

Liberal Democracy



an explainer from the oregon **education** project



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Clear Thinking.
Critical Thinking.
Effective Thinking.

Making Sense of Our Liberal Democratic Republic¹

People in America tend to think a “liberal” is someone on The Left politically.² But that popular usage is wrong. Liberals occupy *either* side of the political center.³ That’s because our Republic *itself* is founded on the **core principles of Liberalism**: the USA is a **Liberal Democratic Republic**. It’s not a “pluralistic [social] democracy.”⁴

Liberalism is about *individual* freedom grounded in unalienable natural rights.⁵ It centers the right of each individual to pursue *their own personal happiness* according to *their own conscience* within the framework of **The Rule of Law**.⁶ As Nobel Prize–winning economist Milton Friedman championed it,

“The heart of the liberal philosophy is a belief in the dignity of the *individual*, in [their] freedom to make the most of [their] capacities and opportunities according to [their] own lights, subject only to the provision that [they] not interfere with the freedom of other individuals to do the same.”⁷

Liberalism enshrines the right of individuals to own property, generate wealth, and manage the fruit of that labor at their own discretion. Liberals hate coercion. It’s why they invented the idea of self-government by the *consent* of the governed. America’s founders called it “republicanism,” and our Constitution embodies it.⁸

Liberalism defends the right to **speak one’s mind freely** and promote one’s thoughts. Such intellectual freedom demands a commitment to pluralism, viewpoint diversity, and the freedom to worship — or not — as one sees fit, gathering with others freely.⁹

Liberals support the **free exchange of goods and services** in competitive markets. Equality of opportunity⁸ and equal *personal standing* before The Law is essential, as is respecting the equal dignity of all as *individuals* — not members of a group. Ethnicity, race, and other tribal identities have no bearing. **Liberalism is colorblind**.¹⁰

Of central importance is the capacity for **self-rule**: cultivating civic and personal virtues, including civility, integrity, open-mindedness, rational compassion, and trustworthiness. Liberalism *requires* a flourishing set of social norms, as James Madison noted:

“Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks, no form of government, can render us secure.”¹¹

It’s the role of public education — a Liberal creation — to instill those virtues.

American Education instills the **core principles of Liberal Democracy**: open inquiry, intellectual pluralism, civil discourse, and the idea that we should seek **truth** ... Acquiring knowledge, wisdom, and virtue.¹²

Liberals resist efforts by collectivized majorities to stifle their rights. In fact, our Constitution’s design to distribute power and constrain democracy counters that.¹³ Yet **illiberal** ideas gained ascendancy and did great damage throughout our history.

The emergence of **illiberal** White Supremacy after the nation’s founding led to the frequent exclusion of “non-whites” — a betrayal of Liberal colorblindness expressed in our founding documents.¹⁴ Yet repairing the damage often undermines Liberalism.

So-called “equity-focused” efforts that redistribute resources and opportunities based on immutable characteristics like race, color, or national origins amount to *excluding some* in order to *favor others*.¹⁵ This is blatantly **illiberal** and, therefore, unconstitutional. We’re right to be concerned about equity — but not in terms of “group identity.”¹⁶

¹ The USA is a Liberal Democratic Republic grounded in natural law and individual human liberty.

It’s not a democracy. In fact, our Constitution was designed to *constrain* democratic power. Neither is it a “pluralistic [social] democracy”, as *illiberal* political progressives aspire to remake it.

² Left vs Right is a useful though insufficient measure of political views from Conservative [Right] to Progressive [Left].

See [HiddenTribes.us](https://www.hiddentribes.us).

³ Now more prominent Right of Center [“Classic” Liberalism]. From [Pew](#): the average Democrat in 1995 now votes Republican. Democrats have had a profound Leftward [illiberal] shift since then.

⁴ [Oregon Department of Education 2024 Revised Social Science Standards](#).

⁵ Unalienable rights are *inherent* endowments. They are not granted by government.

⁶ “A government of laws and not of men” (John Adams).

⁷ **Free to Choose** by Milton and Rose Friedman.

⁸ See **Rage and the Republic: The Unfinished Story of the American Revolution** by Jonathan Turley.

⁹ Liberalism promotes intellectual pluralism on an *individual* basis, not multiculturalism among a coalition of identity groups. Identity groups are antithetical to Liberalism; they are *illiberal*.

¹⁰ Bayard Rustin, Pauli Murray, and Martin King were proponents of this view, acknowledging the *reality* of race without grounding personal identity in it. See [OEP Colorblind Realism](#).

¹¹ James Madison’s words at the Virginia Ratifying Convention.

