemes that often pit the "girls" against the "boys." In one of the most famous episodes, "Job Switching," Lucy wants a position outside the home to prove her ability to Ricky. She goes to work in a chocolate factory and fails at each assigned task. She ends up eating an increasing number of the chocolates that pass before her on the conveyer belt because she cannot wrap them fast enough. At home, the boys, who have switched roles, burn the dinner. Each time Lucy rebels something goes wrong, a trope that encourages the other sitcoms characters and the audience not to take her seriously. Lucy can be read to reinforce, or undercut, in a gentle way, the social conventions of the day.

Fifteen episodes of *I Love Lucy* were randomly selected and coded on a 1–5 scale for expressions of self-interest. An act was coded as 1 when the person responsible did something motivated by self-interest with seeming disregard for its possibly negative consequences for other actors. It was coded as 2 when self-interested behavior did not appear likely to have negative consequences for others. Neutral behavior with respect to self-interest received was coded as 3. Actions that are self-interested but qualify as self-interest well understood were coded as 4. The coding of 5 was reserved for behavior that is entirely selfless and could involve real cost to the actor. These categories are admittedly subjective, as is true of any assessments of self-interest.

Somewhat more problematic is the category of self-interest well understood. I defined it with reference to behavior that seeks to benefit the group as opposed to just the individual, and is seemingly based on the understanding that individual interests are often best served by advancing those of the group. Self-interest well understood often seeks longer-term goals in lieu of immediate personal satisfaction. Assessments of behavior involve motivations as well as consequences, and a behavior was not scored for self-interest well understood when the former could not be reasonably inferred. All the sitcoms in question were scored by at least two coders. Inter-coder reliability was uniformly high.

As Fig. 4.1 indicates, there are a lot of 1 and 2 scores, indicating behavior motivated by narrow self-interest. Lucy is responsible for 85 percent of these acts. She lives very much for the moment. Her actions are simple and generally silly, but when they produce negative consequences, most often for Ricky, they are never serious. The frequency of her self-interested behavior and its invariably negative consequences for her has the effect of reinforcing the wisdom of the conventions that she violates.

Behavior coded as 4 and 5 is mostly that of Ricky, Fred, and Ethel. They act as counterpoints to Lucy as they almost always put others first and realize that what is best for each couple or the group is what is best for them. Ricky is also the antithesis to Lucy in that he is always looking ahead to the future and the longer-term interest of the family. An emblematic example is their respective responses to an upcoming anniversary. Lucy keeps dropping hints about the forthcoming celebration and goes as far as to listen in on her husband's telephone conversation to see if he remembers.

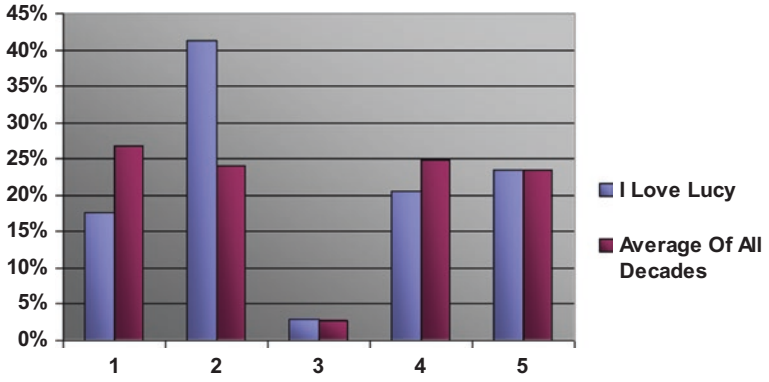

Fig. 4.1 *I Love Lucy*

She does this not because she values the symbolic meaning of the anniversary, but in the hope of receiving a present from Ricky. He in turn makes a big deal out of surprising Lucy with pearls so that she will be happy on their anniversary and feel loved.

Ella Taylor maintains that 1950s sitcoms mirror the vast migration of middle-class American families to suburbia. *Leave It to Beaver, Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Father Knows Best* are set in the suburbs. The urban families of *I Love Lucy*, *The Honeymooners*, and *The Life of Riley* aspire to middle-class status, and, presumably, life in the suburbs.[12] Sitcom suburban families have happy lives, confront only minor problems and setbacks, feature wise fathers with lots of time to mentor their children, loving stay-at-home mothers, and obedient children. The kids sometimes misbehave and cause problems, but nothing that cannot readily be resolved in less than 30 minutes. The children are not allowed the autonomy they would enjoy in later decades, but the family dynamic is consistent with Tocqueville's conception of how democracy extended into the American household. Father, with mother's help and support, guides the family toward conflict resolution in a manner that enlightens and wins the approval of the children and consolidates family loyalties.[13] Such families are, of course, fictional, and reflect values, including the subordination of women and minorities, that are unacceptable to most Americans today.

Leave It to Beaver, which ran from 1957 to 1963, depicts such an ideal family in the seemingly serene suburb of Mayfield. Ward Cleaver is prototypical establishment WASP. He is calm, patient and wise, although not nearly as perceptive as his wife, and rules his family with gentle and benign authority. June maintains an impeccable household and personal appearance, sends her husband off to work with a kiss, and is at the door, with make-up on and not a hair out of place, to bestow another kiss on him when he returns. A submissive wife she stands behind her man—literally, as she is positioned behind Ward in any scene in which they are shown together. The show revolves around the two boys who are the primary source of conflict and humor. Wally is the older, and Beaver the younger and more mischievous of the brothers. In one episode Beaver tells a small lie and immediately fears being found out by his parents, so he goes to Wally who comes up with some impractical way to dodge trouble, which only entangles them further. On another occasion, Beaver, a seven-year-old second grader, fails to meet an obligation because the youngster, who did not know any better, was led astray by a friend.

In another common trope, the kids behave well but their parents, accustomed to their shenanigans, misread the situation. In the episode "Kids Want a New Bike," Beaver and Wally take up a newspaper route on their father's suggestion to learn responsibility and earn some money to buy a new bicycle. Ward and June help their sons deliver the newspapers when the kids run into problems. Wally and Beaver are fired when their parents deliver week-old papers on the mistaken assumption that the kids had left them in the garage. Ward convinces their boss to take the boys back even though they had since accepted a job at the supermarket. In "Linda Likes Beaver," Beaver realizes that he is the only boy invited to the birthday party of a girl that has a crush on him—a nightmare scenario. Unaware of the circumstances, Ward forces Beaver to attend the party against his wishes, believing that it would be rude of Beaver to decline the invitation. In both episodes, parental guidance backfires. The resulting conflicts are easily resolved and the boys harbor no resentment, realizing that they are fortunate to have parents who are so concerned for their well-being.

The coding for this series is based on 15 randomly selected episodes. The pattern is quite consistent, established with the early shows and continuing through the series without significant change. As one would expect, Wally and Beaver are responsible for the majority of 1s and 2s, but there are considerably fewer selfish actions than in *I Love Lucy*. The 2s represent only a quarter of the sample, while the 4s capture over 53 percent. This distribution reflects plot lines in which the boys are the only self-interested actors in the family, yet they also act toward each other and their parents in terms of self-interest well understood. *Leave It to Beaver* is a relatively easy show to code with confidence because of the simplicity and repetitive nature of its plot line and the limited number of interactions its characters have with people outside of the family.

One recurring theme that distinguishes this show from others is that multiple undetected lies are told but then admitted by the responsible party, often at the risk of embarrassment or punishment. In one episode, Beaver is avoiding school and when the doctor tells him in confidence that he knows that Beaver has been faking an illness he feels compelled to "fess up" to his mother. Beaver wants her to trust in him, and judges her trust more important than a free day without school. This is a classic example of self-interest well understood (Fig. 4.2).

Let us to jump to *Seinfeld*, which ran from 1990 to 1998. The show focuses on the work, family, social, and romantic attachments of four

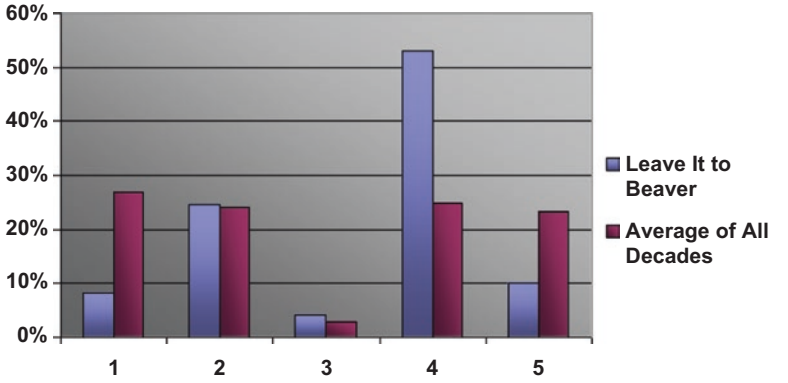

Fig. 4.2 *Leave It to Beaver*

friends who live on Manhattan's West Side. Jerry Seinfeld, the main character, is a successful comedian and a borderline OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) neat freak. His closest friends are his former high school classmate George Costanza, ex-girlfriend Elaine Benes, and eccentric next-door neighbor, Cosmo Kramer. The plot is complex by sitcom standards as it usually tracks three separate and seemingly unrelated story lines that invariably come together by the end of the episode. All the characters are single, and none appears to place much importance on family. In an odd way, they constitute a surrogate family and frequently meet in their home away from home, Monk's Cafe.

Relationships and the changing norms governing them are the dominant themes of *Seinfeld*. Jerry, Elaine, and George are all self-absorbed and have short-lived and self-interested relationships because of their inability to make compromises or deal with minor flaws in their personalities or those of others. In one episode, George finds a beautiful woman who does not care about his odd looks and encourages him to pursue his dream of draping himself in velvet. She makes small sacrifices to build and sustain a relationship—a sign of maturity and self-interest well understood—and George is convinced that she is perfect for him. The relationship collapses when she sucks on the pit of a peach George had just finished eating because he finds it "disgusting." Sex is often valued more than relationships. In the library episode already alluded to, Jerry wants company, and George agrees to go with him, not out of friendship, but out of self-interest because he is bored. At the library, George flirts with an attractive but seemingly stereotypical librarian. He exploits her loneliness, flatters

her, and tells lies about himself. We later encounter them coming out of George's apartment wearing expressions indicative of a satisfying tryst. For George, unlike Lucy and Beaver, narrow self-interest reaps handsome rewards.

At times, Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer act for the common good, but it is narrow self-interest that motivates them to do so. They behave virtuously if failure to do so would jeopardize their social standing or provoke scorn, embarrassment, or confrontation. If good behavior can be evaded, narrow self-interest drives them to find a way out. In their search for ways of evading inconvenient rules of social conduct, George, Jerry, and Elaine act like lawyers attempting to discover and exploit ambiguities or inconsistencies in statutes. When moved by self-interest, they will also exploit social conventions to their advantage. In "The Chinese Restaurant" episode George needs to make an important phone call. He waits with growing impatience as a man takes forever to complete his call at the payphone in the luncheonette only to be frustrated again by a woman who grabs the receiver as soon as the man hangs up. Unable to convince the rule-breaking woman that he was next in line, George angrily and disingenuously exclaims: "We're living in society. We're supposed to act in a civilized way!" Viewers are intended to recognize the irony of his remark. In another episode, when George believes that a chiropractor does not give him a fair evaluation, which he interprets as another breach of the code, he feels justified in paying only half his bill.

