

■ Editor's Introduction

Liberalism is a political doctrine asserting that constitutions, laws, and policies should prioritize individual liberty based on the exercise of rational will. The term “liberal” is often contested, as different viewpoints claim the title due to the ambiguous nature of the criterion. A key way to understand liberalism is by understanding what it opposes. It contrasts with systems like slavery and serfdom, which restrict individual autonomy and rational decision-making. Despotism and oligarchy (rule by the few) are considered twin enemies of liberalism. Conservatism is likewise an antagonist of modern liberal politics, though conservatives may hold classical liberal principles.

The term “liberal” can describe both a type of constitution and a political party's inclination. A liberal constitution emphasizes the rule of law, freedom of political organization, an independent judiciary, and government responsiveness to public opinion. Within this system, “liberal” describes parties advocating change through constitutional means, contrasting with “conservative” tendencies that uphold tradition.

Political parties in liberal countries often have attachments to certain political principles. In the United States, the modern Republican Party has long favored minimal governmental intervention, while the Democrats have generally supported legislation to aid underprivileged individuals. Both have roots in classical liberalism, the one emphasizing individual freedom (including freedom *from* government intrusion) and the other emphasizing intervention in the economy to promote dignity and freedom for all.

Origins of Liberalism

Liberalism emerged in Europe between the Reformation and the French Revolution. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the medieval feudal order gave way to Protestantism, nation-states, commerce, science, cities, and a middle class. This new liberal order, drawing on Enlightenment thought, centered on human beings rather than God, emphasizing rational thought as a means for self-improvement and societal progress.

Liberal thinking opposed the prerogatives of kings, aristocrats, and the church, favoring freedom as a natural right. These ideas fueled the American and French Revolutions and various nineteenth-century uprisings. Liberalism aimed to expand civil liberties and limit political authority through constitutional representative government, promoting property rights and religious toleration. In economics, classical liberalism opposed state intervention, aligning with Adam Smith's and David Ricardo's belief in the marketplace's guiding role (*laissez-faire*).

The eighteenth century saw the rise of varied strands of liberalism. “Classical liberalism” is the earliest and possibly purest form. After the Revolution of 1688, Britain was seen as embodying free political practices. Legal processes were ensured, and the judiciary was independent. John Locke was among the first to formulate a comprehensive liberal philosophy, influencing political thought widely. Thomas Jefferson drew on Locke's ideas for the Declaration of Independence, and French Enlightenment thinkers (Francois Arouet) Voltaire and (Baron Charles) Montesquieu were also indebted to him.

The American Revolution further propelled liberalism. The Declaration of Independence asserted the right to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The French Declaration of the Rights of Man echoed this, making liberal ideas the basis of revolutionary movements in Europe. By the nineteenth century, liberalism became the political wing of a broader movement toward rationalizing practices and exploiting of resources. However, complications emerged. Liberal thinkers became concerned with poverty and the “underprivileged.” They believed state intervention was necessary to address these issues, leading to active measures being taken by representative governments.

Thus, classical liberalism accommodated democracy and supported expanding the franchise (or vote), but it generally opposed plebiscites and “direct democracy,” viewing these as potential tools of despots (especially when manipulated). Classical liberalism does not pro-

hibit regulating business, except for a tendency to leave individuals alone. In this, we again see shades of the Democratic and Republican parties' preferences.

Modern Liberalism

Modern liberalism views the state as an organization for achieving a specific purpose. This purpose could be military victory, the greatest happiness, or industrial modernization. Politics becomes a means of achieving this purpose, rather than individuals managing to coexist separately (as under *libertarianism*). Declarations of natural rights are common but are often qualified by subordinating individual desires to the "common good."

The gap between modern and classical liberalism has been bridged with ideas like "happiness" and "self-fulfillment." It is argued that classical liberalism assumes that all humans are rational and have the cultural resources to enjoy freedom. Many lack education or nourishment, which are vital for individual freedom. Addressing these deficiencies has become a social purpose of liberal states.

This often leads to suggesting individual duties to the state, which classical liberals would oppose. Nonetheless, the links between classical and modern liberalism are strong, so that most people view liberalism as a single, complex doctrine rather than a loose alliance of tendencies.

Liberalism has been the chief political doctrine and a generator of other doctrines. Democracy and, to a lesser degree, nationalism can be seen as applications of liberal ideas—though many expressions of nationalism have proved heretical to liberalism's basic principles. Socialism and communism are generally considered as lying beyond the limits of classical liberalism. On the other hand, democratic socialism does share some ideas and motivations in common with it. Liberalism may primarily be a political and socioeconomic doctrine, but some have come to see it as a kind of philosophy of life as well.

