

## Political Ideas – Liberalism (core ideas)

Politics Edexcel and AQA – revision notes – based on Hodder Education revision guides

### Aliza Samorly

- (1) The origins of liberalism.
- (2) The different types of liberalism.
- (3) Core ideas and principles.
- (4) Differing views and tensions.

#### (1) The origins of liberalism

The origins of liberalism are rooted in the **Reformation**, the challenging of the authority of the Catholic church and advocating free will and individualism.

Throughout the **Enlightenment** during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, together with rationalism, the liberal ideas were consolidated.

**Rationalism** = a philosophy that considers logic and reason to be the foundations of knowledge. It is the opposite of empiricism/positivism which is based on testing knowledge through experience and experimentation (induction).

These developments challenged the religious ideas based on faith.

Philosophical liberal ideas about free choice, consent and natural rights were at the root of the American and French revolutions in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Modern liberalism emerged later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it is the dominant liberal philosophy today = increased role for the state in society and the economy, an **enabling state** rather than a **minimal state**.

### Key values

#### 1. Individualism

“Over his body and his mind, the individual is sovereign” (J. S. Mill).

#### 2. Freedom and liberty

Human beings are rational and responsible and have the right and the duty to pursue their own interests.

### 3. The state

The state is a 'necessary evil' and therefore only the minimal of the minimal state is advocated, to do what is necessary, namely, protection of citizens that is based on consensus through the social contract/covenant.

### 4. Rationalism

Individuals are rational, thus not as imperfect, vulnerable and needy as others argue.

The view of human beings as irrational is used to justify oppression, elitism and violation of human liberties. Link with the ideas regarding human nature.

### 5. Equality and social justice

Classical is based on foundational equality where all individuals are born with equal natural rights, and the state must not violate these rights.

While equality is impossible between human beings, what is necessary is to guarantee and advance equality of opportunities (modern liberalism). This is also in contrast to equality of outcomes, which indeed may remain unequal. Link with meritocracy and equality of opportunities in functionalism in sociology.

Some liberals also emphasise the need for social justice.

### 6. Liberal democracy

Focus on democracy as a political system to bind people together under the social covenant that is based on consent and thus legitimacy. Based on the perception of the role of the state, the political system needs to be limited with clear constitutions = the boundaries of consensus and legitimacy. And by implication, the boundaries of obedience.

## (2) The different types of liberalism

**2.1:** Classical liberalism.

**2.2:** Modern liberalism.

### 2.1: Classical liberalism

- A nightwatchman state = the state needs to play a minimally possible role to preserve freedom.
- Adam Smith and the 'invisible hand' = market forces will deliver fair outcomes for all individuals. Free competition in a free market that is free of regulation delivers the best results by self-regulation.
- Individualism.

- Link to social **Darwinism** = the “survival of the fittest” as described by Herbert Spencer.
- Emphasis on **negative freedom**, ‘**freedom from**’, rather than positive freedom, ‘freedom to’; especially freedom from the state’s regulation, intervention, coercion, imposition etc.
- Focus on a **minimal state** rather than an enabling state.

## Key thinkers

### **John Locke (1632-1704)**

**Key work:** *Two Treatises of Government* (1689)

### Key concepts and ideas

- **Social contract** = Locke established the idea of a social contract, and other philosophers adapted it. It is a crucial concept in any discourse on politics because it delineates the boundaries of consensus and legitimacy; of what can and cannot be tolerated, and as such can be linked back into the modern constitution in representative democracies, regardless of its specific form.
- **Consent, legitimacy**. And by implication, social order and stability.
- **Foundational equality** = all individuals are born with natural rights that entitle them to liberty, the pursuit of happiness and fulfilment and the avoidance of pain and discrimination. Thus, tolerance.
- **Tolerance** of differing religious, social, ideological and political views.
- **Limited government** = the state needs to protect basic liberties if and when it has legitimacy that is granted on the basis of consensus given by rational individuals. Classical liberals advocated **negative freedom** as the highest form of liberalism because it is freedom from oppression and constraints that can stand in the way of actualising ‘freedom to’.
- **The minimal state** = needs to maintain order and law, protecting property and defend against external attacks.
- **Democratic constitution** = reflecting the covenant based on consent and the mandate to govern, and as such, to play a role in the life of citizens within a given state.
- If the state fails to do its ‘job’, citizens can withdraw their consent = a violation of the social contract leads to relinquishing the duty to obey. The social contract is a two-way contract.
- Rejected universal suffrage.
- A two-way deal between the state and individuals = the state has a duty to protect its citizens, and the latter have a duty to obey the law = the role of the social contract as reflected in the constitution.