David Pierson suggests that "one of the main reasons for *Seinfeld*'s popularity is its implicit acknowledgement of a deep-seated cultural ambivalence and anxiety over the consistently shifting social codes, attitudes, and manners of a rapidly evolving American society."[14] From a Tocquevillean perspective, what we may be witnessing is the inevitable loosening of ties in a democratic society, which makes "wide and relaxed" the "bonds of human affection." It also increases the danger of Americans withdrawing into themselves and giving in to the kind of narrow self-interest Tocqueville always associates with individualism.[15]

As Fig. 4.3 indicates, *Seinfeld* has more 1s—a total of 60 percent—than any other sitcom, and had the lowest of overall averages at 1.81. *Seinfeld* is also the first show where there are more actions of self-interest than of self-interest well understood between group members, and between members of the group and outsiders. Even the parents of the main characters provide little evidence of self-interest well understood. At one point Elaine books Jerry's parents a hotel room for their visit because Jerry's apartment

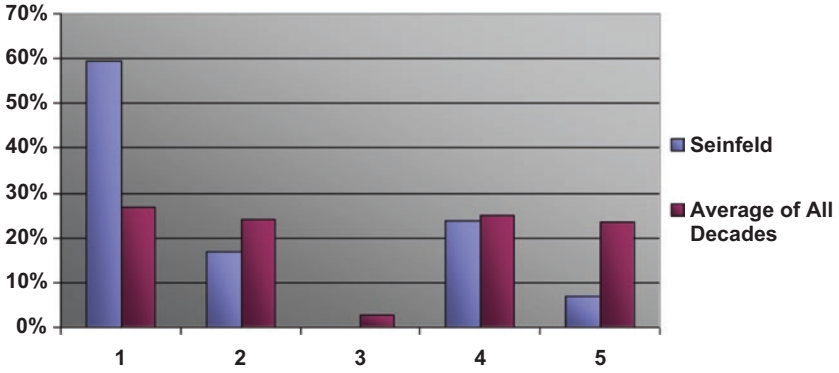

Fig. 4.3 *Seinfeld*

is being fumigated. The parents charge inordinate amounts to room service, massages, and liquor to the room.

The next sitcom is *Sex and the City*, which ran for six seasons, from 1998 to 2004. It features four single, professional women in Manhattan. Carrie, who narrates each episode, is the core member of the group and is unsuccessfully trying to strike a balance in her life between activities that make her happy and the pursuit of needs that usually end up making her miserable. Samantha Jones is the most confident, outspoken, and sexually adventurous member of the foursome, and tries to satisfy her sexual needs without emotional involvements. In spite of her fierce facade, Samantha is actually sensitive and extremely loyal to her friends. Charlotte York, the most conservative and optimistic member of the group, believes in the traditional "rules" of dating. Charlotte strives to lead the perfect life, but over the course of the series comes to realize that it is acceptable to break the rules. Miranda Hobbes, a hard-working lawyer, is the antithesis of Charlotte in that she is utterly cynical when it comes to men and relationships. At the same time she is the voice of reason in the group. Her cynicism mellows over time as she has a baby and gets married. All four women confide in and support one other while they fall in and out of relationships (Fig. 4.4).

The main focus of *Sex and the City* is the difficult role of women in contemporary society. Each episode explores the opportunities, dilemmas, and choices women face in their careers, sex lives, and relationships. The women have separate lodgings and lives but, like the characters in *Seinfeld*, come together over lunch and outings to discuss, sometimes in explicit detail, the problems they encounter and gripe about the expectations

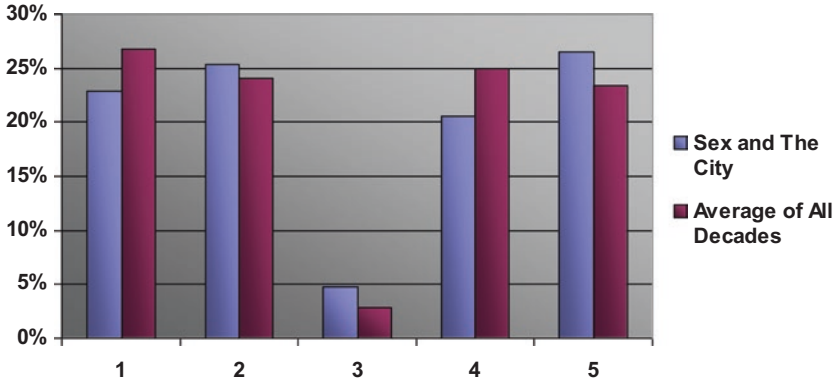

Fig. 4.4 *Sex and the City*

society has for single women. The desire for sex, money, and possessions runs high in all four women and is not unrelated. In "The Baby Shower," Miranda begins a sexual relationship with an accountant in the expectation of getting her taxes done for free. In the "Turtle and the Hare," the four women go to lunch following the wedding of a friend and ponder why she married someone who loved her more than she loved him. Charlotte maintains that the marriage was a wise "investment" on her part because she will get more out of the relationship than she has to put into it. In a subplot, Charlotte becomes addicted to a vibrator, known as the Rabbit, and Miranda wonders if technology of this kind will make men obsolete. Charlotte becomes so fixated on her orgasms that she withdraws from her relationship with the other women. Miranda and Carrie perform what they call "a Rabbit intervention" to restore group solidarity. The spread of the Rabbit through the group mirrored the marketing strategy, developed in the 1980s, to target women for sexual aids by having friends expose them to such devices at the equivalent of Tupperware parties.[16]

The coding for *Sex and the City* indicates an almost equal number of actions motivated by self-interested and self-interest well understood; the former accounted for 47 percent, and the latter accounted for 48.2 percent. The 1s and 2s almost entirely describe behavior by individual members of the group, or the group as a whole, toward the wider society (Fig. 4.5).

Almost all the 4s and 5s describe intra-group behavior (see Fig. 4.6). Toward one another the women act in terms of self-interest well understood 33.3 percent of the time. Diffuse reciprocity operates within the group; members come to the aid of others without any expectation of

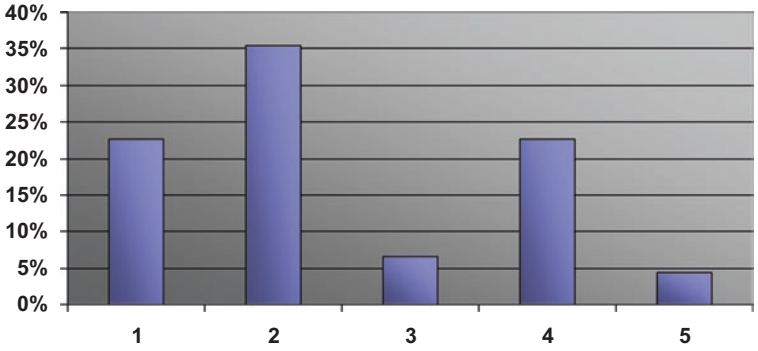

Fig. 4.5 *Sex and the City*: group to outside

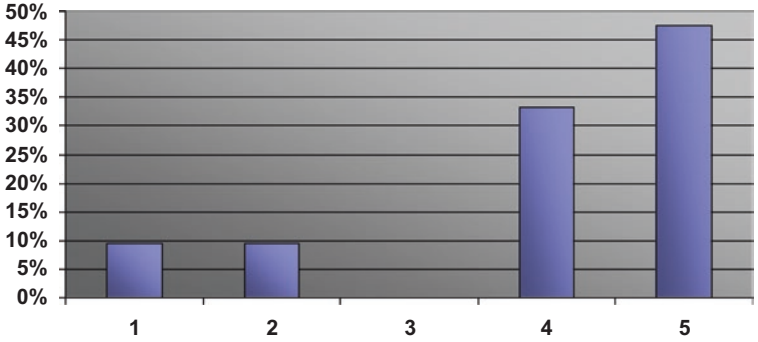

Fig. 4.6 *Sex and the City*: within group

immediate return. When the women engage in group activities it is often in pursuit of their individual interests, which they reason are sometimes better advanced more effectively in a group format. On occasion, the women participate in joint activities to support one of their members; Carrie, Samantha, and Miranda go with Charlotte to a Kama Sutra class because she is convinced she is bad at sex. The four women are as supportive of one another as 1950s and 1960s sitcom families.

Whenever someone in the group needs help or support, the others provide it even when it is inconvenient. In one episode Miranda asks Carrie to accompany her to the hospital when she gives birth. Carrie cancels a date with Big—the most important man in her life throughout the series—to be by Miranda's side when she goes into labor.

Perhaps the most telling encounters are those between the society and the four women. Almost half of the actions of outsiders toward the group—46.7 percent—are scored as 1s, suggestive of the extent to which the wider society in which they must function is self-interested and has almost a total disregard for the consequences of their behavior on the women. The sense of living in an unsupportive, even hostile, environment only reinforces intra-group solidarity. The sitcom conveys the lesson that you can really only depend on your group of friends or family (Fig. 4.7).

Duck Dynasty and *Modern Family* appear in part to be responses to the fragmentation and alienation of the most recent decade. They show considerably higher levels of interest well understood and correspondingly lower levels of individualism.

Duck Dynasty emphasizes rugged individualism but also togetherness as a family. Its characters display a mix of self-centered and altruistic behavior, but the latter consistently triumphs, and to everyone's advantage. In an early first-season episode, Willie's younger brother Jase fails to fulfill an order for duck whistles, and fesses up. Willie forgives him because they are family. This show, and almost every other, includes a concluding homily about working together as a family, and how playing and working hard are not that different.

There is little variation across seasons in the ratio of self-interest well understood and individualism. Their producers presumably recognize that family solidarity and credible altruism within it are one of the bases of these sitcoms' appeal. Viewer comments on Facebook are deeply divided between those who loved the show and those who danced with joy when it was taken off the air. A high percentage of the positive feedback stresses

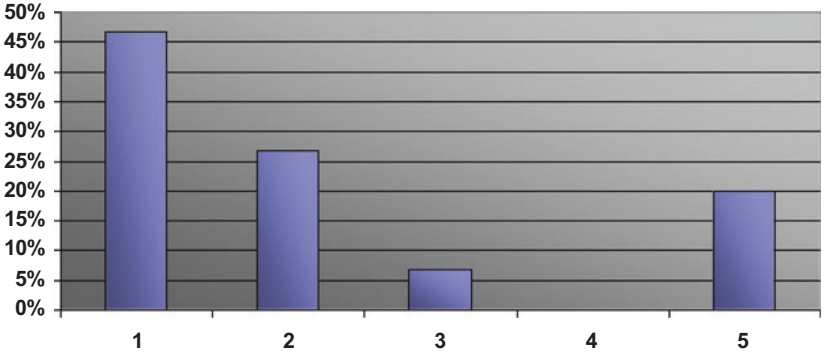

Fig. 4.7 *Sex and the City*: outside to group

the appeal of the family, its solidarity, and the degree to which viewers associated with it.[17]

Duck Dynasty is like *Sex and the City* in another respect: its sharp dichotomy between insiders and outsiders and the development of solidarity in part through negative stereotypes about outsiders. Grandpa Phil does not want his kids to grow up to be nerds. He teaches them how to eat squirrel meat and brains. He warns them about women who wear makeup because it hides their true selves. Their women should be as good cooks as their mom. If she's ugly but cooks good squirrel dumplings, then marry them, he advises. "If you shoot squirrel for you woman she'll never disappoint you in bed." Almost every show opens with some humorous and negative one-liner about outsiders and their practices. Hollywood is referred to as "Hollyweird," kids who use cell phones and play computer games are described as urban "effeminates," and "will next be carrying fanny packs."

Every show emphasizes masculinity, and contrasts Redneck masculinity with the softness of urban and suburban life. Masculinity consists of hunting ducks, camping out, not bathing, and roughing it in general. In a season 1 episode, Willie's brothers make fun of him because he sleeps in a camper, not a tent, when they go hunting. They say his idea of roughing it is opening his garage door manually. But his father Phil also defies expectations. He stays home, eats jambalaya, and agrees to bathe in return for sex from his wife. There is also tension between Willie and his brothers because they are his employees. Willie has less need to demonstrate his masculinity because he has a successful business.

While emphasizing masculinity, this and other shows take the mickey out of Redneck pretensions of masculinity, and reveal the power of women. Women's traditions are portrayed as the opposite of men's in many ways: they value solidarity versus individualism, emotional expression versus restraint, and cleanliness versus the scent of outdoor living. Women exercise power indirectly and through traditional means. Men attempt to assert their masculinity by establishing control over nature and displaying the symbols of manhood: beards, rifles, and bringing game and fish to the women to clean and cook. Hunting aside, they routinely fail in all these activities. In one episode they miss the beginning of the hunting season because they sleep through it. Attempts to bond while hunting in this episode also often fail because Willie's younger brother ignores him while playing video games in his RV.

The solidarity of the *Duck Dynasty* extended family is reinforced by their sense of being a largely self-contained unit. They have the lowest rate of interaction between family members and the outside world since *I Love Lucy*. There is the rare, and usually brief, encounter with, among others, a buyer or distributor of duck whistles, the local school, gulf club, or a tattoo parlor. One of the latter was with a photographer brought in to do a portrait of Willie's wife and her dog. There is more regular interaction with employees at the duck whistle production facility, but they are more family than outsiders. An important marker is dress. Willie and his male family members are invariably clad in fatigues and fully bearded, as are their employees. Others with whom they interact dress in normal clothes and are for the most part clean-shaven.

