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## Political ideologies

# The development of modern liberalism

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You can use this extension piece alongside the 'A2 focus on...' article on classical and modern liberalism on p. 29 of this issue of the magazine.

*Did modern liberal ideas develop from classical liberal ideas and adapt to reflect the modern world, or are they entirely different from classical liberalism?*

## Key features of modern liberalism

- Equality of opportunity
- Positive freedom
- Enabling state
- Developmental individualism
- Qualified welfare

The poverty and nature of life in Victorian Britain led to the development of modern liberal views and values by the end of the nineteenth century. Politicians and theorists felt that there were weaknesses in classical liberal ideas and policies, which could not provide freedom for everyone, as shown by the high levels of disease and squalor. In a similar fashion to the development of paternalism or 'one-nation' conservatism, modern liberal ideas developed in a specific historical context.

## Key developments

**Equality of opportunity** can only be achieved if there is a reduction in social inequality, which may lead to some equality of outcome. This would take place in conjunction with a more positive role for the state. The state would create the conditions in which people could excel, through education or the health service. This state would be an **enabling state**, one that would allow people to choose to progress, rather than one which intervened and forced people to succeed. The notion that individuals can choose to advance can be described as **developmental individualism**.

**Positive freedom** is one of the key differences between modern and classical liberalism. However, it is important to recognise that although the two strands of liberalism have different views on the role of the state, there are still overlapping themes between the two strands. Modern liberals believe in a positive view of freedom, where the enabling state creates the conditions for people to choose to progress. Both classical and modern liberals believe that freedom is the ultimate political goal, in whatever form it takes. Modern liberals have also not rejected negative freedom entirely. The aim of modern liberals is to enable people to help themselves, thus the aim of both classical and modern liberals is to promote **individual autonomy**, or negative freedom. All liberal views on equality stem

from a belief in **individualism**. This is true for modern liberals, who believe in a relative form of social equality that is still grounded in individualism where equality of opportunity and positive freedom allow individuals to choose to succeed.

**Qualified welfare** is the means by which positive freedom and equality of opportunity take place. A **free market**, one that is unregulated and free of state intervention as favoured by classical liberals, creates inequalities in wealth and conditions similar to those in Victorian Britain. The state has a role to play for modern liberals in providing the welfare that enables individuals to help themselves. It is important to note though that the increased role given to the state by modern liberals is limited to providing qualified welfare and supervision of the economy, and does NOT mean that modern liberals support unlimited state power.

## Example essay plan

**'Modern liberals have abandoned individualism and embraced collectivism'. Discuss.**

Introduction: Define liberalism and the terms in the question — individualism/collectivism

Explain that this is the argument advanced by classical liberals

Modern liberals have abandoned individualism:

- Support for enabling state
- Keynesian economics
- How are these criticised by classical liberalists e.g. creating a dependency culture or limiting economic freedom?

Modern liberals are still rooted in individualism and reflect changing circumstances, both economic and social:

- State intervention is limited and conditional — social and economic intervention only
- Collectivism is a means to an end

Conclusion: Weigh up both sides — be clear that modern liberals are not aiming to create a nanny state but to create an environment in which individuals can flourish

## Task

Find out more about the following liberal theorists:

- Charles Taylor
- Thomas H. Green
- John Rawls
- Erich Fromm
- Isaiah Berlin

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