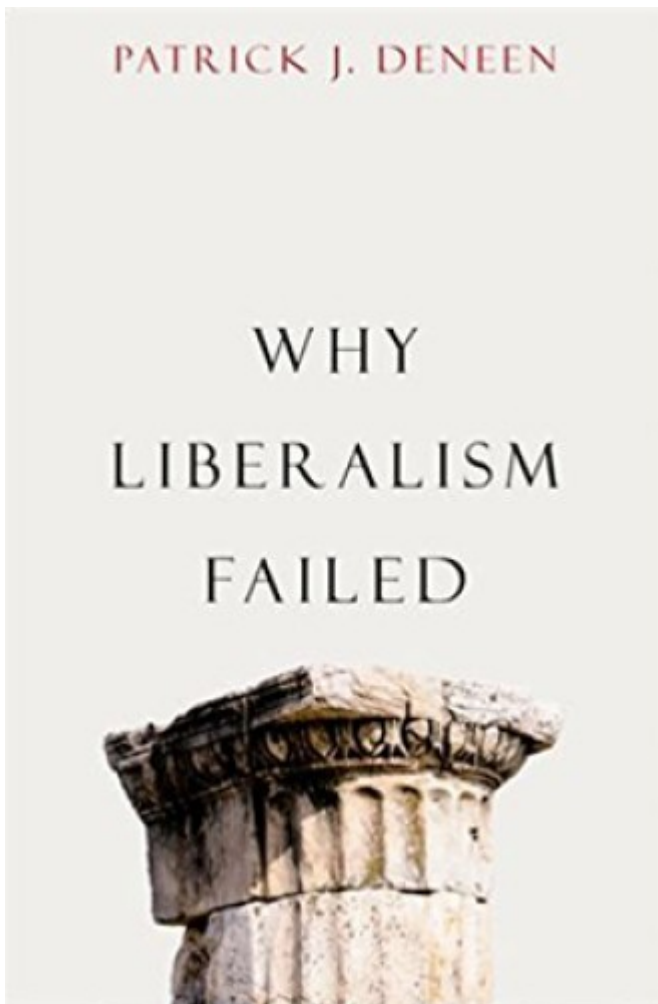


Democrats and Republicans both follow liberalism's playbook

Both parties advocate freeing individuals to pursue self-interested goals, argues Patrick Deneen. This has fractured society.

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Why Liberalism Failed

By Patrick J. Deneen

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When congressional Republicans and the Trump administration enacted their tax bill, they were following in the steps of previous Republican administrations, particularly those of George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan, in which tax cuts accompanied reductions in social programs. When Democrats are in power, pretty much the opposite occurs: taxes go up, as does federal spending on the social safety net and related programs.

Despite the apparent dissimilarity between the political parties, Notre Dame political scientist Patrick Deneen argues that today's liberals and conservatives aren't really so different. Both are guided by an ideological liberalism "premised upon the fiction of radically autonomous individuals." These individuals consent to a social contract and government whose sole purpose is to secure individual rights. In other words, there is no such thing, inherently, as society or social bonds. There are only individuals.

In this liberalism, liberty means license to do as you please. "The resulting liberal polity," Deneen writes,

fosters a liberal society—one that commends self-interest, the unleashed ambition of individuals, an emphasis on private pursuits over a concern for public weal, and an acquired ability to maintain psychic distance from any other humans, including to reconsider any relationships that constitute a fundamental limitation on our personal liberty.

Republicans and Democrats operate from the same ideological playbook. The difference is that Republicans ("classical liberals") are content to let the invisible hand of the market impose whatever direction is to be had as self-interested individuals fight it out, while Democrats ("progressive liberals") want to use the government to level the playing field so that self-interested individuals might compete more fairly. Both assume that freeing individuals of constraint to pursue their own self-interest is the name of the game. In this sense, Deneen writes, liberalism acts "as a solvent upon all social bonds" and leaves us with a fractured, unsustainable society. Liberalism has failed because it has succeeded.

It offers freedom but without giving people a larger goal or purpose; this is the liberalism that gave us the recession of 2008, climate change, and an epidemic of

gun violence, as Deneen sees it.

Is Deneen right about the dangers of liberalism? Yes and no. There is a way in which contemporary conservatives and liberals are both selling the same product: the idea of the liberated individual freed from tradition, obligation, and authority. This ethos is pervasive in contemporary culture. Colleges and universities claim that their main task is “to teach students to think for themselves.” Movies and television endlessly repeat the story of the individual who must become his or her true self, leaving behind family, faith, and community. Businesses claim to help each customer meet his or her own goals.

But Deneen overstates his case. While it may be true (as the authors of *Habits of the Heart* argued a generation ago) that our moral languages have grown thin and become dominated by a therapeutic vocabulary, people do not generally behave as if we live in a Hobbesian state of nature. Family, community, faith, and some sense of common decency appear to figure largely in many American lives. True, such loyalties and bonds are often under severe pressure and can be difficult to sustain. But that is not solely the result of philosophical liberalism. Other trends and forces play a part as well: global economies, technology, shifting demographics, and social change so rapid that it often runs ahead of the capacity of existing institutions to respond.

Yet, Deneen’s argument might give a needed jolt to religious leaders, educators, and politicians. It might embolden them to make a stronger case for the importance of community, civic bonds, and enduring relationships as well as the practices and values upon which these bonds depend. We are up against something real in ideological liberalism’s social solvent. To engage in serious cultural critique and to offer compelling alternatives will require more intentionality than many religious congregations have exhibited.

Deneen’s work also raises the possibility of moving beyond the current blue- versus-red framing of America, which seems to have us locked in a dysfunctional polarization. Although Deneen doubts the capacity of the market to order our lives, he is no more sanguine about big government’s capacity to do so. In showing that radical individualism is in the water we drink and the air we breathe, Deneen may spur us to imagine a third way, an alternative that is neither “liberal” nor “conservative,” but more than either.