



INDIVIDUALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

**A TRANSFORMATION
IN AMERICAN POLITICAL
THOUGHT** **STEPHANIE M. WALLS**

B L O O M S B U R Y

Individualism in the United States

A transformation in American
political thought

STEPHANIE M. WALLS

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PREFACE

Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present.

GEORGE WASHINGTON

It is with this one rule in mind that we embark on a study of the individual in the United States. We are not the first to the party, and we surely will not be the last. Our study of individualism will be with reference, and in deference, to those who have come before, but what we will accomplish in these pages will be unique in its design and approach. The topic of individualism is one of great political and social relevance to all, yet its discussion is scattered far and wide, in bits here and there, and almost always presented in a way that is only intellectually accessible to some. These pages are written and designed for the student of political science of any age, situation, or political orientation. Each chapter tells the story of a concept that has shaped our country and our way of life. Individualism is dynamic, and the chapters herein will explain that dynamism and show the ways it has changed and continues to change. The inspiration for this story began with observations made by a historian 100 years ago. Charles Merriam's *American Political Ideals* planted the seeds for the framework I am presenting here.

When I first began to seriously contemplate the concept of individualism over 15 years ago as a college undergraduate, I was struck by its apparent inconsistency with democracy and several questions immediately came to mind: What does individualism really mean? Can one ever be truly and completely individualistic in thought and deed? What about community and society? Do the individual rights of the founding era mean the same thing that individualism means to people in the United States today? Does a commitment to individualism automatically lead to disengagement with others? If so, what does this mean for the viability of our democracy? I soon realized that it would take years to sort all of these things out. Only years after that would I realize that the journey would never truly be complete. However, thinking about these ideas, understanding the American fascination with the individual, and proposing a framework for how this concept has changed has given me many opportunities to try.

The purpose of this text is to bring individualism to the classroom, the coffee shop, the dinner table, and to make the topic come alive for those who do not yet know how important it is. Each chapter comes complete with discussion questions and suggested readings to aid in understanding the material. These tools will prove invaluable for contemplating and comprehending the ideas contained here. Discussion and application is vital to this pursuit, and it is my hope that this book will facilitate a worthwhile journey into this very important American ideal.

There has been much worthwhile scholarship devoted to the topic of individualism, and my goal herein is to present these various perspectives in a new way and bring them all together using my own argument as to how individualism has changed over time. I am certainly not the first one to suggest that individualism has changed since the founding, but I am bringing something new to the discussion through the way I characterize the transformation of the concept. In earlier drafts of this book, I had referred to the change in individualism as an "evolution," which one of my reviewers thought was a mischaracterization of my argument. Indeed, the reviewer was correct. An evolution could suggest an improvement, and my conception of the changes that have occurred do not reflect an improvement at all. In fact, I believe that individualism has suffered a progressive deterioration, which has the ability to impact the very viability of American democracy now and in the future. With this in mind, know that this text is not just a historical perspective. It is a combination of the past and present so that we as American citizens might best know how to proceed into the future with the health of our society and government in mind. I believe that by looking to the past and understanding the original conception of individualism in the United States, we will realize that we hold the answers to our own problems.

There is some disagreement on this topic, but I believe that a healthy representative democracy requires an active citizenry: the more active, the better (not necessarily easier, but qualitatively better). The government must be responsive to the people, but understandably, it can reflect the will of only those who participate. Robert Putnam, in his influential work *Bowling Alone*, presents data to show how political activity has suffered a decline over the last several decades. I believe that the political process begins long before we step into the voting booth, and so the decrease in community participation that Putnam documents is of great concern to me as well. Many scholars have presented their explanation for why this decline has taken place, and I think that there is merit to these various explanations. The purpose of my book is not to refute these explanations. Rather, my objective is to provide the connections that bring all these explanations together under the umbrella of individualism. All the outwardly observable behaviors that serve to demonstrate and exacerbate the issue of disengagement are rooted in an internal ideological dilemma based on individualism.

In modern times, far too many people believe that the path to freedom is made clear by removing connections, obligations, and associations. We, as a people, have been taught these lessons for well over a century, but these lessons are as misguided as they are damaging for us as individuals and as a society. What many do not realize is that the lesson we have learned is not based on the political wisdom and goals of our Founding Fathers. The individualism that influences our attitudes today is the result of a great transformation and misapplication of the political individualism of the founding era. Though the term did not yet exist, the ideas of political individualism were of great importance to the Founders. The protection and advancement of the individual was something that made the American experiment unique and noteworthy, and it was a key component in creating the balance necessary between the government and the people, among the branches of government, and among the citizens themselves.