- A strong focus on **property rights**, hence much of the role of the state and the nature of the social contract is defined by property rights.
- **Laissez-faire economy** = free market capitalism without state interference and regulation in the economy, society and politics.

### Key quotation

“Government has no other end, but the preservation of property.”

### **Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)**

**Key work:** *A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792)*

### Key concepts and ideas

- **Reason** = women are rational and independent.
- **Formal equality** = for women to be free they need to enjoy full civil liberties and be able to pursue a career.
- **Formal equality** = women are also rational and independent human beings.
- Consequently, women should enjoy the same civil liberties as men.
- Women should have the right to pursue their interests, develop careers, and should never be perceived as a property for men to own and rule over.
- **Patriarchy** = needs to be eradicated to make women really free.

### Key quotations

“Virtue can only flourish among equals.”

“I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves.”

### **John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)**

**Key work:** *On Liberty (1859)*

### Key concepts and ideas

- **Negative liberty** = the absence of constraints, described by Isaiah Berlin as ‘freedom from’ rather than ‘freedom to’. Mill extracted the **harm principle** from the idea of negative liberty.
- **The harm principle** = individuals should be free to do and to be whatever they like except harming others. Thus, the state can interfere with individual freedom to prevent harm to others.
- We should be having the freedom to be engaged in any activity insofar it does not infringe on the liberty of other individuals = **self-regarding actions**.
- Consequently, the role of the state is defined by one principle: intervention is acceptable only if and when its aim is to **protect individual liberty**.
- **Tolerance** = an unpopular idea is no less legitimate than a popular view.

- **Support for democratic reform**, including suffrage extended to women.

### Key quotation

“The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good, in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.”

## **2.2: Modern Liberalism**

- Formed as a reaction to laissez-faire capitalism.
- Emphasis on **positive freedom** rather than negative freedom. The movement away from negative freedom towards positive is a key shift towards modern liberalism because it opened the way to increase the role of the state from a minimal state to an **enabling state**.
- Consequently, the state can take on a more active and interventionist role to protect positive freedom.
- **The enabling state** = creating the best conditions for its citizens to help themselves and fulfil their potential, by securing minimal equal conditions such as free education.
- Link with meritocracy and equality of opportunities; and the impact on social mobility.
- **Keynesian economics** emerging from the idea about a **more active state**: regulation and intervention by the state can foster growth more effectively than free market economy (as in the ‘invisible hand’). The state can regulate conditions to achieve full employment and economic growth. Employment is principal in the enabling state because unemployment is hindering the individual from fulfilling its potential.
- As a result, increased acknowledgment of the need for **social justice** and **state welfare**. The enabling state offering basic conditions for individuals to fulfil themselves, thus it leans towards **equality of opportunity**.
- **Social justice** = based on Rawls as the most influential philosopher on modern liberalism. By using the abstract idea of the **‘veil of ignorance’** Rawls proposed that if individuals were asked to choose the society they would prefer and were ignorant of their own circumstances, they would choose a society with little inequality. It is an imaginary scenario in which decision-makers hold no prior knowledge of their own race, gender, class or abilities = the veil, thus they employ a maximal strategy to maximise the wellbeing of the least fortunate to protect against disadvantages.
- Both types of liberalism emphasise tolerance, constitution to limit the power of government, individualism and capitalist economy, but they disagree on the

implications that such ideas bear on the role of the state and the nature of the economy.

- Mill in his later writings can be seen as a modern liberal thinker.

