

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

By the end of this lesson, I will list and explain five political ideologies using specific examples from history.

WHAT DOES IDEOLOGY MEAN?

Idea -----> Ideology -----> way of thinking and understanding how an ideal system should be.

Over the millennia, political philosophers have expounded (emphasized) on a variety of political ideologies, or ways governments and societies can be organized. Today, scholars generally talk about five major political ideologies:

1. Anarchism
2. Absolutism
3. Liberalism
4. Conservatism
5. Socialism

These political ideologies are, for the most part, mutually exclusive. So, a liberal government does not usually practice socialism, nor does an absolute ruler follow liberalism. The five major political ideologies have played a key role in history by shaping governments and political movements.

Anarchism

The belief that the best government is absolutely no government is known as **anarchism**. This ideology argues that everything about governments is repressive and therefore must be abolished entirely. A related ideology known as **nihilism** emphasizes that everything—both government and society—must be periodically destroyed in order to start anew. Nihilists often categorically reject traditional concepts of morality in favor of violence and terror. Anarchism and nihilism were once associated with socialism because many anarchists and nihilists supported the socialists' call for revolution and the complete overhaul of government and society in the early to mid-twentieth century.

Example: *Although neither violent nor strictly anarchist, members of the American Libertarian Party believe that government should be so small that it hardly ever interferes in citizens' lives, thereby best preserving individual liberty.*

Russia

Russia has had a long association with anarchism and nihilism. Many prominent members of both movements were Russian, including Mikhail Bakunin, considered the father of anarchism. Russian nihilists engaged in a number of terrorist attacks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881.

Absolutism

Traditionally, much of Western civilization's history was dominated by **absolutism**, the belief that a single ruler should have control over every aspect of the government and of the people's lives. Absolute rulers had a variety of titles, including *chieftain*, *king*, *shah*, *pharaoh*, *emperor*, *sultan*, and *prince*. In some cultures, the absolute ruler was seen as a god in human form. Other peoples believed that their ruler had the **divine right of kings**, meaning that God had chosen the ruler to govern the rest. As a result, many cultures with absolute rulers practiced some form of **caesaropapism**, the belief that the ruler is head of both the governmental authority and the religious authority.

Example: *In the Byzantine Empire, the double-headed eagle symbolized caesaropapism. The two heads stood for church and state. This symbol clearly and graphically portrayed the unity of religious and secular power in one person.*

Advocates of Absolutism

A number of political philosophers have advocated absolutism. The Greek philosopher Plato, for example, firmly believed that the best government would be run by a benevolent absolute ruler who would have the people's best interests at heart. English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, meanwhile, was perhaps the most persuasive proponent of absolutism. In his book *Leviathan* (1651), he argued that life without governments was "nasty, brutish, and short" and that people must willingly submit to absolute rulers—even tyrannical ones—in order to live longer, more stable lives.

Absolutist Beliefs

Absolutism emphasizes:

- **A strong sense of order:** Everything should be carefully structured, including society. Disorder and chaos are generally considered to be dangerous.
- **A clear-cut law of nature (or law of God):** This law must be obeyed. According to this law, some people are inherently better than others. A natural **hierarchy** (a power structure in which some people have authority over others) exists. Therefore, the superior should rule the inferior. This general view is called **elitism**, or **elite theory**.
- **The wisdom of traditional values and institutions:** New ideas are considered dangerous to the order of things.

Liberalism

In the early modern age of the Western world (beginning roughly in the early 1500s and running for about 200 years), a number of changes occurred that led to new ideologies: The European discovery of the Americas, the rise of Protestantism, the beginnings of the free-market economy, and the early stages of the scientific revolution fundamentally altered Europe. People began developing different ways of thinking to take account of these changes.

Perhaps the most important of the new ideas is **liberalism** (also known as **classical liberalism**). This type of liberalism, which began in England in the 1600s, differs from American liberalism. Classical liberalism developed when such thinkers as John Locke (in his *Second Treatise of Government* in 1690) rethought the relationship between the individual and society, as well theorized about the rights and responsibilities of the individual. These ideas formed the foundation for many political systems still operating today.

Liberalism in Action

During the French Revolution (1789–1799), the monarchy and much of the church were destroyed, as were traditional laws and habits in different parts of the country. The revolutionaries exalted reason, to the point of literally creating a temple to it (the revolutionaries renamed the Church of Notre Dame in Paris “the Temple of Reason”) in 1793. But as a result of the revolution, France plunged into years of civil war and violence. Only the emergence of Napoleon—an authoritarian ruler—brought stability back to the country.

