

Should We Stop Calling Liberals ‘Liberal’?

When Americans use the term “liberal” today, they are usually describing a person or group that holds political or moral views associated with the Democratic Party or the “Left.”

But it was not always so. In fact, this contemporary usage is the result of an etymological evolution—or devolution, depending on whom you ask.

As a helpful [piece in *The Atlantic*](#) shows, prior to the mid-18th century, the term “liberal” had “pre-political meanings, such as generous, tolerant, or suitable to one of noble or superior status—as in ‘liberal arts’ and ‘liberal education.’”

But then the Scots came along—most notably Adam Smith—and the word took on a more political meaning. Drawing from the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, Smith, in his *Wealth of Nations* and elsewhere, used the term “liberal” to refer to describe economic policies that minimized government regulation and allowed individuals greater freedom to pursue profit. According to Smith, such policies were in the best interests of nations.

This ethos is what is known today as “classical liberalism”—which is only really “classical” in modern retrospect, since at the time, it involved a significant break with the past.

But sometime during the latter part of the 19th century in Britain and America, the term “liberal” began to also be associated with the advocacy of government intervention. At first, [as Professor Jonathan Parry writes](#), these interventions were more limited, for the purpose of “secur[ing] order, economy, free-market conditions and self-improvement.”

But in late-19th and early-20th-century America, the term “liberal” came to be increasingly associated with the Progressive support for expanded government intervention on behalf of social justice. Over the course of the 20th century, this meaning of “liberal” became dominant in the public consciousness, and additionally came to be linked to a belief in freedom *from* the “limitations” of human nature and traditional mores.

So who are the true “liberals”? If arguing on the basis of linguistic provenance, many of today’s “conservatives” would be the truer liberals, since their drumbeat advocacy of the free market more closely aligns with the older use of the term. Plus, as Professor Leland Yeager [has pointed out](#), this use of “liberal” is also more global. It’s mainly in America that “liberal” is associated with progressive politics; elsewhere, it still primarily refers to free-market economic policies.

However, some, [such as Professor Patrick Deneen](#) of Notre Dame, see “progressive liberalism” as the natural ideological evolution of “classical liberalism.” Arguably, the break with the past advocated by the 18th-century liberals continues to be fulfilled in spades by the progressive policies of today’s liberals. And though both classical liberals and progressive liberals share an emphasis on the individual, the latter’s corrective emphasis on the societal is probably more in line with classical anthropology. After all, “no man is an island.”

Regardless of who’s the real “liberal,” it’s probably in the best political interests of today’s liberals to hang on to that term. As Yeager also notes, over the course of the past 250 years liberalism has consistently meant “action.” Some of the main synonyms of “conservative,” on the other hand, are “obstinate,” “timid,” and “unchanging.”

Which party do you think most people would want to be

associated with?