

Madison's Warning: How Group Rights Could Lead to Majority Tyranny

A reflection on Federalist No. 10, the Western political tradition, and the risks of organizing democratic power around group identity rather than individual rights.

The Warning in Federalist No. 10

“The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man,” James Madison warned in Federalist No. 10. He feared a majority faction that would “concert and execute their plans of oppression” against minorities through the power of government. Today, that warning feels increasingly relevant.

The modern progressive movement is deliberately building a broad coalition organized around group rights and identity politics, rather than individual merit or equal treatment under the law. If successful, this coalition aims to become a permanent majority capable of fundamentally transforming American society through democratic means. Justice Clarence Thomas has described this shift as a profound rejection of the principles in our founding documents.

The Foundations of the Western Tradition

Progressives often speak as if they are advancing the best of Western tradition. Yet Western civilization emerged from the synthesis of thousands of years of Judeo-Christian thought with the philosophy, law, and republican institutions of ancient Greece and Rome.

At its core are the beliefs that every person is made in the image of God, that rights come from the Creator—not from government—and that power must be limited because human nature is fallen and prone to corruption. These ideas, enriched by Greco-Roman traditions of reason, natural law, and self-government, produced the radical claim in our Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Even for those who do not believe in God or the Bible, Thomas Jefferson distilled the moral teachings of Jesus into a rational code of ethics and viewed the core values of equality, liberty, and limited government as self-evident truths. Today, even many secular liberals acknowledge that the individual rights they defend are downstream of the Christian inheritance they sometimes criticize.

Constitutional Safeguards Against Majority Power

The Constitution built institutions—separation of powers, checks and balances, rule of law, and explicit protection of individual rights—to prevent exactly the kind of majority faction Madison feared.

Modern progressivism, by contrast, emphasizes group identity and group rights over the individual. It sees people primarily as members of oppressed or oppressor classes and seeks to use state power to achieve equal outcomes rather than equal opportunity. This approach aligns less with the Western tradition and more with collectivist ideologies that prioritize the group over the person and central authority over limited government.

As Friedrich Hayek explained in *The Road to Serfdom*:

“It is only because the control of the means of production is divided among many people acting independently that nobody has complete power over us, that we as individuals can decide what to do with ourselves. If all the means of production were vested in a single hand, whether it be nominally that of ‘society’ as a whole or that of a dictator, whoever exercises this control has complete power over us.”

A Practical Example: Public Safety and Standards

In several major cities, fire departments and other public safety agencies have lowered physical fitness and testing standards in the name of diversity and inclusion. These changes were not made because the physical demands of the job had decreased, but to achieve desired demographic outcomes. Such policies compromise merit, public safety, and the principle that positions of high responsibility must be earned through demonstrated competence.

The Economic and Historical Record

History consistently shows that redistributive models focused on group outcomes, while often well-intentioned, reduce economic activity, slow growth, and ultimately deliver less overall wealth for society—including the poor. Free-market systems rooted in individual rights and merit have repeatedly lifted far more people out of poverty by rewarding innovation, work, and voluntary exchange.

Modern progressive rhetoric frequently reflects this devaluation of individual achievement. In 2012, President Barack Obama told business owners, “If you’ve got a business — you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen.” More recently, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has argued that extreme wealth cannot truly be earned through merit:

“There’s a certain level of wealth and accumulation that is unearned. You can’t earn a billion dollars. You just can’t earn that.”

When government policy rewards group identity over productivity, the predictable result is slower growth, capital flight, and declining living standards for everyone. Hayek captured the deeper moral cost in *The Road to Serfdom*:

“It is true that the virtues which are less esteemed and practiced now—independence, self-reliance, and the willingness to bear risks, the readiness to back one’s own conviction against a majority, and the willingness to voluntary cooperation with one’s neighbors—are essentially those on which an individualist society rests. Collectivism has nothing to put in their place, and in so far as it already has destroyed them it has left a void filled by nothing but the demand for obedience and the compulsion of the individual to what is collectively decided to be good.”

