

WHY? | DR. RANDY WHITE
SESSION 5 | WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE LIBERAL?

Society is often divided into two camps: conservative and liberal. Social conservatives advocate for traditional values, minimal government intrusion, and established authority. Religious conservatives emphasize a literal interpretation of Scriptures and traditional views of church and family. However, much of American society leans neither socially nor religiously conservative.

A HISTORY OF LIBERALISM

THE RENAISSANCE: BIRTHPLACE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The Renaissance laid the intellectual foundations for liberal thought, emphasizing education, humanism, and the potential of individuals. This period revived classical learning and cultivated the environment that led to the Enlightenment, where classical liberalism formally developed. Key aspects of a Renaissance liberal education included the study of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, moral philosophy, and classical languages, fostering critical thinking and a sense of moral responsibility.

CLASSICAL LIBERALISM

Classical liberalism, distinct from modern political labels, emerged during the Enlightenment and emphasized individual liberty, private property, and minimal government intervention. Thinkers like John Locke and Adam Smith championed these ideas, advocating for limited government, the rule of law, free markets, and the social contract.

POLITICAL LIBERALISM

The American political system, founded on classical liberalism and Enlightenment ideals, emphasized individual rights and limited government. Over time, political liberalism evolved, with figures like Teddy Roosevelt introducing progressive ideas, culminating in FDR's New Deal, which expanded the federal government's role in economic and social matters, shifting liberalism towards progressivism.

LIBERALISM TODAY

RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM

Religious liberalism, rooted in the German rationalist tradition, rejects traditional dogma and emphasizes progressive interpretations of religious texts. This movement, often embraced by mainstream Protestant denominations, advocates for social change based on a progressive agenda rather than fixed theological truths.

POLITICAL LIBERALISM

The American political system, beginning with the American Revolution, was founded upon classical liberalism and the Enlightenment. The Declaration of Independence, with its assertion of inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, could be considered the icon of classical liberalism. The U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1789, established a framework for a government based on the rule of law, separation of powers, and protection of individual rights. The Bill of Rights (1791) further enshrined specific liberties, such as freedom of speech, religion, and the press, all central to liberal thought.

Early 19th-century American liberalism was characterized by an emphasis on agrarianism, limited government, and individualism. The slow but steady expansion of voting rights, from land owners, to all white men, to men of all color, and eventually universal suffrage giving women the right to vote was the result of the steady push of classic liberalism.

The abolitionist movement, leading to the Civil War (1861-1865), was driven by liberal ideas of human equality and natural rights.

The 19th century also saw the rise of economic liberalism, with policies favoring laissez-faire capitalism, free markets, and minimal government intervention in the economy. This era was marked by the belief that economic freedom was essential to individual liberty, as promoted by classical liberal economists like Adam Smith.

From Abraham Lincoln to Herbert Hoover, Republican political leadership prided itself in taking the label "liberal." But, as we shall soon see, liberalism began to take on a new meaning after Herbert Hoover's presidency.

The shift from classical liberalism to progressivism in American politics began with Teddy Roosevelt and culminated with Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR). Teddy Roosevelt, through his Square Deal policies, introduced progressive ideas such as government regulation of corporations, conservation of natural resources, and so-called social justice. Though Teddy Roosevelt held to the individualism of classic liberalism, his economic policies marked a departure from the classical liberal emphasis on limited government.

The transformation reached full fruition with FDR's New Deal in the 1930s. Faced with the Great Depression, FDR implemented a series of government programs aimed at economic recovery, social welfare, and financial reform. These policies expanded the role of the federal government significantly, promoting ideas of economic security and social equity over the classical liberal ideals of minimal government intervention and individual economic freedom. Thus, progressivism overtook liberalism by redefining the relationship between the government and the individual.

WHAT MAKES A PERSON PROGRESSIVE?

Progressive worldviews often stem from education, whether from parents or schools. Those exposed to progressive values early on are likely to adopt them. Progressives prioritize societal well-being over individual interests, trust in collective decision-making, and advocate for a radical concept of fairness that seeks to address disparities in social and economic status.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of liberalism from its classical roots to its modern progressive form reflects the dynamic nature of political and social thought. Understanding the historical context and foundational ideas of both classical and modern liberalism provides insight into the current political landscape and ongoing debates about the role of government, individual rights, and social justice.