¹² [OEP American Education and American Culture](#).

¹³ **Rage and the Republic** by Turley.

¹⁴ See [OEP White Supremacy and No Property in Men](#) by Sean Wilentz.

¹⁵ See [Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity](#) (EO 14173).

¹⁶ [OEP Equity & Equality](#).

The Alluring Warmth of Collectivism

While **Liberal** Democracy centers individuals, **Social** Democracy centers *the collective*.¹⁷ Social Democrats defend “the right of the people” over individual rights. They favor government-led economic and social interventions to promote “social justice.” That appeals to people’s innate psychological desire for collective unity and action.¹⁸

Today that’s organized around *intersecting* group identities: “Black,” “Latinx,” “Gay.”¹⁹ It’s the perspective framed in the Oregon Department of Education’s 2024 Social Science Standards, which describe the USA as a “**pluralistic [social] democracy**.” The *stated* goal of their instructional practice is to inculcate a collectivist worldview:

“Empathizing with a range of identities and lived experiences, the practices help students become informed and empowered *agents of change* ... to address systemic injustices, advocate for a more *equitable* world [social justice], and uphold the aspirational ideals of our democratic *society* [social democracy].”²⁰

For Social Democrats, *the aspirational ideals of our democratic society* are central — not *the aspirational ideals of the individual*, together with other free individuals. Redistributing wealth [“*equity*”] in the interest of the *collective* is a primary concern — not the individual’s right to generate and manage wealth at *their own* discretion.²¹

Social Democracy is illiberal. Thus Oregon education is not American education.²² Oregon’s Standards further aspire to “de-center whiteness” by deriding, eliminating, and obscuring the Liberal foundations of American culture.²³ They are **anti-Liberal**. This is a major cause of failure in our schools and drives our deep political division.

Collectivist ideals tend to negatively impact society — despite their attractiveness.²⁴ Liberalism replaces *innate collectivist desire for group action* with an *individualist framework promoting free inquiry, deliberative democracy, and The Rule of Law*. The USA is a republic of reasons, not a majority power grab.²⁵ It’s why we succeed.

Liberals disagree about many things.²⁶ That’s why Liberal Democracy is deliberative: citizens need to *justify* policies, not simply vote for them. Disagreeing is good. We need viewpoint diversity to overcome bias and escape narrow tribal loyalty.²⁷

Important: The secret to America’s flourishing has been the successful *assimilation* of people from many differing populations into this *individualistic* Liberal mindset.²⁸

Adopting the core principles of Liberalism is essential to being an American — it facilitates the civil coexistence of many diverse groups, beliefs, and interests. Yet some ideas are antithetical to Liberal Democracy. **They are decidedly illiberal.**²⁹

Liberalism is a *constrained* progressive vision like our republican Constitution itself.³⁰ American government works best with a center-Left to center-Right *balance*. Today’s **illiberal extremes** undermine that. We need to restore an effective *center*.

¹⁷ Collectivism prioritizes the interests of the group over those of individuals, who are subordinated to the greater *collective* good.

¹⁸ This has deep evolutionary roots in what evolutionary psychologists call “coalitional instincts” (Tooby). See OEP Moral Tribes.

¹⁹ A political coalition of oppressed victim groups forming a majority. See OEP Victim Culture.

²⁰ Oregon Department of Education 2024 Revised Social Science Standards.

²¹ See OEP Equity & Equality.

²² See OEP American Education.

²³ See OEP Ethnic Studies.

²⁴ See OEP Victim Culture.

²⁵ #Republic by Cass Sunstein.

²⁶ That’s why you’ll find them on either side of the political divide.

²⁷ See OEP Myside Bias.

²⁸ American culture is characterized by higher individualism, a greater willingness to cooperate and extend moral concern beyond kin, a greater emphasis on personal freedom and self-expression, greater tolerance for individual variation, and less emphasis on obedience to authority. These cultural traits create a high-trust, innovative, and prosperous society unlike most non-American ones. See OEP American Culture.

²⁹ In addition to Social Democracy from The Left, some expressions of Christian Nationalism from The Right seek to impose “Biblical Law” on citizens, undermining the Liberal commitment to pluralism. Similarly, radical Islamists promote the imposition of Sharia Law. See OEP Viewpoint Diversity and Christian Nationalism.

³⁰ *Rage and the Republic* by Turley.

Explainers Clear Thinking. Critical Thinking. Effective Thinking.

Brief primers providing basic information about a particular topic, point of view, or “doctrine.” They include links to online references and resources (in the digital versions).



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