The tragic precedents are clear: Mao’s Great Leap Forward, the Soviet Union’s stagnation, Venezuela’s collapse, and France’s repeated struggles with high unemployment and fiscal strain.

Why This Path Leads to Majority Tyranny

The danger is not that progressives hate individual rights in theory. The danger is that by organizing politics around immutable group identities and permanent grievances, they are building the very majority faction Madison feared—one that can democratically dismantle the safeguards (free speech, merit, property rights, and equal protection) that protect minorities from majority will.

Friedrich Hayek warned in *The Road to Serfdom*:

“Democracy is essentially a means, a utilitarian device for safeguarding internal peace and individual freedom. As such it is by no means infallible or certain. ... it is at least conceivable that under the government of a very homogeneous and doctrinaire majority democratic government might be as oppressive as the worst dictatorship.”

This risks the erosion of free speech through expanding hate-speech rules, reverse discrimination via quotas and DEI mandates, fiscal strain from ever-growing redistribution, declining public safety as merit is subordinated in policing and emergency services, and the systematic use of political power to reward favored groups while punishing disfavored ones.

Addressing Common Progressive Objections

Progressives often defend group-rights approaches with several familiar arguments. They acknowledge favoring group remedies for the “oppressed” but insist they still support individual rights. In practice, however, **group rights by definition discriminate against or trump individual rights whenever the two conflict**—with the inevitable long-term result of subordinating the individual to collective identity.

They point to past racial discrimination (common before the Civil Rights era) as justification for ongoing preferences. Yet that discrimination, while real, violated the constitutional principles and 14th Amendment rooted in Western civilization—the same civilization that led the global fight to abolish slavery and legal racism. The West did not invent these evils; it was the first to reject them systematically.

Critics highlight Nordic welfare states as successful models. In reality, according to the Heritage Foundation’s 2026 Index of Economic Freedom, Denmark ranks 7th, Norway 8th–9th, Sweden 11th, and Finland 13th—well ahead of the United States (22nd). These countries rely on universalist systems built on high social trust and cultural homogeneity, not permanent racial or group-based redistribution. As Denmark’s former Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen stated clearly: “Denmark is far from a socialist planned economy. Denmark is a market economy.”

On public safety standards, some claim no standards are being lowered, that biological sex differences are not real, or that “diverse teams perform better.” Extensive research in physiology and psychology confirms large, biologically rooted differences between men and women in upper-body strength, muscle mass, aerobic capacity, and risk-taking behavior. These differences emerge strongly at puberty due to testosterone and explain why firefighting — a job defined by extreme physical strain and the willingness to risk one’s life for strangers — remains disproportionately male and highly paid. Lowering objective standards to meet demographic targets necessarily compromises competence where lives are on the line.

Claims of pervasive **systemic racism** also fail under scrutiny. Decades after the removal of legal barriers, individuals who experience racial discrimination have robust legal remedies and can (and do) win substantial awards in court. Statistical group disparities today are far more plausibly explained by cultural, behavioral, and family-structure factors than by widespread invisible discrimination.

Finally, some equate modern identity politics with the Civil Rights Movement or dismiss individual-rights advocacy as hypocritical given the West’s past sins. This conflicts between two eras. The Civil Rights Movement sought to remove *legal* barriers so individuals

could be judged by character and merit—the color-blind ideal of Martin Luther King Jr. Western civilization’s enduring contribution was developing universal principles that judged and ultimately transcended its own flaws. Replacing equal rules with new group hierarchies does not extend Enlightenment; it abandons its core achievement.

The Better Path Forward

The genius of the Western solution was never to pretend group differences don’t exist, but to subordinate them to a higher principle: the equal dignity and unalienable rights of every individual under law.

Recommitting to a color-blind merit, free speech, and limited government is not regression. It is the surest way to preserve liberty and prosperity for all Americans, regardless of background.