U.S. Politics and Liberalism in the Twentieth Century

In the United States, liberal governments—as opposed to more conservative ones—have sought interventionist policies to correct unregulated capitalism's ills, thus supporting taxation, minimum wage laws, social secu-

rity, antitrust laws, public education, and safety/health laws. They also have advocated for consumer protection and environmental preservation.

Beginning around 1900, modern American liberalism became a dynamic ideological force, shaping policy, electoral politics, social movements, and governmental institutions. In the American context, liberalism has historically been associated with advocating for individual rights, civil liberties, equality, government intervention in the economy, and social justice. Although these principles trace back to Enlightenment ideas, they were adapted within the unique American political tradition, emphasizing constitutionalism, federalism, and pragmatic reform.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, American liberalism was deeply intertwined with Progressivism, a reform movement that sought to address problems stemming from rapid industrialization, urbanization, and economic inequality. Progressive reforms included antitrust measures, labor rights, women's suffrage, and efforts to curb political corruption.

The Great Depression (1929–1939) was a turning point that radically reshaped liberalism in the United States through President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Roosevelt's administration expanded the role of the federal government to stimulate economic recovery and provide social safety nets. Key programs such as Social Security, unemployment insurance, and public works projects epitomized a shift toward a more active government committed to economic security and social equality.

During this period, liberalism also became associated with a commitment to Keynesian economic policies, emphasizing government intervention to stabilize the economy. The New Deal coalition united diverse groups—including urban liberals, African Americans, labor unions, and ethnic minorities—creating a dominant political base for the Democratic Party for decades.

Post–World War II liberalism balanced economic policy with a focus on civil rights and international engagement. The 1940s and 1950s saw the expansion of social welfare programs and efforts to combat racial segregation and discrimination. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s marked a pivotal period in American liberalism, striving to dismantle institutional rac-

ism, exemplified by landmark legislation such as the Civil Rights Act (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965).

Liberal foreign policy also became prominent, especially during the Cold War, emphasizing international institutions like the United Nations, containment of communism, and support for decolonization.

The 1960s under President Lyndon B. Johnson embodied a peak of liberal policymaking—termed the “Great Society.” Major initiatives included Medicare and Medicaid, federal funding for education, urban renewal, and efforts to fight poverty and racial injustice. Johnson’s administration aimed to create a “War on Poverty” and expand the social safety net further, embodying a broad vision of government as an agent of social progress.

However, this era also exposed ideological divisions. Opposition from conservatives and some working-class voters grew over the expansion of federal power and social programs, setting the stage for subsequent ideological realignments.

Neoliberalism and After

Starting in the late twentieth century, especially during the Ronald Reagan era of the 1980s, conservative political forces challenged the liberal consensus. Reagan’s rhetoric emphasized free-market principles, deregulation, and reduced government intervention, framing liberal policies as overly expansive or inefficient. In response, American liberalism itself evolved. Figures like President Bill Clinton in the 1990s embraced a “Third Way,” advocating for a pragmatic blend of market-friendly policies, crime and welfare reform, and continued social safety programs, attempting to reconcile liberal aims with a more centrist approach.

Since the late twentieth century, liberalism has often been associated with the Democratic Party’s platform on social justice, environmental issues, health care, and civil rights. The election of Barack Obama in 2008 marked a significant milestone as he championed re-

forms such as the Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”), the Dodd-Frank financial reform, and efforts toward racial equity.

The political landscape remains polarized, with liberalism often contrasted against conservatism, especially under the influence of the Republican Party. Contemporary liberals emphasize intersectionality (i.e., the interaction of categories of identity with systems of power), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) rights, climate action, and a strong social safety net, but face political and ideological opposition, particularly from conservative media and constituencies.

Donald Trump’s Make America Great Again (MAGA) era has had a profound and multifaceted impact on American liberalism. It triggered both ideological redefinition within the liberal camp and strategic shifts in political tactics. It has reshaped American liberalism by intensifying its focus on defending democratic institutions, advocating bold social and economic reforms, mobilizing diverse constituencies, and clarifying ideological boundaries. It has prompted a more confrontational, activist approach within liberal politics, and continues to influence its direction and priorities today.

—Michael Shally-Jensen, PhD

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