Duck Dynasty and *Sex and the City* share an important feature: whenever someone in the group needs help or support, the others provide it even when it is inconvenient. Otherwise, these sitcoms exist in different universes, and it is hard to imagine how, if at all, their characters would interact if they ever met. Not that they are likely to, because the men of *Duck Dynasty* never depart from Louisiana, and hardly ever leave the swampland on which they live, hunt, and fish. Carrie and her friends stay in the Big Apple, and if they left for a holiday it would not be for the bayous of Louisiana. *Sex and the City* characters seek out others; at the very least they need them for employment and sexual gratification. *Duck Dynasty*'s characters are self-contained. They support themselves, they have spouses, and they regard everyone not like themselves with suspicion.

Modern Family is in many ways a counterpoint to *Duck Dynasty*. It is urban, secular, multiethnic, and one of its couples is gay. Its characters are troubled by their roles; parents and children alike struggle to work out how they should best perform them and balance their personal interests against those of the family. *Duck Dynasty* characters treat their roles as unproblematic, although not infrequently violate their understandings of them. In *Modern Family* Jay and his wife, Phil and Claire, and Cameron and Mitchell openly discuss their roles and disagree about them or their application. *Duck Dynasty* family members understand their roles as "natural" in the sense that they are defined by scripture and timeless in their practice. *Modern Family* characters take the cues from the society around them, a society in which there is no consensus, so they must struggle to work them out for themselves.

This struggle is most evident in the case of Cameron and Mitchell, and understandably so, as openly gay couples are a very recent development.

Their language is filled with therapy speak. Their daughter Lilly is aggressive toward other children, wants to kill a prospective brother, and clings to Cameron. In Season 3, episode 3, Cameron suggests that Mitchell is a cause of her problem as he is overly possessive, permissive, and clinging. Mitchell gets angry but agrees there is some truth to the charge. Cameron insists that he bring Lily to preschool for a change, where he has a casual conversation with one of the teachers who suggests that Lily has difficulty sharing with other children, and that kids who do this are often mimicking a parent. Cameron begins to think he is the cause of Lily's problem, and becomes anxious and overcompensates in his behavior. This continues until extended family members assure them that Lily will outgrow her problem.

Self-interest in *Modern Family* is more self-evident, more threatening in the short term to family solidarity. *Modern Family* also stresses togetherness, but of a more fragile kind. There are greater displays of individualism that become the source of family tension, but they are always resolved and appear to strengthen the family—if temporarily. Viewers wonder if some relationships within the family will survive, which is never in question in *Duck Dynasty*. In season 1, episode 3, Jay Pritchett makes a model airplane and attempts to fly it through a loop held up by his son-in-law. He misses and hits him in the face instead with the plane, knocking him out. He is more concerned about the condition of the plane than he is about his son-in-law. They are later reconciled, but only after the intervention of Jay's wife.

In season 3, episode 3, Claire and Phil get into an argument after a supermarket accident. Claire says it is Phil's fault because he backed into her shopping cart, knocking her over while ogling a woman. He denies it. The conflict escalates with their children ganging up on Claire, whom they insist always needs to be right. At the dinner at which Cameron and Mitchell intend to announce their impending adoption of a second child, Claire makes everyone watch the surveillance video she obtained from the store that proves her right. The effort to which she went to make her point only convinces family members even more of her neurosis. In the same show, her daughters argue with each other over their choice of bedrooms and their younger brother resolves the problem by giving up his and agreeing to sleep in the attic. He is not being selfless, but wants to go to the attic because he is afraid that the ants in his closet will turn on him when they finish the bag of candy he has left there. In this episode, as in others, self-interest runs amok. Much is said that appears to put somebody

else first, but is really self-centered. There is lots of blame shifting, which is always a sign of self-interest. It is a key trope of marriage and sibling relations, and consistently played for laughs.

Comparative Analysis

Perhaps the most revealing trend is in the pattern of intra- and extra-group relations. By group, I mean the family, extended family, or a surrogate family composed of friends. A sitcom like Lucy has both; the Ricardos and Mertzs are each a family and together they form a tight-knit social circle. *Seinfeld* and *Sex in the City*, by contrast, feature social groups. *Duck Dynasty* and *Modern Family* are about extended families. Those outside the family or social group include strangers, friends, or more distant family members not in the core group but part of the wider society. I coded three kinds of interactions: within the group, group members toward outsiders, and outsiders toward the group or members of the group.

In the 1950s and 1960s, by far the dominant form of interaction is intra-group. Sitcom characters in *Lucy* and *Leave It to Beaver* infrequently left their homes, and when they did, their out-of-the-house activities are most often reported by them to other members of the family once they return home or left to our imaginations. This pattern began to change in the 1970s. The *Mary Tyler Moore* show and *Cheers* acknowledge the importance of the workplace and other public settings. This opening brings additional characters into sitcoms, some of them quite marginal but others who make more regular appearances and blur the previously sharp distinction between family and society. In the 1990s and 2000s, the trend accelerates, with even more encounters between the nuclear groups of *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City* and outsiders (Fig. 4.10).

Interactions between outside characters and family or group members provide insight into a different dimension of social relations, and one that has important implications for intra-group relations. Figure 4.11 tracks these interactions over seven decades on our self-interest scale. It indicates that outside groups behave toward family and group members largely on the basis of their self-interest. In the 1990s and 2000s, the society at large and sitcom group members became increasingly self-interested. At the same time, intra-group interactions become even more firmly based on self-interest well understood. It is not surprising that intra-group solidarity increases as a function of the perception that the outside world is self-interested, uncaring, and even hostile. Admittedly, we are talking about

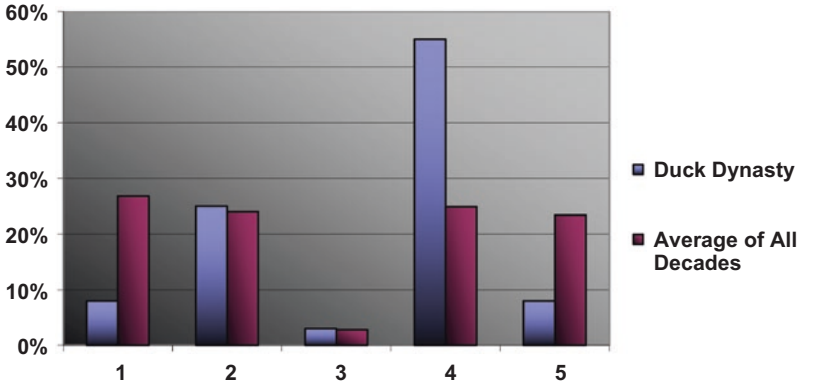

Fig. 4.8 *Duck Dynasty*

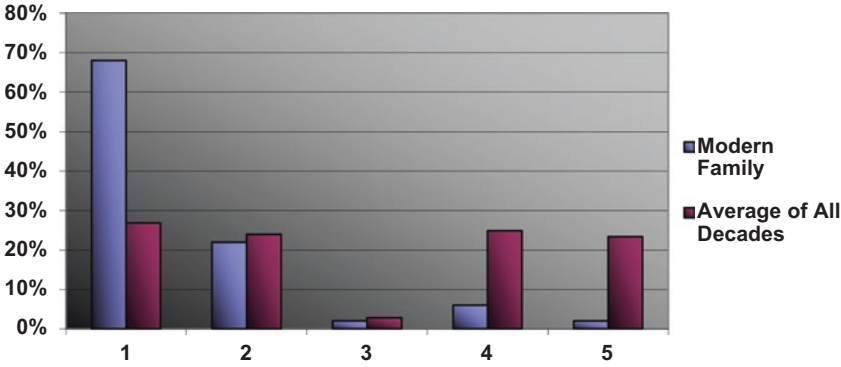

Fig. 4.9 *Modern Family*

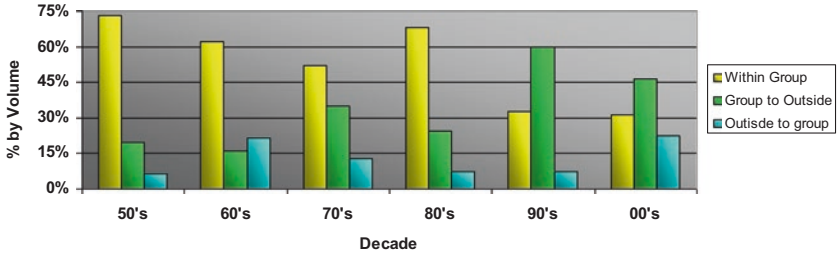

Fig. 4.10 Breakdown of volume of activities for each grouping

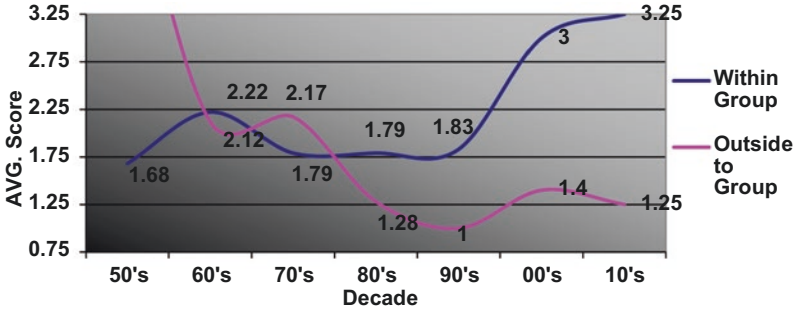

Fig. 4.11 Sitcom group versus outsiders' interactions

the world of American television, not American society, but it is a reasonable inference that the former reflects the latter at least in part.

Evidence for this assertion comes in the first instance from the extraordinary success of these sitcoms to which many viewers obviously relate. In addition to providing entertainment, these shows may offer some kind of vicarious group affiliation, which viewers themselves feel in need of in light of their parallel perceptions of the outside world. *Friends* arguably makes an overt appeal to this kind of viewer. Even *Seinfeld*, whose characters border on the pathological, has a relatively tight-knit core group. *Duck Dynasty* and *Modern Family* also follow this pattern. The latter shows a relatively intense and consistent pattern of hostile relations, or at least perceptions of hostile relations, between family members and outsiders. So too are outsider relations to the group correspondingly more hostile.

It is probably no accident that social groups have replaced families as the focus of these shows as families have become less central to the lives of so many viewers, so many of whom are involved in relationships—serial or lasting—that are very different from the traditional family. Television as a whole has also moved toward more realistic portrayals of American life. It is debatable whether American families are more dysfunctional than they were in the 1950s, but the dysfunctional features of family life are no longer taboo. Suburban families of the old-fashioned kind, in which mother takes a back seat and father knows best, have become unmarketable because they have become increasingly unthinkable.

There has undoubtedly been a shift from self-interest well understood to individualism in TV sitcoms, and it has been accelerated by the growing tendency to portray families more realistically. At the outset, I noted that when robust norms are violated in increasing frequency, hypocrisy

develops to paper over the difference between former and current practices. Discourses attempt to make the behavior at odds with the still respected norms somehow consistent with it. There was little internal hypocrisy in early sitcoms because their characters lived by the most respected norms. These shows themselves were hypocritical because writers and producers knew that they were unrepresentative of real American families. With *Seinfeld*, hypocrisy comes into the open; its characters routinely violate norms and attempt, often in pathetic and amusing ways, to square their behavior with accepted norms. This theme provides much of the humor of the show and is based on the tacit understanding among writers, actors, and audience that most of us behave at times in similar ways.

The next step in the progression from self-interest well understood to individualism is the normalization of behavior at odds with traditional norms. The most recent sitcoms I analyzed—*Duck Dynasty* and *Modern Family*—resist this move. Like *Seinfeld*, their humor derives in part from people violating norms and then trying to justify their action to others and themselves. In various business sectors and in politics it may no longer be necessary to justify what was formerly unacceptable behavior. Consider, for example, how many voters thought well of Trump for paying no taxes and not releasing his tax returns.[18] In sitcoms, this has not happened, and is unlikely to because viewers would not find it funny.