## Key thinkers

### John Rawls (1921-2002)

**Key work:** *A Theory of Justice (1971); Justice as Fairness (1985)*

### Key concepts and ideas

- **A theory of justice** = society must be just and fair and guarantee a meaningful life for its citizens.
- **The 'veil of ignorance'** = to establish principles of justice, we need to imagine that we are all equals, and then to ask ourselves, what would we all agree about what is just and unjust, fair and unfair? Thus, protecting everyone from disadvantages. This is similar to the idea of universal justice.
- **A just society** must be one that transcends the circumstances into which individuals are born into by ensuring decent housing, education, a fair justice system, etc.
- **The liberty principle** includes basic freedoms, and **the difference principle** refers to the impossibility of equality but ensuring **equality of opportunity** and protection of minimal needs for less fortunate individuals.
- Strong emphasis on **social justice** that influences the formation of social democrats and modern liberals; significant influence on the centre-left spectrum of politics.

### Key quotations

"A society regulated by a public sense of justice is inherently stable."

"Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others."

### Betty Friedan (1921-2006)

**Key work:** *The Feminine Mystique (1963)*

### Key concepts and ideas

- A key liberal feminist that argued in favour of legal equality between the sexes, including to pursue careers and any form of activism.
- **Legal equality** = to safeguard the freedom of women.
- All laws that are implicated with the oppression of women must be abolished.

- **Socialisation** to eradicate discriminatory and patriarchal attitude and educate for ones that centre on equality between men and women. The state is not the prime suspect in the oppression of women but rather the cultural milieu.
- **Legal change** rather than combative protest.
- **Equal opportunity** = women are being excluded by many jobs that are not 'acceptable' for women to fulfil. Same for access to opportunities.
- **The feminine mystique** casts women out of any sphere of influence because their mystique is rooted in their domestic role.

### Key quotations

"Men are not the enemy but fellow victims. The real enemy is women's denigration of themselves."

"Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to be themselves."

## (3) Core ideas and principles

### 1. Individualism

Protection of individual rights and freedom is above any claim of the state or any group.

Classical liberals are based on **egoistical individualism** = individual freedom is based on a rational sense of self-reliance and self-interest. Individuals are naturally inclined to maximise their own utility and the state should respect negative freedom.

Modern liberals are leaning towards developmental individualism and equality of opportunity.

### 2. Freedom/liberty

Locke argued that freedom is a natural right. Early liberals resented the way authoritarian government and monarchies retain legitimacy by depriving citizens of their natural right for freedom and the need for consent that is embedded in the social contract.

While classical liberals were concerned with negative freedom, modern liberals were concerned with positive freedom together with **meritocracy** that can be secured by an enabling state to tackle inequality and guarantee equality of opportunities.

### 3. The state

The state is a necessary evil, but classical liberals advocate a minimal state compared with the enabling state for modern liberals.

Liberals share the belief in the rule of law and the organisation of the state by way of **limited government**:

- Constitutional arrangements to replace traditional systems.
- Limited power by division into three branches, legislature, executive and judiciary, with checks and balances. The minimal state would be based on Locke's principle of government by consent and regular elections. These influenced the US constitution.
- The minimal state should operate under the rule of law.

Mill and classical liberals argued for representative democracy rather than direct popular, and only those with formal education should be allowed to vote.

While Mill is associated with classical liberalism, in his later writings he acknowledged the state needs to be given further role in assisting the poor and disadvantaged citizens: the state needs to provide education and promote employment.

#### **4. Rationalism**

The **Enlightenment** was predicated on rejection of traditional religious ideas and the adoption of rationalistic ideas that are based on science and inquiry, on doubt and seeking of facts.

The liberal leaning on rationalism is not in tandem with empiricism because they believed in **innate abilities to reason and to make moral choices**. Liberals have more confidence in the intellectual abilities of human beings that can guide progression rather than empirical experimentation that is based on inductive methods.

#### **5. Equality/social justice**

Classical liberalism is based on **foundational equality** where all individuals are born with equal natural rights, and the state must not violate these rights. Contemporary examples are the US Bill of Rights, and the UK's Human Rights Act.

Modern liberalism expanded the perspective of these natural rights into the achievement of social justice as part of the package.

#### **6. Liberal democracy**

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century many governments in Europe were monarchies and the state was ruling by authoritarian elites. Locke's ideas consider these political arrangements to be illegitimate because they do not protect natural rights nor are based on any form of consent.

**Liberal democracy's ideas are based on:**

- The supremacy of the people.

