

IS LIBERALISM RIGHT-WING OR LEFT-WING?

Marius Robert LUNGU¹, (ORCID: 0000-0002-2907-6194)
Alina DRAGOESCU-PETRICĂ¹ (ORCID: 0000-0003-1270-0728), Maria LUNGU², Patrick
LAVRITS²

¹ University of Life Sciences” King Mihai I” from Timisoara

² West University of Timisoara

Corresponding author: andreeadragoescu@usvt.ro

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.

Keywords: political philosophy, political economy, history of ideas

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” (p. 122), highlighting a core liberal principle that transcends ideological divisions.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

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

The Origins of Liberalism

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.

These foundational ideas were revolutionary and cannot be easily categorized within the modern left-right spectrum.

Liberalism and the Left-Right Spectrum

The distinction between left and right emerged during the French Revolution. Early liberals aligned with the left due to their opposition to monarchy and aristocracy. However, as Freedman (1996) notes, liberalism developed into “a morphology of political concepts that resists simple classification” (p. 48).

Gray (1995) further argues that liberalism is “a family of related doctrines” (p. xii), which explains its ideological flexibility. As socialism emerged, liberalism increasingly occupied a middle position between competing ideologies.

Classical Liberalism and Right-Wing Associations

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.

Social Liberalism and Left-Wing Influence

In the late 19th century, social liberalism emerged as a response to industrialization and inequality. Green (1883/2003) argued that “freedom is not merely the absence of restraint” (p. 199), but the ability to achieve personal development.

Rawls (1971) expanded this idea, stating that inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the least advantaged: “to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged” (p. 83).

These ideas align liberalism with left-wing ideologies, particularly in its support for welfare policies and social justice.

Liberalism in Different Contexts

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.

Liberalism in Western Europe today occupies a central but increasingly contested position in political life. It remains strongly associated with democratic governance, the rule of law, and the protection of individual rights. Liberal parties often support free markets combined with moderate welfare policies, reflecting a balance between economic efficiency and social protection. However, liberalism faces growing challenges from both the populist right and the radical left. Issues such as immigration, economic inequality, and globalization have put pressure on traditional liberal values. In some countries, skepticism toward supranational institutions like the European Union has also increased. At the same time, liberalism continues to play a key role in defending civil liberties, minority rights, and international cooperation. Many Western European societies still rely on liberal principles as the foundation of their political systems. Overall, liberalism remains influential but must adapt to new social and political realities.

Liberalism in Romania today plays an important role within the country's democratic framework, especially through pro-European and reform-oriented political forces. It is generally associated with support for the rule of law, individual freedoms, and integration into European institutions. However, liberal ideas often compete with populist and nationalist tendencies that question aspects of globalization and EU influence. Challenges such as corruption, political instability, and weak institutional trust continue to affect the credibility of liberal governance. At the same time, civil society and younger generations tend to support liberal values such as transparency and accountability. Economic liberalism is visible in policies that encourage private enterprise and foreign investment. Nevertheless, social inequalities and regional disparities remain significant issues. Political polarization has also made it harder to maintain consistent reform agendas. Despite these obstacles, liberalism continues to shape Romania's direction as a democratic European state.

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