Notes

1. Darrell Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology* (New York: Praeger, 1989), p. 10.
2. The coding and the initial analysis of sitcoms from the 1950s to 2008 were carried out by Dartmouth students Ben Reed, Jen Ross, and Mike Whitticom. The charts were updated by Timothy James Potenza.
3. According to Judy Kutulas, "Who Rules the Roost? Sitcom Family Dynamics from the Cleavers to the Osbournes," in Mary Dalton and Laura Linder, *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 49–59, "family is the one experience to which virtually all viewers can relate. It evokes symbols and images advertisers like. And its plot possibilities are endless."
4. Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, p. 24.
5. Judy Kutulas, "Who Rules the Roost?," p. 51.
6. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II, part 3, ch. 8, pp. 558–563.

7. Ibid., p. 561.
8. Ibid., pp. 560–563.
9. U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Special Report, "Married-Couples and Unmarried Partner Households: 2000," February 2003, p. 1.
10. Daphne Lofquist, Terry Lugaila, Martin O'Connell, and Sarah Feliz, "Households and Families: 2010," U.S. Census Bureau, *2010 Census Briefs*, April 2012.
11. Janice Littlejohn, "State of Television's Family Sitcoms Is Not SO Funny," *Valley News*, Television Listings, 20 July 2008, pp. 1–2.
12. Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families*, p. 25.
13. Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter*, p. 25.
14. David Pierson, "American Situation Comedies and the Modern Comedy of Manners." in Mary Dalton and Laura Linder, eds., *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 35–46.
15. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* II, Part 2, ch. 2, pp. 482–484.
16. Sharon Marie Ross, "Talking Sex: Comparison Shopping through Female Conversation," in Dalton and Linder, *Sitcom Reader*, pp. 111–124.
17. Facebook, Duck Dynasty, https://www.facebook.com/duckdynasty/ (accessed 12 April 2017).
18. David Barstow, Susanne Craig Russ Buettner, and Megan Twohey, "Donald Trump Records Show He Could Have Avoided Taxes for Nearly Two Decades, New York Times Found," *New York Times*, 1 October 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/us/politics/donald-trump-taxes.html (accessed 9 October 2015); "Latest Election Polls 2016," *New York Times*, 9 October 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/us/elections/polls.html (accessed 9 October 2016).

CHAPTER 5

Rock to Rap

Abstract The third domain for exploring changing conceptions of self-interest is popular music. Its lyrics attempt to reflect current practices but also help to shape them. We observe a similar shift in self-interest in personal relationships from romance and framing interests in terms of a couple to sex and self-gratification, and from longer-term to short-term, more immediate frames of reference.

Keywords Rock 'n' roll • Music videos • Selfishness • Romance • Sex

Victor Hugo perceptively observed that "music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent." It is a medium through which people can communicate virtually any type of sentiment or message, including deeply subversive ones. Popular music in America became increasingly mainstream and commercial in the early years of the twentieth century, and more so with the advent of radio in the 1920s. Station owners and broadcasters had a common interest in making money and thus in playing music that would appeal to the widest audience or, in later decades, to the specific demographics they targeted.

Critical to the growth of the popular music industry in the 1950s was the purchasing power of teenagers and their emergence as a distinct

R.N. Lebow, *The Politics and Business of Self-Interest from Tocqueville to Trump*, International Political Theory,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-68569-4_5

subculture. Both were made possible by the great postwar economic boom, greater high school enrollments, parental allowances, part-time jobs, and peer socialization. The music and movie industry were quick to cash in on this phenomenon, and their products in turn further solidified the sense of American teenagers that they were a breed apart. So too did the negative reaction of adults to their music and behavior.[1] Chuck Berry's 1956 hit, "Roll Over Beethoven," urged him to "tell Tchaikovsky the News." The news, of course, was that rock and roll was here to stay and the expression of powerful demographic at the cutting edge of American culture.

On the whole, however, rock and roll lyrics remained tame and rebellion was limited to relatively mild objections to social codes or parental supervision. In the top of the charts 1958 song, "Yakety Yak," parental power is reduced to the power of the purse. The young man is told: "Take out the papers and the trash, Or you don't get no spending cash." And again, "If you don't scrub that kitchen floor, You ain't gonna rock 'n roll no more."[2] The lyrics suggest that the singer will do as told, and there is no suggestion that his parents are acting in an unreasonable way.

With rock and roll, and Elvis Presley in particular, popular music gradually became more controversial. Its suggestive lyrics, beat, and the gyrations of some of its performers were correctly perceived by conservatives to challenge the conventional social and sexual order. The *New York Times* published a score of articles linking hooliganism to rock and roll.[3] Senator Robert Hendrickson asserted that "Not even the Communist conspiracy could devise a more effective way to demoralize, confuse and destroy" the United States than "permissive parents" who allowed the children to listen to this kind of music and become juvenile delinquents.[4] Rock and roll was widely regarded as licentious, along with sex education, cheap and reliable birth control, and penicillin.[5] In the 1960s and 1970s, in the civil rights and Vietnam War era, some popular music became overtly political without losing its commercial appeal.[6] Rock and roll is credited with foregrounding and advancing civil rights, creating economic opportunities for African-Americans and making aspects of their culture "mainstream." Lumping together rock and roll with bebop, blues, and "jungle music," segregationists vilified the genre as a source of miscegenation, sexual immorality, and juvenile delinquency.[7] Ironically, some on the left did the same. Frankfurt School political philosopher, Theodor Adorno, dismissed jazz and popular music as crude, status-upholding products of the music industry.[8]

The proliferation of radio stations, and later, the digital revolution, made it possible to target music to increasingly diverse audiences. Music production also became increasingly decentralized and independent of major record companies. Commercialization was no longer hindered as much by the kind of censorship that had prevailed from the 1920s to the 1970s. Censorship is still present, but limited to mass audience events or broadcasts controlled by major networks and companies, sensitive to complaints from sponsors. Even then, it is likely to generate more laughter and scorn than compliance. A prime example is the so-called "wardrobe malfunction" at the 38th Super Bowl half-time show in Houston, Texas, at which singer Janet Jackson's breast, adorned with a nipple shield, was briefly exposed. Dubbed "Nipplegate," the incident produced more ridicule than shock, and many commentators thought Jackson had exposed herself deliberately to gain publicity. The Federal Communications Commission fined CBS a record $550,000. The network appealed and in 2011 the Third Circuit Court of Appeals voided the fine.[9]

Songs are a more difficult genre to code than sitcoms because it requires separating the lyrics from the music that affects their meaning. In Mozart operas, the music not infrequently undercuts the lyrics, telling us not to take them at face value.[10] Tension between music and lyrics is less common in popular songs, but music is important in other ways. It provides emphasis and context, the latter by establishing genre, intensity, mood, and cross-references to other songs. The same is true of visual images. To understand Elvis, and the controversy he provoked in the 1950s, one must see his gyrating hips. Psychedelic light shows were integral to the music of Pink Floyd and other bands in the 1970s, just as head banging and mosh-pitting were to Metallica and other bands of the 1990s.

Music videos were a revolutionary development and significantly changed the way in which young people approached music. They watch at least as much as they listen, and lyrics have declined proportionately in their importance and impact. Some young people say they pay no attention to the lyrics, at least for the first few times they watch a music video. Popular music is nevertheless popular in part because its lyrics appeal in some way to the aspirations, fears, values, and practices of listeners. For these reasons, it is an appropriate discourse for my purposes.

Songs may be more responsive to changing values than either presidential speeches or sitcoms. The rhetoric of presidential speeches is constrained by all the expectations that surround high public office. Sitcoms are a commercial genre, dominated by profit, making its moguls generally

more cautious than adventurous and anxious to avoid offending political authority, sponsors, or any significant segment of their audience. Music is also commercial, but, as noted, it is a more pluralistic form of entertainment. For most of the period under study there were only three major television networks, and even today there are only a handful of additional cable networks that produce their own shows. There were always many record companies and independently owned radio stations. Over the course of the postwar era, recording companies proliferated while the growth of radio allowed stations to aim increasingly for niche markets. Both developments made music more responsive to an increasingly affluent youth culture. As youth sets most social trends, popular music, like the Internet, is usually ahead of the curve as far as media go in reflecting changes in social patterns and behavior in American society.

As with presidential speeches and sitcoms, my students and I analyzed the lyrics of popular songs over most of the postwar era. Using *Billboard's* Top Song Lists for each decade, we sampled approximately 70 of the top 100 songs over seven decades. This is because singers and narrators vary across songs, and we included only those in the top 100 who speak in the first person or about another person with whom they had some kind of relationship. *Billboard* has as yet no list for the current decade, so we used the top 40 songs to date from acclaimedmusic.net and top 20 albums from *Billboard*. For all songs, we used the same five-point scale, with a 5 denoting behavior we consider strongly consistent with self-interest well understood. A score of 1 goes to behavior that exhibits the highest degrees of narrow self-interest—individualism in Tocqueville's lexicon.

We investigated self-interest along four dimensions: identity, goals, behavior, and time perspective. To generate scores, we asked the following questions about the lyrics of each song. To what extent do the main character(s) identify solely with themselves or with others as well? Are their goals and activities pursued for the benefit of others, or at least consistent with them, or at their expense? Do they act as isolated individuals or in collaboration with others? Are the goals or gratification they seek immediate or deferred?

All songs were coded on all four dimensions and were also given a mean value based on the four scores. Two of my students independently coded all the songs from the 1950 through the 2000s.[11] A sample of their codings were checked by the other ten seminar students, who were given copies of the lyrics to follow while listening to songs the coders considered emblematic or problematic. The students made their own codings, which

were then compared with those of the original student coders. The seminar student codings were generally similar, and, following this exercise, there was higher inter-coder reliability between the students who coded the remainder of the songs and a second check by the seminar as a whole. I coded the songs from 2010 to the present with the assistance of two students. We coded a sample of songs and individually and then compared our scores and resolved the few discrepancies.

Consistent with my thesis, we found popular music to reveal increasing individualism over time. Many of the songs are about romance, and, depending on how it is framed and expressed, love can be an emotion that binds one to another or it can be selfish. Lovers were once framed as couples, but by the turn of the century, if not before, were increasingly characterized as individual consumers in the market for affection and sex.[12] Love songs received an individual, or more selfish, rating to the extent that their lyrics speak of only the narrator's satisfaction, and more so if it is achieved at the expense of their "partner." When an individual's love for a partner displaces purely individual concerns, identity becomes collective. An example is "Endless Love," a 1980s song, in which Diana Ross and Lionel Ritchie proclaim: "My love, There's only you in my life. The only thing that's bright." They sing it separately and then together, affirming that two have merged into one.

Figure 5.1 indicates that the 1950s are the highpoint of collective identification. There is a steady drop to the current decade with the sharpest overall decline in the last two decades. Characters in songs have come to think of themselves as increasingly detached from their society.

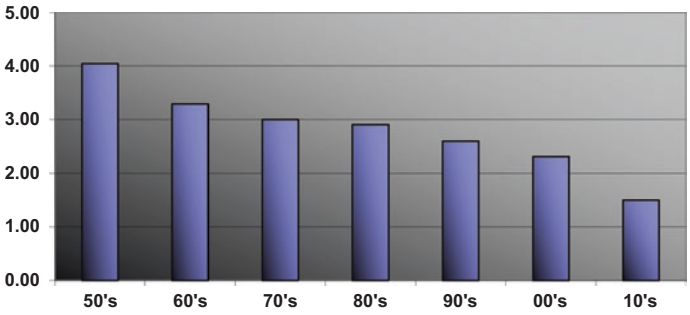

Fig. 5.1 Identity as group or individual

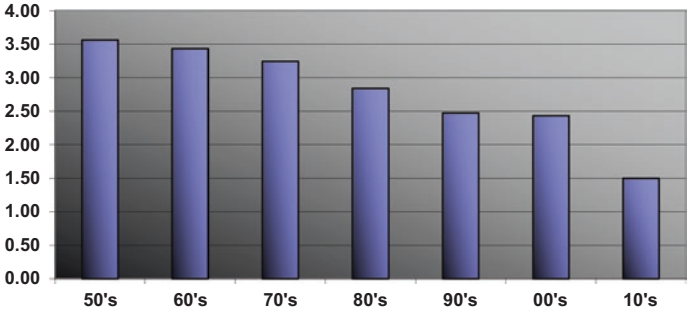

Fig. 5.2 Activity centered on group or individual

Our second dimension, goals, refers to the envisaged beneficiaries of the behavior in question. Are the singers' goals expected to benefit the individual, a couple, group, or the wider community? The lowest scores go to behavior that is expected to benefit or gratify the individual at the expense of others. The highest scores are for what can be judged altruistic behavior. Once again, as Fig. 5.2 demonstrates, there is an observable decline over seven decades.