Liberal Beliefs

Liberalism emphasizes:

- **Individualism:** The individual takes priority over society.
- **Freedom:** Individuals have the right to make choices for themselves. This freedom is not absolute, and some behaviors, such as murder, are prohibited. Freedom of religion is a particularly important freedom to come out of liberalism because so many governments at the time were very closely tied to a particular religious creed.
- **Equality:** No person is morally or politically superior to others. Hierarchies are rejected.
- **Rationalism:** Humans are capable of thinking logically and rationally. Logic and reason help us solve problems.
- **Progress:** Traditions should not be kept unless they have value. New ideas are helpful because they can lead to progress in the sciences, the economy, and society.
- **The free market:** Liberalism and capitalism go hand in hand. Liberals like the free market because it more easily creates wealth, as opposed to traditional economies, which often have extensive regulations and limits on which occupations people can hold.

These basic characteristics of liberalism have led liberals to argue in favor of a limited government, which draws its power from the people. In practice, this has meant favoring a democratic government.

Mill's Good Government

In his books *On Liberty* (1859) and *Considerations of Representative Government* (1861), English philosopher J. S. Mill argued that good governments should be unrestricting enough to allow people—both men *and* women—to pursue their own interests and achieve their own potential as they see fit. Fostering individuality would, in turn, benefit society as a whole, because fewer people would feel restricted or marginalized. Mill also believed that representative democracy was the best form of government because it allowed people to express their individuality and provided them the opportunity to take a more active role in the political process. The more active the people are, Mill thought, the more satisfied they are with their government.

Classical liberalism has profoundly influenced the modern world, so much so that we do not even realize how controversial its ideas were in early modern Europe. Back then, liberal ideas

were considered dangerous and inflammatory by traditional European governments, and liberals were frequently persecuted. Even after liberalism took hold in England, the rest of Europe was hostile to liberal ideas for another century (and even longer in some cases).

Example: *For centuries, Eastern Europe suffered greatly from authoritarian rule, in which one person or a small group holds all the political power and oppresses everybody else. As recently as 1989, open discussion of liberal ideas (such as the free market) or publicly complaining that the communist governments did not speak for the people could get a person arrested. The writer Vaclav Havel, for example, was jailed by the Czechoslovakian government. But after the 1989 end of the communist government in Czechoslovakia, Havel served as the newly democratic government's first president.*

The Controversial Case of John Locke

In the seventeenth century, liberals were not held in high esteem, as evidenced by the life of John Locke. Locke was forced to flee into exile to avoid arrest by the British monarchy. He returned to England only after the Stuart monarchs were overthrown in 1688 and a government friendlier to liberalism took power. But even then, Locke refused to acknowledge that he had written *Second Treatise of Government*, his main political text, because of its controversial nature. Other liberals, in England and elsewhere, were arrested or even killed by traditional governments.

Conservatism

Conservatism (also known as **classical conservatism**) began as a reaction against the liberal ideas taking hold of Europe during the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century. This type of conservatism differs from American conservatism. Edmund Burke, a British Member of Parliament, observed the early stages of the French Revolution with great distress and predicted the violence and terror that would ensue. His book, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), is one of the founding texts of classical conservatism.

Burke and other conservatives attacked liberalism for many reasons. They argued that liberalism destroyed tradition. In its rush to overturn the old and bring in the new, liberalism and capitalism ruthlessly attacked traditional institutions and beliefs.

Conservative Beliefs

Conservatism emphasizes:

- **Stability:** Stability is a precious thing, and change must be made gradually in order to preserve it. Undermining stability is very dangerous because societies can easily fall into chaos and violence. Classical liberals frequently called for revolution, which opens the door to great turbulence, according to the classical conservative view.
- **Concreteness:** Liberalism is too abstract. It focuses on freedom and equality, not on the concrete way people live every day.
- **Human fallibility:** Liberalism overestimates human beings. Humans are frequently ignorant, prejudiced, and irrational. By ignoring these defects, liberalism becomes unrealistic.
- **Unique circumstances:** There is no universal answer to the problems of society; the circumstances are unique in each country.

Classical Conservatism and Democracy

Many early conservatives favored authoritarian government. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars (roughly 1792–1815), for example, most European governments actively worked to stop the spread of liberalism and democracy. Nevertheless, conservatives were not necessarily hostile to democracy. Generally these conservatives argued that some sort of monarchy was necessary, but some were more open to popular government. Burke, in particular, thought that limited democracy was a good form of government for England, as long as it maintained the customs and mores it inherited from its predecessors.

