

Define individualism and explain its importance within liberal ideology

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The liberal ideology is formed on several ideologies. Individualism is considered one of the most crucial. It's involved in most liberal characteristics like freedom, the economy and the role of the state. But there is notable division between modern and classic liberalists as to what it focuses on with modern liberalists focusing on individuality and classics believe in utilitarianism and and social darwinism. However it is widely agreed that individualism is a key concept within liberal ideology.

Firstly, to discuss the importance of individualism, it must be defined.

Individualism is the social theory favouring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control. Essentially the belief that the individual is more important than the social group. This is then split further into methodological individualism where the individual is placed at the centre of political theory and ethical individualism where moral priority is given to the interests of the individual.

One place where individualism plays a key role within liberalism is in the role of the state. This appears in the form of a constitutional government that liberal thinkers view as essential with two other aspects to guarantee individualism. The first is the separation of powers where capability would be disbanded between various parts of government in order to prevent a focused centre of power which would be able to destroy individual freedom. The second is a limited government, where the state is only given enough powers necessary to allow individuals to follow their own eccentric pursuits. Therefore it can be seen individualism plays an important role in liberal ideology as liberal government is designed to protect this. John Locke sums this up as 'the state that governs least is the state that governs best'.

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Another place where individualism is important within liberal ideology is with regard to the financial market. This became prominent through the thinkings of Ricardo and Smith (writer of the wealth of nations). They believed that the individual should be enabled to act in their own interests and this will therefore benefit society overall. This will in theory therefore promote freedom, well-being and prosperity. More recently, John Maynard Keynes put forward the requirement of demand management - that the government should inject money into the economy to ensure the individual can still act in their own interests.

Individualism also plays a crucial part in the opinion of freedom within liberal ideology. It is not total freedom but freedom under the state and the rule of law. It warrants for people to develop their own abilities and ambitions. John Locke, a 17th century philosopher considered freedom of the individual to be a natural right.

Modern liberals have moved away towards individuality, by suggesting life is about more than a selfish pursuit of ones own joys. John Stuart Mills expressed the desire of individuals to achieve self-realisation and autonomy, through 'high' pleasures, which consist of intellectual and moral pursuits in comparison with 'low' pleasures which are crude pleasures including activities such as promiscuity, drinking and gambling. This may suggest individualism has less of a role in modern liberalism because there's less focus on the simple pleasures that a classical liberalist would conform to.

Classical liberals have an atomistic view of the individual, due to ideas such as Social Darwinism, that the hard-working and talented would survive and the lazy would fail. Spencer stressed this, and the importance of the <https://assignbuster.com/define-individualism-and-explain-its-importance-within-liberal-ideology/>

individual responsibility. Utilitarianism is also a key concept within classical thinking on individualism, the idea that the proper course of action is the one that maximises utility. Bentham suggested this was key as individuals ought to be allowed to follow their own happiness. The focus and analysis of political theorists on what individualism should be shows its importance.

To summarise, it is clear that individualism is greatly important in liberal ideology, particularly in the opinion of classical liberalists. In classical liberalism individualism takes a more pivotal role within most aspects of their ideals. However in modern liberalism individualism is slightly more subdued due to the state's larger role. Overall individualism can be seen to play an important role within liberalism as a whole.