The third dimension, behavior, describes the extent to which the main characters in songs act alone or in concert with others. Individual behavior can be benign, and collective behavior malign, but it is on the whole a reasonable measure of social integration. The codings took into account the nature of the collective activity in question, and did not score as collective any with anti-social goals (e.g., drug dealing, bank robbery). Much, although not all, isolated individual behavior is indicative of alienation from society. Otis Redding describes his alienation in the 1960s song, "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay." He attributes it in the first instance to the sense of feeling trapped. He laments: "Look like nothing's gonna change, Everything still remains the same." He then acknowledges that he is part of the problem because "I can't do what ten people tell me to do, So I guess I'll remain the same, yes."

Figure 5.3 indicates that yet again the 1950s had the highest score. The decline over almost six decades was once again steepest in the current decade.

The final dimension was time perspective. Self-interest well understood often leads people to defer immediate gratification in pursuit of longer-term goals. Individualism, which more often finds expression in efforts to satisfy appetites, tends to seek more immediate gratification. Songs that

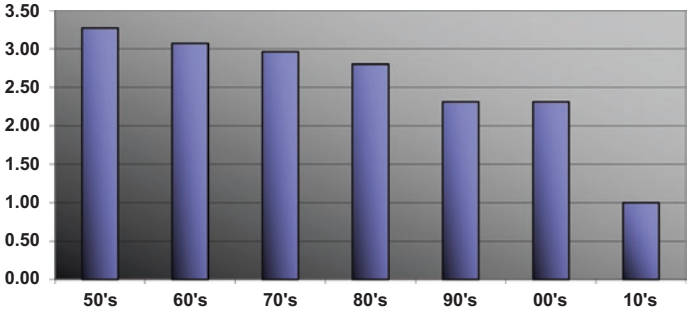

Fig. 5.3 Behavior centered on self or group

emphasized short-term costs for longer-term rewards received the highest coding, while the lowest went to behavior aimed at achieving immediate returns. Figure 5.4 indicates the highest scores in the 1950s and 1960s, with a 30 percent decline from this high to the present decade. This pattern is consistent with the scores for the other three dimensions.

When we combine the scores of these four dimensions to obtain an overall evaluation of self-interest, the results, shown in Fig. 5.5, indicate a decline only in the last four decades of the study. To flesh out these findings, I provide a qualitative analysis of three major substantive themes of popular music: romantic relationships, materialism, and attitude toward the law and prevailing social norms. All three themes have significant implications for understandings of self-interest.

Romantic relationships are far and away the dominant subject of popular music. The majority of the top 100 songs of the 1950s are variants of the theme: boy meets girl, love blossoms, and marriage follows. Prominent examples are "Earth Angel," "Teen Angel," "Altar of Love," "The Book of Love," "The Chapel of Love," and "Heaven and Paradise." These songs link love, marriage, and religion. Dean Martin's classic "Memories Are Made of This" sings of the joys and warm memories people gain through love, relationships and families. He suggests a natural and enduring progression, from "love and kisses" to "wedding bells" to a home with "three kids for flavor," and a flavor that endures and "dreams you will savor." In keeping with the values of the day, songs such as "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing," "Don't, I Beg of You," and "To Know Him Is to Love Him" display female submissiveness.

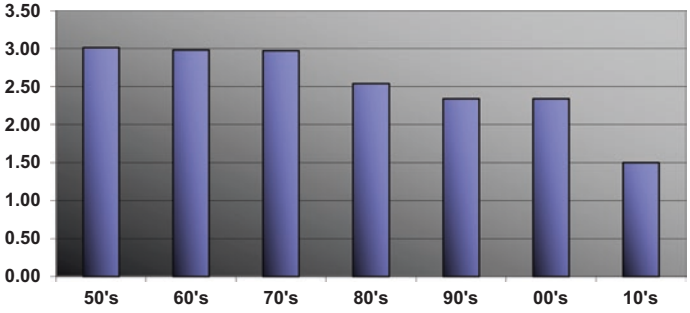

Fig. 5.4 Time perspective

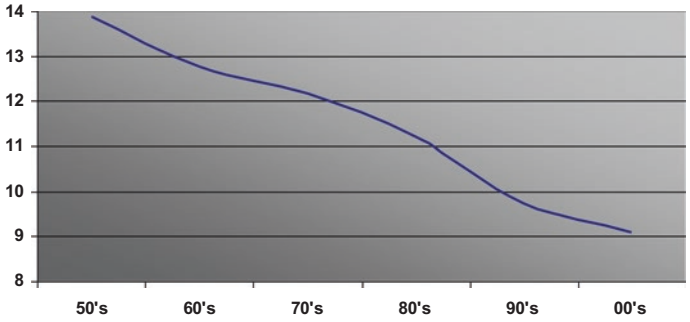

Fig. 5.5 Aggregate self-interest

Other songs emphasize the mutual acceptance and understanding, and even sacrifice, that love is thought to require. Love and marriage are invariably portrayed as long-term desirable commitments. In "Love Me Tender," one of the hit ballads of the decade, Elvis Presley promises that "I'll be yours through all the years, Till the end of time." Listeners would have thought this the norm for "true love," as Elvis sang in an era where divorce was largely the preserve of the very rich, and especially movie stars.

Just as sitcoms began to move away from stereotyped portrayals of idealized families in the 1970s, songs begin to confront the difficult realities of romantic relationships. Lyrics occasionally express anxieties that relationships will not survive, and there is almost a complete absence of lyrics framing marriage as a lasting commitment. In keeping with the sexual revolution, songs like "My Sharona," "Do You Think I'm Sexy," and

"Maneater" express interest in the opposite gender for purely ephemeral forms of satisfaction. Lyrics contain more references to broken homes and cheating. Songs such as "Stop! In the Name of Love," "You're so Vain," and "Don't Talk to Strangers" nevertheless reaffirm traditional values by depicting cheating as self-indulgence at the expense of partner feelings and relationships. In "Careless Whisper," George Michael reveals that cheating has forever changed the way he can look at his partner and other people. While not yet the norm, deceit is a serious issue for the songs of this decade. Self-interest well understood is unambiguously on the decline.

Distrust became more prevalent in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. A common theme of songs is that society is corrupt and relationships are likely to fail. In the 1980s hit, "Islands in The Stream," Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton "Sail away … to another world" where they can escape from society and its values. In the 1990s, Deborah Cox, in "Nobody's Supposed To Be Here," will not allow a man into her heart for fear of breaking it once more. Lyrics like these discourage people from putting trust in either society or relationships. The same distrust became a major trope in sitcoms, but not until the 1990s.

Kissing aside, sex was taboo in 1950s songs. Rock and roll in general was still suspect because its "Negro" roots, beat, and encouragement of a separate youth culture were thought by many to encourage permissiveness. Cheating is about sex, although the word "sex" itself does not make it into a song on the charts until the 1971 theme song from the movie "Shaft." Interestingly, the increase in sexual references parallels the rise of women singers to the top of the Billboard charts. There are no women represented in the top ten positions in the 1950s and only one in the 1960s. Three made it to the top in the 1970s, five in the 1980s, four in the 1990s, and five in the current decade. The women's movement encouraged females to assert their sexual needs and demand satisfaction from their partners. Female artists were not solely responsible for the introduction of explicit sexual references in songs, but they played a major role in breaking this taboo and in presenting sexual satisfaction as a goal in itself. Sexual references increasingly lost their association with "love," "girlfriend" or "boyfriend," and, above all, with marriage. Songs such as "Ring My Bell" and "Da Ya Think I'm Sexy" portray sex as a short-term physical need. In her 1979 hit "Hot Stuff," Donna Summer calls for a physically attractive man to gratify her sexual appetite. The liberation of sex from relationships and with it the focus on one's own satisfaction is another expression of the more general shift in the direction of self-interest.

Once again popular music is ahead of sitcoms, which do not deal openly with sex or emphasize self-gratification until the 1990s. In the 1950s, the censors would not let anyone use the word "pregnant" on *I Love Lucy* even though Lucille Ball was pregnant and many of the shows were built around this theme.[13] In 1976, Mary Hartman alluded to homosexuality. In a 1992 Seinfeld episode, "The Contest," George tells Jerry, Elaine, and Kramer that his mother discovered him masturbating. The conversation leads to a competition among the four of them to see who can go the longest without masturbating. The National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) did not consider masturbation a suitable topic suitable for prime time television and as a result, the word "masturbation" is never used in the episode. Instead, the four characters convey its meaning through a number of funny euphemisms and hand gestures. It was not until the late 1990s and the advent of *South Park* that words like "crack whore, anal probes and flaming farts" enter the TV lexicon, and with a delight in their use that only long suppression can bring about.

The lyrics of the 1980s and 1990s become even more permissive and explicit. They not only accept sex outside of marriage and relationships but also celebrate the joys of sex without any emotional or other ties. Singers begin to advertise their sexual prowess, and some treat sex as a means of dominating others. Some artists flaunt their ability to exploit their sexual partners for their own pleasure. In 1997, in "Wannabe," the Spice Girls explain what a man must do to obtain their love. "If you wanna be my lover," they proclaim, "you have got to give, taking is too easy, but that's the way it is." In many rap songs, the value of commitment is further degraded and sex is treated as a commodity. In their song "California Love," 2Pac and Dr. Dre comment favorably on self-interested actions and girls who "friend" for alcohol and give gifts in exchange for sex.

The exchange of sex for goods brings us to the subject of materialism. Tocqueville asserts that "equality of social conditions … without any doubt" encourages more ethical and selfless behavior.[14] However, in the absence of constant reinforcement of communal attachments, equality threatens to bring about individualism, a condition in which citizens' circle of commitments narrow to themselves or their families. With individualism, the quest for wealth becomes not only the dominant concern but the material goods it allows become status symbols that differentiate their owners from their fellow citizens. This transition is evident in postwar popular music.

Songs of the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s recognize poverty and the struggle to escape it. Songs like "Dominique," "Love Child," "Age of Aquarius," and "Calcutta" recognize the human cost of poverty and reveal willingness to extend a helping hand to its victims. Songs in these decades also stress the value of hard work, steady employment, and savings and warn against lavish and shortsighted spending. "Baby Come Back" by Player describes the sadness a man feels after blowing his money on a night out on the town. Dolly Parton exalts the value of a dollar in her hit song "9 to 5," without extolling the value of money as an end in itself.

The lyrics of the 1970s and 1980s put more emphasis on material possessions. The number of references to expensive goods mushroomed during the 1980s and continued to increase in the 1990s. Compassion toward the poor underwent a corresponding decline, and by the 1980s, consideration toward those less fortunate all but disappears. Materialism even affects love songs. Blondie's "Call Me," Donna Summers' "Bad Girls," and Human League's "Don't You Want Me." "Maneater" by Daryl Hall and John Oates praises material possessions and links them to sex. Madonna's "Material Girl" is, of course, the song that most famously and most explicitly links money with intimacy. Money attracts partners at least as much, if not more, than personal qualities. In "Bad Girls," Donna Summer attributes rising levels of prostitution to greater desires for money and the material goods it buys. An important caveat is in order here. These songs and others lend themselves to multiple readings. Some of Madonna's videos have convincingly been interpreted as relating to African-American and feminist theologies in the early 1990s.[15]

By the 1990s we encounter songs that regard the impoverishment of others to advance one's own wealth as acceptable behavior. In "I'll Be Missing You," Puff Daddy reminisces about his murdered friend Christopher Wallace, a.k.a. Notorious B.I.G. Puff Daddy talks about the joy they shared buying new cars, clothes, shoes and stealing from others. In "This Is How We Do It," rhythm and blues singer Montell Jordan recognizes spending for drugs, alcohol, and flashy cars as something of a norm. He gloats about how money buys him sexual favors. In "Can't Nobody Hold Me Down," Mase and Puff Daddy ridicule others who do not own expensive cars and jewelry and access to the women they want. At the same time, they mock those who have aspirations for higher social status. In "No Scrubs," TLC disclose that you need money to receive their love. They deride the unclean, lazy, and impoverished—all of whom are lumped together as "scrubs"—and chastise poor men for even making sexual advances.