The irony of this transformation is that individualism has been changed in such a way that this founding concept has now become the main threat to the viability of our democracy. Through a complete misunderstanding and mangling of the concept, some politicians today are actually calling for a return to the will of the Founders by reducing the role of the government to nil and encouraging people to go off the grid and take up arms against the government and one another. In reality, this is a great departure from what the Founders wanted. I completely agree that the United States would benefit from going back to the understanding of individualism that the Americans of the founding era had, but I (and they) mean something quite different from the individualism we see today.

This text is divided into three sections: The background of individualism, the different ways that individualism has manifested itself (the “ideals”), and the implications of the transformation of individualism. Part 1 contains an introduction to the concept of individualism and how it fits in with other related concepts, an introduction to and discussion of the foundational political theory that laid the groundwork for the development of this concept, and a presentation and discussion of the various perspectives on life in colonial America. Part 2 contains the transformation of individualism I have developed. Individualism in the United States has varied greatly since the founding, and its current form deserves great understanding and close scrutiny to determine its compatibility with American democracy. To help guide and shape our study of American individualism, we will proceed with a basic typology proposed by Charles Merriam 100 years ago and build on it for our purposes.

In his book, *American Political Ideals*, Merriam discusses the changing nature of individualism in the United States. He speaks of a founding era political individualism and then an economic and social individualism that he believes developed in the 1800s. I will build on these categories and use his suggested typology to flesh out an explanation of exactly how individualism has functioned in the United States since the founding. I do not necessarily

agree with Merriam's assessment of Early Americans, but I believe that his understanding of American individualism as a changing concept is correct. The explanation of individualism's transformation over time provides an invaluable tool for understanding this concept and its implications for democracy in the present and future.

The three main phases in the transformation of individualism will be classified in terms of "ideals": individualism as a political ideal, an economic ideal, and a social ideal. The literature documents the view of individualism as a political ideal and then as an economic ideal. The third category concerns individualism as a social ideal, and I believe that this is the phase Americans transitioned into during the second half of the twentieth century. Each individualism "ideal" has its implications for democracy, and I will address the implications of each phase. I have changed Merriam's "industrial individualism" into economic individualism, but use his rough model to build up to my definition of "social individualism."

This framework, and the historical context in which it is placed, will provide us with the means to understand the complicated and important matter of individualism and the challenges it presents for Americans today. In Figure 1.1, political individualism, economic individualism, and social individualism are illustrated through a determination of their foundations. Each type of individualism is inherently different from the one before it, because its foundational blocks change with each transformation. My contention is that the social individualism of modern times is structurally different from both political and economic individualism. In Chapter 4, we will examine political individualism, and learn that it was based on a strong foundation of individual freedom and societal bonds. The individual freedom of this era was built on individual choice and individual opportunity, which existed for many with a structured societal network. These societal bonds served as the rest of the foundation that political individualism rested upon. The societal bonds comprised obligation to others, social stability and security, and the exercise of individual self-restraint. In Chapter 5, we will learn about the transformation of political individualism into economic individualism. The transformation resulted in an internal change in the concept of individualism. Economic individualism also rested on components of individual freedom and societal bonds, but as one can see, the role of societal bonds changes and weakens, in turn compromising the structure. Its foundation changes to economic exchange and dependency (which introduces instability and insecurity) and the presence of class divisions. In Chapter 6, we will explore the third, and currently dominant, form of individualism: social individualism. With this last transformation, the societal bonds that were compromised under economic individualism fail completely. Social individualism now rests on a foundation that wholly comprises individual freedom, but those foundational blocks have now changed. Instead of resting on the assumptions and reality of individual