- Consent via the social contract and therefore legitimacy that is based on consent and the preservation of the social contract.
- Rule of law, as part of the social contract, and no one is above the law.
- Existence of a common good or public interest = that is more relevant to modern liberals because the classical view of society is more atomistic.

#### (4) Differing views and tensions

##### 1. Human nature

All liberals agree with Locke that individuals are born with **natural rights** that require protection and they deserve formal equality under the law.

Agree on the need for tolerance and support of the harm principle.

Positive view of human nature; human beings are rational while they seek to maximise their own happiness.

They differ:

On **what constitute freedom:**

Classical is based on negative freedom while the modern is based on positive freedom.

Classicals argue that individual fail or succeed based on their own efforts, while the modern argue they need some help by the state.

Classical offers an atomist view with humans being selfish and pursuing their own interests to maximise happiness and thus they focus on foundational equality. Modern support foundational equality but believe in the promotion of common good, and for it to materialise we need equality of opportunity and an enabling state.

Rawls argued that it is based on three principles of justice:

- Individuals must have the same absolute freedoms.
- Individuals must share equal opportunities for all.
- Some inequality is inevitable but helping disadvantaged individuals is a priority.

##### 2. The state

All liberals argue that **the state is necessary** to maintain order, protect property and ensure the rule of law (= mechanist view of the minimal state). It needs to govern by consent, be limited by constitutionalism and separation of powers, and ensure foundational equality. They advocate democracy but are concerned by the **tyranny of the majority**.

They differ on how the state needs to practise its role in order to best serve its citizens. Classical leans on the minimal role: maintaining order, protect property and prevent external attacks. Modern leans on the enabling state, one that can provide the conditions for freedom thus less of a minimal role and thereby taking on a greater array of functions.

Classical, the state should follow laissez-faire free market capitalism, while modern, follow Keynesianism that is predicated on regulation to guarantee full employment and economic growth to prevent recession.

Classical, favoured representative government with limited suffrage wherein educated and property-owning individuals will represent the interests of all. Modern, favoured direct popular democracy with universal suffrage.

Both feared tyranny of the majority – modern emphasised the role of education for educated informed citizens (hence political participation).

### 3. Society

Both agree that society needs to be the space where individuals can be free and happy by enjoying foundational formal equality.

Society needs to promote freedom alongside with cultural, economic and intellectual development.

Classicals like Locke argued that natural laws and natural rights of society predate the establishment of the state, because in a natural stateless society people would **still obey natural laws** = human beings are intrinsically capable of holding values of ‘right and wrong’ that govern their behaviour. Thus, the moral compass is innate, like the right to live and the right for happiness. **Society is merely a collection of individuals.**

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even Mill in his later writings acknowledged that the minimal state idea is insufficient to guarantee freedom. With Rawls’ ideas, modern liberals consider the society to be increasingly unequal, with poverty and discrimination = calling for an enabling state to transform the fabric of society. Classical liberalism however considers an enabling society and state to foster dependency culture that hinders individual development.

### 4. The economy

Both branches of liberalism are predicated on Locke’s idea of natural laws that emphasise **property rights** as a natural right in the pathway for freedom and happiness.

Both support a **free market** as necessary for a thriving economy and the creation of wealth.

However, classical is based on **laissez-faire capitalism**, with minimal governmental intervention, with minimal taxation.

Modern liberals favour **Keynesian economy** accompanied by welfare measures, which surely requires higher tax to fund public services within the enabling state model.

Modern liberals argue that laissez-faire economy leads to exploitation, deprivation and inequality and thereby stands in the way of freedom.

### **Summary of similarities and differences**

- + Positive view of human nature.
- + Agree on the principle of governing by consent and limited government.
- + Rationalism, the harm principle and tolerance.
- + Individualism, but disagree on the methods to achieve it.
- + Capitalism and free markets, opposing nationalisation.
  - Different interpretation of freedom, negative versus positive.
  - Minimal versus enabling state.
  - Classical opposes taxation, modern regards tax as necessary for an enabling state.
  - Classical laissez-faire capitalism, modern Keynesian.
  - Classical limited forms of democracy so elite groups retain power, modern endorse full representative democracy.