Self-interest well understood requires people to restrain their appetites and respect reasonable legal and social constraints. Self-restraint is related to trust because people are more likely to follow norms—like not cheating on exams or taxes—when they believe that others will behave similarly. The more they distrust others and fear being made chumps, the less likely they are to exercise self-restraint. As we have seen, postwar sitcoms and popular music alike track increasing self-indulgence. They also indicate declining respect for legal and social norms.

The 1950s was the era of rock and roll, considered at the time to be music of rebellion. In retrospect, its agenda appears relatively juvenile and tame. "Rock Around the Clock," which arguably ushered in the genre, questions the norms of early curfews as kids party and dance through the night. In "Wake Up Little Susie," another signature hit, the Everly Brothers are concerned that they have remained out with a girl too late in the evening and that her parents will be furious and her reputation will suffer. Elvis Presley's "Jail House Rock" is about a party the warden throws at the county jail. The prison band begins to wail and the jailbirds start to dance. In the fifth verse, the warden coerces a loner to join the party by singing: "Hey, buddy, don't you be no square. If you can't find a partner use a wooden chair." For better and worse, songs like these reinforce social norms and stress conformity, even among those who may be in jail for rejecting more central social norms and practices.

As early as the middle 1960s, popular music begins to show contempt for social norms and the legal establishment. This is most evident in the frequent and favorable references to drugs. "Puff the Magic Dragon," a 1963 hit by Peter, Paul, and Mary, was a heavily coded account of a drug high that resonated strongly with young people. Songs such as "Get Back," "Aint Seen Nothing Yet," and "Seasons in the Sun" contain more open and positive references to drugs. Another important contrast with the 1950s is the rise and idolization of pessimistic outsiders, known as "Lone Rangers." Songs like "Rhinestone Cowboy," "SHAFT," and "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" celebrate people who reject conventional values and norms and seek satisfaction elsewhere.

By the 1990s, songs openly celebrate "bad boys" who break laws and commit crimes. "Mo Money Mo Problems," a 1997 posthumous release of a Notorious B.I.G., and featuring guest vocals by Mase and Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs, topped the *Billboards* hits for ten consecutive weeks. It explicitly addressed marijuana and drug sales. Christopher Wallace, the Notorious B.I.G., was a crack dealer turned rapper who was involved in an

East Coast–West Coast hip-hop feud and was killed by an unknown assailant in a drive-by shooting. "Gangsta's Paradise," "Here Comes the Hotstepper," and "California Love" make theft and murder important themes in their own right.

The twenty-first century shows the sharpest decline in our four coding categories and, accordingly, the greatest shift away from self-interest well understood to individualism. Songs become increasingly focused on individual short-term sexual gratification, often accompanied by alcohol or other drugs. "Blurred Lines" by T.I. and Pharrell is representative. It is also degrading to women, who are described as animals moved by their sexual needs. The men project their needs on to the women by repeating the line "I know you want it." Sexual satisfaction is nevertheless narcissistic and with a hint of sadism: "I'll give you something big enough to tear your ass in two."

In this and other songs by men, women are given a voice or acknowledged to have preferences of their own. They are often not shown in the video and, if they are, objectified in lyrics and image alike. Ed Sheeran's "Shape of You" is not about his partner, but her body. He tells his partner that he is in love "with the shape of you" and "in love with your body." Lyrics also become more explicit. In Eminem's "Cold Wind Blows" they are particularly crude, and possibly deliberately so, to gain attention. He tells his partner: "I want my dick sicked, mommy, And my nuts licked, gobble them up trick, yummy."

Women now also have a voice, and some, like Beyoncé and Rihanna, have reached the top of the charts. In the current decade Rihanna has had 41 weeks as the leading artist, with second place Bruno Mars at 31 weeks.[16] Rihanna became one of the few black women to reach the top of the male-dominated pop music business. "S&M," released in January 2011, mimics her male counterparts by singing about her sexual desire and appears to brag about her skills at being "bad." She acknowledges her love of the smell of sex, excitement at the prospect of chains and whips, and a man who gives "it to me strong" and makes "my body say ah ah ah."

"S&M" reached number 2 on *Billboard*'s "Hot 100" chart, which encouraged a remix starring Britney Spears. "S&M" had worldwide appeal, making number one in Australia, Canada, Hungary, Israel, and Poland, and among the top five in France, Germany, Ireland, Spain, and the United Kingdom.[17] Rihanna told *Spin* magazine that the lyrics were metaphorical. Critics for the most part said the obvious about that song: that it embraced violence as a fetish.[18] The video suggests that Rihanna is

aping, or mocking, men who seek sex for their own satisfaction and see it as an aggressive if not violent act against others. Rihanna insisted the song was about confidence in one's identity.[19]

Feminists took umbrage at "S&M" and Rihanna's video "Bitch Better Have My Money" (BBHMM).[20] The seven-minute-long film is about extracting revenge on an accountant who has defrauded the singer. Assisted by two friends, she kidnaps his wife, a stereotype of a rich woman with flashy dogs and jewels. They strip her, hang her upside down, hit her over the head with a bottle, and almost drown her in a pool. When the accountant refuses to return the money he stole, Rihanna ties him to a chair, threatens to dismember him with her collection of knives, and leaves him dripping blood over a trunk of money. In a reprise of "Thelma and Louise," Rihanna and her helpers ride away in a 1960s blue convertible.

The song has been described as Rihanna's revenge against Peter Gounis, whom she filed a lawsuit against in 2012, claiming he gave her "unsound" financial advice that led to a loss of $9m in 2009 alone. She won a multi-million settlement. Predictably, BBHMM ignited a furious debate. A headline on Refinery29 declared the video "Not Safe For Work or Feminists" while Twitter accused Rihanna of glorifying violence against women, and condemned the "kidnapped female" trope. Rolling Stone was attacked for praising the video and crediting the two minor male roles while not even giving a name to the actress who plays the main role.

Do lyrics of the kind I have quoted influence behavior? It is akin to asking if pornographic films influence behavior and are responsible, as some feminists allege, for unacceptable sexual behavior. There is no evidence to support this allegation, despite a large international research literature. Nor is there any of which I am aware regarding songs and videos in this connection.[21] We must exercise caution in drawing inferences about behavior from the lyrics of popular music. The idealized love of the 1950s reflected the practice of the 1950s only in part. It was an ideal, but one that influenced people and shaped their expectations of romance, love, and marriage. It also supported the double standard that permitted premarital sexual experience for men but not for women. This encouraged men to create a binary of women with whom they sought sex and those from whom they sought love. The top songs of the 1950s, and most from the first half of the 1960s are about the latter group of women and full of praise for them. Song undoubtedly had some influence on beliefs and behavior. However, they did not prevent a sea change in sexual attitudes and practices and the general loosening of social constraints that began in the 1960s.

Together with the emergence of a youth culture, wide experimentation with marijuana and other drugs, readily available and inexpensive methods of birth control, and the civil rights and antiwar movements, rock and roll helped to produce and legitimate the so-called revolution of the late 1960s. But this was an unintended consequence, and not a direct function in any of way of the lyrics. In retrospect, the transformation of the 1960s was a classic example of a non-linear confluence; multiple developments with largely independent chains of causation combined to produce a transformation. The postwar economic boom made rock and roll possible and both developments, along with access to automobiles and burgeoning college enrollments, generated a distinctive youth culture. The birth control pill, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War, all of which arrived hard on the heels of rock and roll, made that culture increasingly distinct and defiant.[22]

The music of the later 1960s and 1970s helped to negotiate this change. What about the music of the 2000s and 2010s? Causal inferences are hard to make in the social world under almost any circumstances, and particularly difficult in this instance. Popularity does not necessarily translate into assimilation and practice of the values conveyed by the lyrics—and perhaps more importantly now, the message of the videos. Images supplement, occasionally compete with, and are at least as important as lyrics. Interviews with young people suggest diverse reactions. Many read lyrics and images metaphorically, as a rebellion about society and its conventions. Some associate the lyrics with an oppressed minority and admit to deriving a frisson of excitement from listening to them. A few students admitted they listened because everyone else did and they would be at a social disadvantage not being conversant with the music.[23]

We may be presented with an interesting conundrum: the lyrics and visual images of the present decade are far more radical a departure from existing social conventions than were the lyrics of images (e.g., a gyrating Elvis, musicians and singers clad in counterculture garb) of the 1960s, yet may have had less behavioral impact. If this is so, I theorize it has much to do with the way in which rock and roll was one causal chain in a confluence that had non-linear effects in contrast to today's popular music. The reverse may be the case here. That is, there may be other factors at work that minimize its behavioral consequences.

When describing popular music, we must also be careful about defining our audiences. Popular songs of the 1940s and 1950s were national in reach and appeal. For the most part they cut across class, religious, political,

and racial divides. This was less true in the late 1950s and 1960s, where rock and roll became increasingly dominant. It was very much a youth phenomenon.[24] It was also very white, despite its African-American roots.[25] Motown Record Corp., founded in 1959, achieved considerable crossover success in the 1960s and helped to break this barrier, but whites and blacks continued to form distinct markets until late in the century.[26] In the twenty-first century, the fragmentation of the popular music market is more political than racial. Christian rock and evangelical pop emerged in the 1970s, and became increasingly important as genres. They convey on the whole conservative religious and social values.[27]

Not unlike sitcoms, the popular music audience has to some extent become fragmented and is best studied within, not across, its segmented demographics. Judging by market success, there nevertheless remains a dominant genre and it reveals the same shift from self-interest well understood to individualism as do presidential speeches.

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CHAPTER 6

Self-Interest and Democracy

Abstract The conclusion reviews the principal empirical findings of the book and explores their consequences for democracy. It identifies the rise of equality as a value and principle of justice as the underlying cause of the narrowing of self-interest. It in turn is a fundamental, although not exclusive, cause of the cultural and political crisis the United States currently faces.

Keywords United States • Democracy • Self-interest • Congress • Comity • Culture wars • Donald Trump

Our four discourses reveal a strikingly similar pattern: a decline in self-interest well understood becoming apparent in the second half of the 1960s and continuing unabated to the present decade. Presidents increasingly appeal to individuals rather than the community as a whole, and do so on the basis of their economic self-interest. Sitcoms move away from functional and hierarchical families in which father knows best, or at least means well, to groups of friends held together by their hostility and distrust of the wider world. In the early postwar period the top of the charts is consistently populated by love songs in which young men and women seek fulfillment by expanding their identities to that of couple and family. By the 2000s, popular music describes, and sometimes celebrates, young

R.N. Lebow, *The Politics and Business of Self-Interest from Tocqueville to Trump*, International Political Theory,
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people seeking instant gratification of their sexual appetites, and treating it as a semi-commercial transaction or an act of domination in which they impose their will on others.

The shift in discourse parallels and follows on the general loosening of social constraints that began in the 1960s. Together with the emergence of a youth culture, wide experimentation with marijuana and other drugs, readily available and inexpensive methods of birth control, and the civil rights and anti-war movements, it helped to produce and legitimate the so-called revolution of the late 1960s. In this chapter, I explore the relationship between discourse and practice, the deeper underlying causes of changes in narratives of self-interest, and what we should think about this process and its implications. I return to Tocqueville, whose thoughts once more offer an appropriate entry point.

I follow constructivists in arguing that conventions create the intersubjective understandings on which all action depends. The language that sustains these norms, conventions, and practices invariably describes a world that is never fully represented in practice. The democratic ideology of America posits equality among all citizens in their rights, and their freedom, within reason, to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. The reality is very different. Presidential speeches, sitcoms, and popular music of the 1950s and 1960s present a highly idealized portrait of the American people, their families, and how both act in terms of self-interest well understood. These discourses might be described as goals toward which the country and its people should aspire.

