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## IS LIBERALISM RIGHT-WING OR LEFT-WING?

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**Abstract.** *Liberalism is not strictly right-wing or left-wing, because it has evolved into different forms across history and political systems. Classical liberalism, developed in the 17th and 18th centuries by thinkers such as John Locke, emphasizes individual liberty, private property, limited government, and free markets. In modern political terms, this version of liberalism is often associated with the right or with center-right economic policies, since it supports capitalism and minimal state intervention.*

*However, modern or social liberalism takes a different approach. It still values individual freedoms, but it also accepts that the state should play a role in reducing inequality and ensuring access to education, healthcare, and social protection. This form of liberalism is often associated with the political center or center-left, especially in European contexts.*

*In countries like the United States, the term "liberal" is commonly linked to progressive or left-leaning politics. In contrast, in much of Europe, liberal parties may be economically liberal but socially moderate or centrist. Because of these differences, liberalism cannot be placed neatly on a single point of the political spectrum. Instead, it is a broad tradition that adapts to different historical and cultural contexts, balancing freedom, equality, and the role of government in varying ways.*

### • Introduction

Liberalism is one of the most influential and debated political ideologies in modern history. Its meaning varies significantly depending on historical context and geographical location. In the United States, liberalism is commonly associated with left-wing politics, while in Europe it is often linked to center-right economic policies. This divergence raises an important academic question: is liberalism inherently right-wing or left-wing?

This paper argues that liberalism cannot be confined to a single position on the political spectrum. Instead, it represents a dynamic and evolving tradition that has influenced both left- and right-wing ideologies. As Berlin (1969) explains, "the extent of a man's negative freedom is, roughly, the area within which he can act unobstructed by others", highlighting a core liberal principle that transcends ideological divisions.

### • Material and method

The interdisciplinary approach to liberalism involves analyzing it from multiple perspectives, such as philosophy, economics, sociology, and political science. From a philosophical point of view, liberalism emphasizes individual freedom and fundamental rights. In economics, it supports the principles of the free market and private property. Sociology examines the impact of liberalism on social structures and on relationships between individuals and communities. In political science, liberalism is studied as a foundation of democracy and the rule of law. Thus, this approach allows for a more complex and nuanced understanding of liberalism in contemporary society.

### • Results and discussions

Liberalism originated during the Enlightenment as a response to absolutism and traditional authority. Locke (1689/1988) argued that individuals possess natural rights and that "men being... by nature, all free, equal and independent" (p. 287), no one can be subjected to political power without consent. Similarly, Montesquieu (1748/1989) emphasized the importance of limiting political authority, stating that "power should be a check to power" (p. 155). Smith (1776/1976) contributed to liberal thought by arguing that individuals pursuing their own interests are "led by an invisible hand" (p. 456) to promote societal benefit.

Classical liberalism emphasizes individual freedom, private property, and limited government. These principles align closely with modern right-wing economic thought. Hayek (1944/2007) warned that "the more the state 'plans' the more difficult planning becomes for the individual" (p. 83). Similarly, Friedman (1962) argued that "economic freedom is... an indispensable means toward the achievement of political freedom" (p. 8). However, liberalism also strongly supports civil liberties. Mill (1859/1974) stated that "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised... is to prevent harm to others" (p. 68). This principle demonstrates liberalism's broader commitment to individual rights beyond economic concerns.

The meaning of liberalism varies across political systems. In the United States, it is associated with progressive policies. In Europe, it often combines economic liberalism with moderate social policies. Kymlicka (2002) emphasizes that liberalism is based on the idea that individuals should be free to choose their own conception of the good life (p. 212), allowing for diverse interpretations. Liberalism has been criticized from both sides of the political spectrum. Sandel (1998) argues that liberalism "fails to account for the way in which our identities are shaped by the communities to which we belong" (p. 179). At the same time, Hayek (1944/2007) warns against excessive government control. Berlin (1969) also highlights tensions within liberalism, particularly between negative and positive liberty.

### • Conclusions

Liberalism cannot be categorized strictly as right-wing or left-wing. It has evolved over time, incorporating elements from both sides of the political spectrum. As Gray (1995) notes, liberalism is "continually reinterpreted" (p. 6). Ultimately, liberalism is best understood as a flexible ideological framework centered on individual freedom, equality, and democratic governance. Its adaptability ensures its relevance but also explains why its political classification remains contested.