Individualism

· Emerson and Thoreau
  - Not typically thought of as political writers.
  - Their writings raise interesting questions about the relationship between democracy and individual freedom and character.
    o Does democracy threaten individual freedom?
    o Do individuals threaten the functioning of democracy?

· At time of Emerson and Thoreau, move from republic (Federalists) to a Democratic-Republic (Jeffersonian Republicans) was being consolidated.
  - Compared to rest of world, equality in American more evenly distributed.
  - Rise of democratic conditions.
  - Democracy extending beyond government to civil society
  - Tocqueville: characterized American at this time as having a “equality of conditions,” which he (like Emerson) viewed as a threat to individual freedom
    o Thought it could lead to “democratic despotism” – as men become more equal, they become mainly concerned with material well-being and less interested in the affairs of government.
    o As a result, government is less accountable to people, and more likely to rule tyrannically; paternalistically.
  - Emerson and Thoreau focused on individual character:
    o Emphasized the need to cultivate the character of individuals;
    o They viewed this as a function of government, in addition to its more conventional functions of protecting rights and property.
    o Nature important part of building individual character – “Knowing thyself is studying nature” – meaning, people should rely on their own experiences to formulate judgments about the world.

· Student presentations on readings:
  - Emerson
    o Suspicious of parties, associations.
    o Focus on individual character, which was hindered if too much attachment to established groups or the past.
    o Challenged American scholars to move beyond history and think anew.
  - Thoreau
    o Critical of government.
- Reactionary? Anarchist?
- Importance of simplicity, found in natural world.
- Arguing for reforms of law, not anarchy.
- Denies individuals have obligation to obey unjust government – higher law v. man-made law; if latter unjust, then individuals can disobey (civil disobedience).
- Disdained voting; thought it was a cheap form of participation; instead, he believed people should participate more meaningfully.

  - Stanton
    - Echoes Emerson.
    - Psychology of individualism that transcends gender.
    - Importance of independence and solitude.
    - Argues that women should be equal in society to enable them to cope with individualistic struggles (e.g., loneliness that comes with old age).