Beginning in the 1960s, many traditional American norms were challenged in theory and practice. In response, language became more problematic and contentious. Those defending traditional norms circled their linguistic wagons; they invoked conventional understandings of words and norms to condemn and constrain challenges. Political, religious, and social conservatives did this in their unsuccessful struggle against rock and roll in the late 1950s. Those challenging long-established norms justified their behavior with reference to other well-entrenched norms, expanding or stretching their meaning or the domains in which they applied to cover the practices in question. The greater freedom from parental and school authorities demanded by the youth culture was routinely justified in terms of self-reliance and the broader principles of democracy. In the 1960s, the civil rights movement and sexual revolution challenged more serious norms. The language of liberation and self-expression was invoked and extended to justify behavior very much at odds with traditional norms.

After much resistance, these new understandings became widely accepted and provided justification and incentives for further challenges to traditional norms. Equality, as opposed to subjugation, of women is a prime example of such a beneficial change.

These changes were made possible, as Tocqueville understood, by the reinforcing feedback loop between words and deeds. At the same time, and by the same means, understandings of self-interest changed in other ways to undermine long-standing norms. In the 1950s, where I begin my analysis, there was some degree of fit between words and deeds. Presidents could reasonably appeal to citizens on the basis of the longer-term national interest, and sitcoms and popular music could attract audiences by portraying close-knit, hierarchical families and young people moved by the ideal of ever-lasting romantic love. These values were still taken seriously, if not always honored in practice. As noted, these discourses represented a highly idealized depiction of American life, but one many, if not most, Americans accepted as valid.

Representations of self-interest began to change markedly in the late 1960s. Presidents increasingly address the American people as self-interested individuals and appealed to them on the basis of their short-term economic interests. Sitcoms like *Leave It to Beaver* continue to glorify the traditional family. *The Beverly Hillbillies*, a transitional show of the 1960s, maintains a tight-knit family living according to old-fashioned values, but in Beverly Hills, amidst a culture portrayed as indulging in every kind of social and material excess. It was not until the 1970s, and the advent of sitcoms like *Mary Tyler Moore* and *All in the Family*, that the major characters were allowed to deviate from traditional norms—albeit to a limited degree. Popular music was more responsive to public opinion, and especially the youth culture, its principal market. Its transformation began in the 1950s, but became more marked in the 1960s and later decades. Song lyrics became dominated by short-term individual interest, and the satisfaction of sexual appetite freed from moral and legal restraints.

With these changes in discourse, we enter a second stage of evolution marked by hypocrisy. Its advent varies across media, but everywhere it enters the picture and over time becomes increasingly evident in language and behavior. Hypocrisy has always been pronounced in politics, but it is absent or understated in presidential speeches in the 1950s. It becomes more pronounced in the 1960s and 1970s, in the speeches of Presidents Johnson and Nixon on the war in Indochina, and of Nixon and Reagan on civil rights. Nixon, for instance, deftly presented himself as a friend of the

civil rights movement, but did "not see any significant area where additional legislation could be passed that would be helpful in opening doors that are legally closed."[1] The most striking—and most transparent examples—may be Nixon's attempts to defend himself and his administration during the Watergate scandal. In April 1973, Nixon declared that he was "appalled at this senseless, illegal action" and was "shocked to learn that employees of the Re-Election Committee were apparently among those guilty."[2] Real life reprises art. Louis, the French Préfect in *Casablanca*, standing outside of Rick's Café with his winnings in his hand is "shocked" to discover that gambling goes on inside. Many of those who watched Nixon's speech would have made the connection.

Hypocrisy is almost entirely absent from *I Love Lucy*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, but self-evident and increasingly pronounced in *All in the Family*, *Seinfeld*, and the *Simpsons.* These shows expect their audience to recognize hypocrisy for what it is and play it for laughs. In Chap. 4, I offered the example of George from *Seinfeld*, who would resort to almost anything to get what he wanted, invoking the queuing rule in an obviously unsuccessful attempt to shame a woman who grabbed the telephone receiver before he could. His norm violation evokes laughter from viewers.

By the 1990s, sitcoms could build entire shows around hypocrisy. In "The Outing," another Seinfeld episode, a woman eavesdrops on Elaine's conversation with Jerry and George at Pete's. Elaine decides to get even by giving the woman the impression that Jerry and George are a gay couple. The woman turns out to be a reporter from New York University who has come uptown to interview Jerry for the school paper. She goes off with Jerry to his apartment where Jerry and George get in a fight over a piece of fruit, behavior she interprets as quintessentially gay. She publishes an article in which she describes Jerry and George as a homosexual couple. George exploits the situation to get out of a bad relationship with a woman but his mother freaks out and is admitted to the hospital. Throughout the episode, Jerry and the others are quick to exclaim whenever homosexuality comes up: "Not that there's anything wrong with that." Their language and behavior make evident that in their judgment there is something wrong with it. Their seeming tolerance—and by extension those of many so-called liberal viewers—is hypocritical and entertaining. Incidents of this kind can be read as critical of hypocrisy but also recognition of how rife it has become and how altruistic behavior must sometimes be cast as self-seeking hypocrisy to succeed.

The seventeenth-century French author François La Rochefoucauld suggested that "Hypocrisy is the homage which vice pays to virtue." Sitcoms validate his observation. Their hypocrisy shows that older norms are still valued, even considered proper, but no longer judged as accurate predictors of behavior.

In a third and final stage, new discourses emerge to justify behavior at odds with traditional values but which by now has more or less become the norm. In presidential speeches this is apparent in the reformulation of interest in the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast to their predecessors, Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton largely reframe the national interest as the sum of individual interests—usually economic interests—of voters or their families.

In the 1987 movie *Wall Street*, the ruthless and rapacious tycoon Gordon Gecko proclaims: "Greed is good." In the cinematic world of the 1930s and 1940s, only a character unambiguously identified as a villain could make such a statement. Gecko's observation was understood by movie audiences in the 1980s to reflect actual practice, although practice that was still shocking to acknowledge openly as he did. The Great Communicator was never as blunt as Gordon Gecko, but Reagan speeches are full of applause for untrammeled capitalism and the profit motive that serves as its driving force. In his first inaugural address on January 20, 1981, Reagan told the nation: "Government is not a solution to our problem, government is the problem." Thus began a grand experiment: release the American economy from the "shackles" of government regulation. Individual enterprise and initiative, the free market, and unrestricted competition were expected to usher in a new era of personal liberty and unrivaled prosperity. The result, according to Reagan's critics, was an extraordinary giveaway of public wealth to the rich in the form of tax breaks, sweetheart contracts, and governmental subsidies. The poor and the middle class paid the price, directly through tax dollars and indirectly through the unprecedented public debt that the administration ran up over the course of eight years in office. Ronald Reagan added $1.86 trillion to the national debt, a 186 percent increase from the $998 billion debt at the end of Carter's last budget.[3]

These policies were even more pronounced during the presidency of George Bush. On the one hand, his favor for the wealthy was perhaps clearest in the undeniably regressive 2001 tax cut and the 2005 bankruptcy bill, written by the credit card companies themselves. Publicly committed to a balanced budget, Bush added $1.55 trillion, a 54 percent

increase from the $2.8 trillion debt at the end of Reagan's last budget, Fiscal Year 1989.[4] His apathy for the less well-off was nowhere clearer than in the administration's lethargic and half-hearted response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The Reagan revolution was justified with reference to shaky economic theories: supply-side economics and the so-called Laffer Curve, both of which were dismissed as crackpot by serious economists. They were mobilized to justify lower taxes on high incomes and corporate profits on the grounds that this was in the interests of the poor and unemployed. The "trickle down" benefits of more disposable income for the rich would create jobs and more wealth for everyone else. "Reaganomics" might be considered a masterful display of economic hypocrisy. We suspect that it was well received by so many people only because of an underlying shift in values. Many voters reacted positively to Reagan's redefinition of government as an institution whose purpose was to abet striving for the dollar, protect accumulated wealth from any form of confiscation and especially any form of redistribution to help the less fortunate.

The change in discourse was equally evident in the academic community where the discipline of economics became increasingly powerful. Its central premise of *homo economicus*—the entirely self-interested rational actor—enabled parsimonious theories that their advocates claimed had predictive values. Their approach was adopted by other social sciences hoping to gain similar status by putting themselves on a more "scientific" footing. They also took from economics the definition of rationality as complete and transitive preferences and behavior designed to maximize these preferences in an efficient way. Political scientists substituted power for wealth. These imaginary accounts of how people behaved quickly morphed into normative arguments about how they should act. In effect, an academic discourse developed to justify a highly questionable and unrealistic approach to economics and political science generated an ideology that justified self-serving policies of corporate managers and the upper middle class. Efficiency replaced social justice as the benchmark of policy, consolidating and legitimating the shift in values that had been under way throughout the postwar era.

Donald Trump and his administration, I suggested in the introduction, have taken norm violation to a new level. He has groped women, encouraged violence against peaceful protestors, insulted other candidates, sitting officials, and the former president, refused to release his taxe, returns, mixed high office and business, and perhaps had questionable, if not illegal,

contact with Russians. As I write, the President is said to be considering pardoning himself if he is convicted of any crime.[5]

Tocqueville Revisited

From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century Tocqueville looks just as prescient as he did 25 or 50 years ago—although for different reasons. During the Cold War, readers of *Democracy in America* were impressed by his prediction that America and Russia would be the great powers of the twentieth century. In the McCarthy era, his analysis of the tyranny of the majority struck many as remarkably contemporary. From our vantage point, the most relevant feature of his grand opus is its analysis of individualism and how, like the tyranny of the majority, it poses a serious threat to democracy. The transformation of self-interest well understood into individualism took much longer than Tocqueville expected; it did not occur in the nineteenth but in the late twentieth century. It is now the dominant narrative of self-interests and the social foundation for policies that protect the wealth of individuals at the expense of the general welfare.

The Framers put a premium on self-interest. As noted in Chap. 1, they hoped to harness it to preserve the liberties of the people. They employed two mechanisms toward this end: separation of powers and federalism. Both entail overlapping lines of authority, meaning that any politician or branch of the federal government could only increase its power at the expense of the others. The same was true of the federal government versus the states. The Framers assumed that politicians seek power, but for this reason oppose others who sought to do so at their expense. The Framers further expected self-interest to play a positive role in bridging and moderating ideological tensions and clashes of interest. In *Federalist* number 10, Madison argued that the size of the country and the diversity of its interests would prevent any single interest, or combination of them, from dominating the Congress. This made coalition necessary and gave politicians and those representing diverse interests strong incentives to remain on good terms and reach compromise settlements.[6]

Tocqueville differs from the Framers in that he puts less emphasis on institutions and more on mores, customs, and manners. They are the foundation for self-interest well understood, and that in turn is essential for the successful functioning of federalism and separation of powers—and democracy more generally. People calculating their interests on the

basis of individualism would not see the benefits of decisions and policies from which many other people benefitted or the value of comity. Nor would they care if their policies exacerbated the country's political, economic, and social cleavages. And once those divisions were great, they would exploit them for their own ends, making division and the resulting tensions greater still. I documented this kind of behavior in Chap. 1 and tracked the discourses that justified and enabled it in Chaps. 3, 4, and 5.

Madison's emphasis on interest checking interest, forcefully expounded in Federalists 10 and 51, theorizes that "ambition must be made to counter ambition."[7] He assumes that people in general, not just politicians, are selfish. Trust all but disappears from the political lexicon and only reentered social science through the study of collective action and its emphasis on coordination and the need for actors to have some trust in others before engaging in what otherwise might be costly commitments. In contrast to the Framers and contemporary liberals, Tocqueville believes citizenship and its associated virtues of trust, common deliberation, and friendship. He considers them more important than checks and balances in preserving democracy. Good citizenship is made possible by friendship and cooperative enterprises that encourage people to remain active in the community. It widens the horizon of citizens, and keeps them from withdrawing into their private spheres, and encourages self-interest well understood.

Tocqueville offers no evidence of believing that individualism could be prevented, although he fervently hopes it might. Along with self-interest well understood and good citizenship, he envisaged religion as an important check on its growth.[8] Religion and church attendance remain much more robust in America than in other developed countries. Polls indicate that somewhere between 63 and 89 percent of Americans believe in god[9] In Norway, by contrast, only 37 percent said they believe in god, and are outnumbered by those who do not.[10] However, belief in god and religious attendance, the latter also higher in the United States than elsewhere, may no longer be good indicators or inculcators of self-interest well understood.

