

Liberalism—Handout # 3 Political Ideologies Class

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Human Nature

Basically good and rational. Personality develops through education. Cooperation is the norm and conflict the exception. Social problems are caused by system failures not individual fault.

Freedom

Gives priority to freedom as the supreme individualist value. Classical liberals supported what has been termed negative freedom meaning the absence of external restraint or constraint. Modern liberals support positive freedom meaning people are free when they can develop their full human potential and their rights are protected. Government ensures the conditions exist for this to happen.

Rationality

People are basically rational, can rationally deliberate about public problems and base their preferences on logic and evidence. Reason is capable of understanding society's problems and fixing them.

Equality

People are inherently equal in the sense that they have innate human dignity and moral worth. Human dignity makes people basically equal. Therefore, human beings have the right to legal and political equality. For classical liberals there was an emphasis on meritocracy.

Government and the State

Government and the state are the only social institutions capable of guaranteeing equality and equal opportunity. Government must level the playing field and support equity. Classical liberals saw the state as a necessary evil that should not interfere with the market.

Government Authority

Arises from the consent of the governed. Authority must be rational, limited and have the goal of promoting the general welfare. Government must be accountable to the governed. Rule of law is critical to check excesses of power. Power is corrupting and institutions must limit power.

Religion

Distinct private matter linked to individual choice. Religious freedom is necessary for there to be civil liberty. Must be separation of church and state. The state is secular in nature.

MODERN LIBERALISM

Modern liberalism is a political and moral philosophy that seeks to balance individual liberty with social justice and the public good.

While classical liberalism focused almost exclusively on limiting government power, modern liberalism views the government as a necessary tool to protect rights and provide equal opportunity.

1. Individual Liberty and Autonomy

At its core, liberalism prioritizes the right of individuals to make their own choices about how to live.

- **Civil Liberties:** Strong support for freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly.
- **Privacy:** A belief in "negative liberty"—the right to be free from government interference in personal matters, such as reproductive choices or marriage.

2. Social Justice and Equality

Modern liberals argue that true freedom is impossible if people are held back by systemic poverty, prejudice, or lack of resources.

- **Equal Opportunity:** The government should ensure that a person's success is determined by their talent and effort, not their race, gender, or socioeconomic background.
- **Equity:** Support for policies like affirmative action or civil rights protections to address historical injustices.

3. The "Positive" Role of Government

Unlike libertarians, modern liberals believe the state has a responsibility to provide a "safety net."

- **Public Services:** Support for taxpayer-funded education, healthcare, and infrastructure.
- **Social Safety Net:** Programs like Social Security, unemployment insurance, and food assistance are seen as essential for maintaining human dignity.

4. Regulated Market Economy

Modern liberals generally support capitalism but believe it requires oversight to prevent "market failures." There must be government regulation.

- **Consumer & Labor Protection:** Support for the minimum wage, collective bargaining (unions), and safety regulations such as those provided by OSHA.
- **Environmentalism:** The belief that the government must regulate industries to prevent pollution and combat climate change. Market cannot do this.

5. Secularism and Pluralism

Modern liberalism flourishes in diverse societies and emphasizes the separation of church and state.

- **Tolerance:** A commitment to a multicultural society where different lifestyles and beliefs can coexist. Diversity is a positive good. All must be included in society.
- **Rule of Law:** The belief that laws should be applied equally to everyone, including government officials, and should be based on rational, secular debate rather than religious dogma. Law needed to check the excesses of power.

Modern vs. Classical Liberalism: A Quick Comparison

| Feature | Classical Liberalism | Modern Liberalism |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Role of State | "Night Watchman" (Protects property/borders) | "Provider" (Ensures social welfare) |
| Economic View | Laissez-faire (Free markets) | Mixed Economy (Regulated markets) |
| Focus | Freedom <i>from</i> interference | Freedom <i>to</i> succeed (Opportunity) |
| Main Value | Individualism | Social Equity & Individualism |

In short,

Modern liberalism emphasizes a balance between individual liberty and social justice, advocating for a democratic, mixed-market economy where the government actively addresses economic inequality, protects civil rights, and provides social safety nets. Key principles include ensuring equality of opportunity, fostering social equality, protecting individual autonomy, and upholding secularism and the rule of law.

Key principles of modern-day liberalism include:

- **Positive Liberty and Social Justice:** Unlike classical liberalism's focus on "freedom from" interference (negative liberty), modern liberalism promotes "freedom to" achieve potential, requiring state intervention to provide education, healthcare, and infrastructure.
- **Economic Regulation and Welfare State:** Liberals advocate for state intervention to manage capitalism, such as market regulation, antitrust laws, and social welfare programs (e.g., social security, public education) to reduce poverty and inequality.
- **Protection of Individual Rights and Liberties:** Strong emphasis on civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly, religion, and the press, alongside a commitment to protecting minority rights and expanding rights for historically marginalized groups.
- **Government by Consent and Democracy:** A belief in representative democracy, rule of law, and the protection of constitutional rights against the abuse of power.
- **Social and Cultural Liberalism:** Support for personal autonomy, secularism, and the freedom of individuals to make personal choices regarding their bodies and lifestyles, including support for LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, and gender equality.
- **International Cooperation:** A preference for international institutions, diplomacy, and trade to foster peace and cooperation, rather than unilateral power politics.

Modern liberalism generally emerged in the 20th century as a response to the limitations of laissez-faire capitalism, particularly during the Great Depression, leading to a belief that the government must act as a corrective force in society.

CLASSICAL LIBERALISM VS. MODERN LIBERALISM

Modern and classical liberalism share a foundation in individual rights and democracy, but they differ primarily on the role of government and the nature of "freedom."

Core Differences

- **Role of the State:**
 - **Classical Liberalism:** Advocates for a **minimal state** (the "night-watchman state") that focuses only on national defense, protecting private property, and maintaining order. Any other function is improper exercise of power.
 - **Modern Liberalism:** Supports a **facilitating state** that intervenes in the economy and society to provide a "safety net" and ensure equality of opportunity.
- **Definition of Freedom:**
 - **Classical Liberalism:** Focuses on **negative liberty**—the freedom *from* external interference or government coercion. Free if no external restraints on action.
 - **Modern Liberalism:** Emphasizes **positive liberty**—the freedom *to* achieve one's potential, which may require government assistance (e.g., healthcare, education) to remove barriers like poverty.
- **Economic Approach:**
 - **Classical Liberalism:** Promotes **laissez-faire capitalism** and unregulated free markets, viewing government intervention as a threat to efficiency and liberty.
 - **Modern Liberalism:** Supports a **mixed economy** with government regulation to address market failures, protect workers, and redistribute wealth through taxation.
- **Individualism:**
 - **Classical Liberalism:** Rooted in **egoistical individualism**, where self-reliance is paramount and individuals are seen as independent actors.
 - **Modern Liberalism:** Embraces **developmental individualism**, recognizing that individuals are socially interdependent and that personal growth is tied to the well-being of society.

Overview Table

| Feature | Classical Liberalism | Modern Liberalism |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Key Goal | Individual Liberty | Social Justice & Equality |
| View of State | Necessary evil; should be minimal | Positive tool for social progress |
| Economics | Free market / Laissez-faire | Regulated market / Mixed economy |
| Rights Focus | Property & Civil Rights | Social & Economic Rights |
| Key Thinkers | John Locke, Adam Smith | John Rawls, T.H. Green |