Classical Conservatism Today

For the most part, classical conservatism has faded. Most people who label themselves conservatives are more like American conservatives than classical ones. But there are still some classical conservatives. Many of them in Europe have ties to old noble families, and some advocate monarchism. Classical conservatives can also be found in other parts of the world.

The chart below compares classical liberal views with classical conservative views on several issues.

Classical Liberalism versus Classical Conservatism

Issue	Liberalism	Conservatism
Tradition	Only valuable if it serves a purpose; we should not be afraid to overturn tradition	Repository of acquired wisdom; collection of best knowledge from many years of practice
Freedom	Essential for human flourishing; people are free to do as they please as long as they do not hurt others	Excessive freedom is bad; lets people ignore societal responsibilities and overlook social customs
Reason	Relies on reason; the great success of the scientific revolution can be repeated in human affairs if we use reason	Thinks reason is fallible and prone to error; human beings cannot discover the best way to govern through thinking. Instead, we must base our judgments and decisions on experience.
Free Market	Valuable because it unleashes tremendous economic growth and efficiency, enriching society	Dangerous because it breaks down traditional economic roles. The profit motive corrodes customary mores and reduces all relationships to cash transactions.

Socialism

Socialism arose as a response to the Industrial Revolution, which was the emergence of technologies such as the steam engine and mass production. The Industrial Revolution started in England in the last years of the eighteenth century and had spread too much of Europe and America by the end of the nineteenth century. It caused major upheavals: In a very short time,

many people were forced to abandon agricultural ways of life for the modern mechanized world of factories.

Early versions of socialism were put forward in Europe in the first part of the nineteenth century (these versions are often dubbed “utopian socialism”), but truly influential socialist theories did not emerge until industrialization expanded in the mid-nineteenth century. Karl Marx is the best-known theorist of socialism. Along with Friedrich Engels, Marx wrote *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) as a call to revolution. Other prominent socialist thinkers included Karl Kautsky, Vladimir Lenin, and Antonio Gramsci.

Socialist Beliefs

Socialism emphasizes:

- **Collectivism:** Human beings are social by nature, and society should respect this. Individualism is poisonous.
- **Public ownership:** Society, not individuals, should own the property.
- **Central economic planning:** The government plans the economy; there is no free market.
- **Economic equality:** All citizens have roughly the same level of prosperity.

Class Warfare

According to socialists, liberalism fails to live up to its promises of freedom and equality. Socialists blame the free market for liberalism’s failings. Under a capitalist system, money and means of production are the measures of power. The haves (the *bourgeoisie*, in Marx’s terms) and the have-nots (whom Marx calls the *proletariat*) are locked into a fight that Marx called *class warfare*. Because they control the money and means of production, the bourgeoisie have the power and thus are winning the fight. The rich use the government to further their control and to increase their power over the lower, poorer classes, so people are neither free nor equal.

The Evolution of Socialism

Socialism evolved in a variety of ways. Communism and democratic socialism are the two most prominent evolutions of socialism.

- **Communism:** An authoritarian and revolutionary approach to achieving socialism. As an ideology, communism emphasizes a classless society in which all members jointly share the means and output of production. The regimes of the Soviet Union and communist China embody this ideology. Communists such as Vladimir Lenin, who became the first premier of the Soviet Union in 1917, argued that people can and must make the transition to socialism quickly rather than waiting for it to evolve. Authoritarian and violent measures are often required because the defenders of capitalism will fight ferociously to stop socialism from coming into being.

Communism Today

With the fall of communist regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe, communism has been in retreat for most of the 1990s and 2000s. There are, for example, fewer communist movements around the world than during the Cold War. But there are still several major communist regimes, including the governments of North Korea and Cuba.

- **Democratic socialism:** A peaceful and democratic approach to achieving socialism. As an ideology, democratic socialism also emphasizes a classless society in which all members jointly share the means and output of production. But unlike communism, democratic socialism attempts to achieve its goals peacefully via the democratic processes. Democratic socialists reject the need for immediate transition to socialism in favor of a gradualist approach, achieved by working within a democratic government. Economic inequalities should be remedied through a **welfare state**, a system that provides aid to the poor and help to the unemployed.

Democratic Socialism Today

Democratic socialism has been quite successful in Western Europe and Scandinavia. Many governments there have extensive welfare systems that have remained largely intact even when democratic socialists are voted out of office. Democratic socialist parties exist in many democracies around the world. Germany's Social Democratic Party and Britain's Labor Party are contemporary examples of successful political parties heavily influenced by democratic socialism.