Many churches have embraced individualism and doctrines that see material success as a sign of god's favor. Known as prosperity theology, it holds that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes—especially to one's pastor and church—will bring financial blessing and physical well-being from god. It spread at healing revivals in the 1950s and later

through televangelism, and has many millions of adherents.[11] More moderate churches have also made their accommodations with capitalism and the quest for wealth and status. To the extent that fundamentalist churches build solidarity among their members, it is often by negative stereotyping of other denominations and non-believers. During the run-up to the 2012 presidential election, a Baptist minister denounced Mitt Romney for belonging to the Mormon "sect."[12] This kind of "othering" further divides the country and aggravates its culture wars. It is also in sharp contrast to Tocqueville's pleasure in discovering the extent to which American religious leaders and their churches were studiously apolitical.

Tocqueville was a close reader of the Greeks and embraced the threefold division of the psyche central to the writings of Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle. His analysis is informed by classical Greek categories of appetite, spirit (*thumos*), and reason.[13] Appetite in the modern age is synonymous with the passion for wealth and material possessions. Spirit refers to the universal desire for self-esteem, usually achieved by excelling in activities valued by one's peer group or society. By winning their approbation we feel good about ourselves. Tocqueville thought material well-being was the principal goal of ordinary people. The wealthier and more educated people become the more interested they are in status, and thus more motivated by *thumos*. Reason, the third motive, was thought by the Greeks to search for what made a happy life and constrain and educate appetite and spirit alike to work together toward that end. Together with empathy and civic solidary it is responsible for what Tocqueville describes as "self-interest well-understood."

In ancient Greece and Rome, and in Tocqueville's France, honor was traditionally associated with the aristocracy. The most striking thing about America, Tocqueville observed at the outset of *Democracy in America*, was the absence of an aristocracy. The closest thing to it, he thought, was the political class—mostly trained as lawyers. It had greatly increased in numbers and influence in the new republic. It might provide guidance for the society through the example of its lifestyle and a role conception independent of and above its economic interests.[14] Tocqueville hoped to smuggle honor back in to the society in a manner consistent with egalitarianism, and to create an "aristocracy of democracy."[15] This is not such a great leap of the imagination as France had two kinds of aristocracy: the *noblesse d'épée* and the *noblesse de robe*. The former were a warrior class, or initially performed this function. The latter were more recently ennobled men rewarded for their administrative and legal service to the monarchy.[16]

Tocqueville was not all that optimistic about this strategy. The Federalists, he observed, were moved by great ideas, but their successors, the Jeffersonian Republicans, were successful because they spoke the language of the people and appealed to their material interests. Rather than educating the people, they became their agents and pandered to their appetites.[17] Tocqueville exaggerates the differences between the two political factions; Federalists also sought to advance the material interests of their supporters, and many Jeffersonians were motivated by a vision of their country and its future. Tocqueville's hope for the positive role of lawyers and the political class was also unrealized. His somewhat stereotyped depiction of the Jeffersonian Republicans increasingly became reality. Politicians competed for votes and largely said and did what was likely to win elections and keep them in office.

Many lawyers maintain a commitment to the Constitution and the rule of law, but the courts also became increasingly politicized, especially those to which judges were elected. Judges on all sides of the political spectrum write opinions that reflect their interpretation of the Constitution and the national interest. The national interest is an entirely subjective concept. Any formulation is never neutral but is intended to advance given political projects. The same is true of any reading of the Constitution. The courts and their decisions become highly politicized when there is no consensus about fundamental values or those in contention. In the late nineteenth century, federal judges, guided by their ideology and class interests, upheld the power of corporations and denied the right of workers to unionize and strike. In the early 1930s, the Supreme Court initially declared unconstitutional President Roosevelt's key program to combat the Depression. These actions prompted the left to condemn the federal judiciary as undemocratic. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the courts were more liberal, they received the same criticism from the right. Judicial decisions are accordingly just as likely to intensify political conflicts as they are to resolve them. Today's conservative court has tried to impose its values and has aroused the wrath of the left.

Tocqueville errs in a second respect. Many politicians and judges may still be motivated more by spirit than by appetite; presumably they could earn considerably more money in business or private practice. But election to state and local courts and appointment to the federal bench depends less on jurisprudential standing than it does on political appeal. The search for honor has become increasingly entwined with appetite, as helping advance the material interests of the special interests is the stepping stone to funding for election campaigns or appointment to office.

Lawyers as a class have fared no better. In the Anglo-American, common law tradition, lawyers are socialized into holding the rule of law in high esteem, and in the United States, the Constitution as well. But lawyers are also expected to show loyalty to their clients, and within reason, to put their interests first. They and their profession have frequently been criticized, for pursuing client interests in lieu of justice. This criticism began in the last century, but became more common in the postwar era when they were perceived by many to have become "hired guns" of corporations seeking to exploit or defraud the commonweal.[18] A 2013 Pew Research Center Poll revealed that lawyers rather than being admired are seen as the dregs of society and the profession held in lowest esteem by the public.[19] In a December 2016 Gallup Poll of honesty and ethics in the professions, Americans thought lawyers among the least honest of professions, and put the Congress at the very bottom. Only 3 and 1 percent, respectively, held them in high esteem.[20]

The decline in status of politicians, judges, and lawyers and their failure to live up to the Tocquevillean ideal is not unique to America. Early in the twentieth century Max Weber made similar complaints about German politicians who, he argued, put the narrow interests of party above those of the nation.[21] These criticisms highlight the larger issue of the meaning and fate of democracy. It is unreasonable to suppose, as Weber did, that there is some objective national interest and that political parties and politicians should represent it. This belief represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what democracy is about. Tocqueville is closer to the truth in recognizing that democratic politics will reflect the understandings citizens have of self-interest, but errs in thinking that lawyers and politicians are the group of people most moved by honor and can encourage people to emulate them and develop goals beyond satisfying their appetite and longer-term perspectives on their attainment.

A more fundamental question is the extent to which democracy and the citizen values that sustain it actually benefit from people pursuing goals other than appetite. Here, there is a fundamental philosophical divide between liberals and their opponents on the right and left. Liberal thought developed in opposition to the long-standing belief, going back to the ancient Greeks, that appetite was destructive. Plato argued that appetite unconstrained by reasons could never be satisfied as people motivated by desire for wealth, sex, food, and drink always wanted more. They were slave-like and to be pitied.[22] Honor was held in high esteem, because it put a premium on restraint and sacrifice for the greater good, and its pursuit

was thought to be a prop of political and social order. Beginning with Cervantes, honor, and by extension the aristocracy, came under attack. It was now held responsible for war and conflict. In the late eighteenth century Mandeville and Smith upgraded appetite, arguing that the individual pursuit of wealth benefitted the society as a whole.[23] Their nineteenth-century successors, like Bright, Cobden, and Mill, maintained that societies motivated by material gain would be peaceful, an argument that finds resonance today in the Democratic Peace research program.[24]

Many readings of democratic politics characterize it as the articulation and aggregation of demands, demands that are regarded as almost entirely economic.[25] As noted, modern economic theory assumes that above all else people seek material gains and that any other motive can be given a monetary value. During the postwar era and immediately afterwards, some democratic theorists went so far as to claim the end of ideology due to the triumph of liberal, capitalist democracy.[26] Recent events in Europe and America have revealed the absurdity of such predictions, but many political scientists still subscribe to the assumption underlying these arguments: politics is—and should be about—the distribution of material rewards. They understand these kinds of struggles as manageable by governments and their successful adjudication of them as beneficial, even necessary, for the survival and robustness of democratic orders.

Tocqueville, by contrast, contends that democracies driven by appetite risk becoming tyrannies because of the way this motive combined with equality—a defining feature of democracies—promotes individualism. My account of self-interest, its evolution, and political consequences in America offers support for his argument. It is undeniably true that populations carried away by passions constitute a real danger to democracy. But so too do populations narrowly focused on their material interests. The Framers were sensitive to both dangers. Federalist Number 10 speaks eloquently about the dangers of minorities motivated by material interests *and* majorities moved by emotions.[27] A social science that focuses almost entirely on material interests cannot offer useful insights into the ills of democracy because it is part of the problem.

While I favor a Tocquevillean approach to democracy, I am equally wary of simplistic arguments that focus on the values and practices of society. The right wing in America and Europe makes highly questionable claims attributing chaos to the breakdown of religion and traditional values.[28] All would be well if only we could restore them and respect for

the authorities who uphold them—all of them white males—and do away with, among other things, trade unions, liberal college professors, abortion, pornography, feminism, gay marriage, and access to bathrooms of one's choice. In his *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam offered a moderate variant of this yearning for the life of the 1950s.[29] In his view, Tocquevillean-style withdrawal of people from activities carried out with others led to a decline in social capital.

"Turn back the clock" arguments are comforting but dangerous delusions. They portray a past that never was. They mistake TV sitcoms and romantic songs of an era gone by as representing reality. They present the past as rosy, ordered, and predictable, better at fulfilling human needs. Worlds in which the authority of religion and tradition were unquestioned were in reality extremely hierarchical, exclusionary, economically and intellectual impoverished, and disproportionately advantageous to a small elite. Nor is there any evidence that the decline of religion and white male hierarchy is responsible for the evils of the present age. Such assertions are reminiscent of the self-serving and justifying claims of post-Reconstruction Southerners who lamented the demise of slavery and claimed that it was better than freedom for those held in bondage. To the extent that there was any truth to their argument, it rested on the way white Southerners rolled back the political and economic rights of African-Americans in the post-Reconstruction era.

Leo Strauss famously argued that the Enlightenment was the source of much evil, including the Holocaust.[30] His argument was picked up by postmodernists on the left.[31] Here too, fantasy substitutes for reality. Rejection of the Enlightenment is akin to throwing out the baby with the bath water. Enlightenment thinkers undoubtedly overvalued reason, social planning, the ability of people to create utopias, and downplayed the role of emotions, myth, uncertainty, and unintended consequences. The Enlightenment nevertheless opened peoples' eyes to the oppression of existing political and social orders, and gave a huge boost to education, tolerance, economic progress, and culture. Equally telling, the rise of the Nazis, World War II, and the Holocaust are better explained as reactions against Enlightenment by those who opposed its liberal, inclusive values.

Despite his fear that egalitarianism would lead to the tyranny of the majority, Tocqueville regarded modernity on the whole favorably. Equality would improve living standards, reduce the likelihood of war, and generally promote a happier existence for humankind. He nevertheless regrets

that the triumph of the appetite, by making people more or less alike in their goals and behavior, will make life more monotonous.[32] To modern readers, Tocqueville's arguments alternate between being prescient and quaint. He is a liminal figure, caught between the old aristocratic order based on hierarchy and inherited privileges, and the new bourgeois society whose organizing principle was equality. He describes himself as "nicely balanced between the past and the future."[33] On one level this is an accurate depiction. Like Thucydides and Montesquieu, Tocqueville is a representative of the old order who is reconciled to the emergence of the new, and strives to create a synthesis of the best of both worlds.[34]

Tocqueville's arguments also suggest imbalance in that they expose rather than resolve tensions, even contradictions, between the old and new and within the new. He recognizes that equality has become the supreme principle of democracies and that people "want equality in freedom, and if they cannot get it, they still want it in slavery. They will tolerate poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not tolerate aristocracy."[35] Yet, he hopes to resurrect values associated with the aristocracy and imbue the political class with them in order to check the worst consequences of equality and the individualism to which it gives rise.

Like Tocqueville, I recognize that modernity is a mixed project. We cannot succumb to the temptation of one-sided historical interpretations that use selective evidence to support unwarranted, if comforting, inferences. These inferences, moreover, lead to policies that heighten rather than resolve existing tensions. We must reject conservative and reactionary beliefs that the world was once a much better place, and radical ones that progress will produce utopias. Equally absurd and self-defeating is the belief, held by a startling 41 percent of Americans, that Jesus will return, or is likely to, before 2050.[36] All these beliefs represent escapism and provide more evidence of how unhappy people are with their current life worlds.

There is no solution to the dilemmas of democracy or those of modernity. We must learn to live with them, develop a nuanced view of their benefits and evils, and with them a search for ways to improve on their benefits and moderate their evils. We must be wary of intellectual and political projects that promise to do more, and think too about ways in which we can inculcate and encourage self-interest well understood, even if such behavior may be more costly and rewarding in the short term in a society increasingly dominated by individualism.

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Index[1]

[1] Note: Page numbers followed by "n" denote endnotes

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