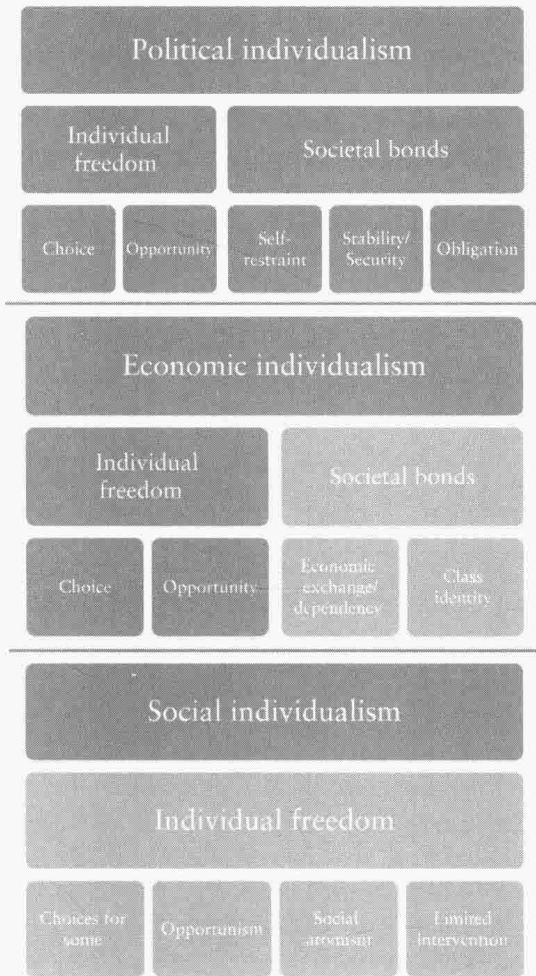


FIGURE 1.1 *The transformation of individualism.*

choice and freedom, social individualism rests on the need for choice and opportunity that is not realized by all. In addition, it is supported by the equally weak blocks of social isolation and limited intervention. If the past is any indicator, it would seem that freedom resting on such an unstable foundation will likely collapse. When it does, the future of individualism becomes quite uncertain.

Finally, in Part 3, I deal with the implications of this transformation through an explanation of current American individualism and the ways in which I believe individualism can be drawn closer to its roots.

The text herein does not represent an exhaustive review of the literature on individualism, though the suggested readings included at the end of each chapter provide the engaged reader the opportunity to delve into many other sources of information on this topic. I am a political scientist, but

this journey through individualism in the literature has taken me through a number of disciplines, including history, economics, psychology, and sociology. The gracious reader will humor me as I attempt to navigate these waters and create a cross-disciplinary explanation of individualism. This book represents my best attempt to explain what has happened to this vital feature of American political ideology, and one that will hopefully illuminate a path back to a time when the individual was truly protected and his or her freedom genuinely valued.

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PART ONE

The background

While the topic of individualism may seem straightforward, it is actually quite complex in its history, its meaning, and its application. The conclusion one arrives at about individualism derives in large part from one's perception of the history of the individual, how the individual has been established and defended in life and in the literature, and how one is able to reconcile the individual with the world around him. Thus, my conclusion is based on my perception of all of these issues. Therefore, it is critical to give the reader a tour of the landscape as I see it so that we may speak the same language in the chapters ahead. In order to do this, we will look at the background of individualism from a number of angles. In Chapter 1, I introduce the concept of individualism and ideology, and differentiate these concepts from others that are closely related and sometimes confusing. Then, in Chapter 2, I establish some of the political theories that had a great impact on the American Founding Fathers when creating the political system we have in the United States. Finally, Chapter 3 contains a historical overview of the colonial era and what life was like for the individual during this time. This chapter is intended to establish how hospitable an environment the early United States was for the concept for individualism. These first three chapters lay the groundwork for the typology and transformation of individualism I will explain in Part 2.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to individualism

Chapter summary

The individual, individuality, and individualism are independent concepts, though the individual and individualism are far more linked than individuality and individualism. We understand individuality to mean the difference between one person and a group of people with regard to personal preferences and characteristics, that is, one person is entitled to be distinctive from the group. We understand individualism to mean a “theory of society” in which the well-being of individuals is an always prominent, usually primary, and often the only politically relevant value; and the value of things is largely consequent to their value for human individuals. This approach opens up a world of possibilities and problems, as it is uncertain what happens to individualism if individuals choose to value the group. Matters are further complicated when one considers the role of the state in promoting or restricting individual rights. While individualism has been conceptualized in many ways, the terms “negative” and “positive” aptly cover these variations and categorize them on the basis of intervention or nonintervention as a way of preserving the individual. These conceptions, together with a historical overview and three-pronged ideal-based framework, will aid the reader in understanding individualism in the United States.

Chapter objectives

- 1 To become acquainted with the concept of individualism and understand how it relates to other “individual” words such as individuality.

- 2 To begin consideration of the tensions within individualism and the competing schools of thought with regard to the individual.
- 3 To explore ways in which the individual relates to society and the state.

The scholarship on individualism is as diverse and varying as the individuals who have created it. An acceptance of individuality and a belief in its promotion leads one to expect and desire this variance of thought, though it makes our job as student and scholar far more difficult. The topic of individualism has been evaluated through a number of lenses by members of varying disciplines, including psychology, sociology, philosophy,¹ and political science. Despite this variance, one theme is common: the concept of the individual self.

The individual self refers to the way each person identifies and defines himself or herself that is distinct from his or her membership in any group.² The acknowledgment that this self exists, as opposed to the collective or social self, is significant to establishing individualism as a viable social theory.³ We have to believe in the ability of an individual to exist, at least in theory, as an entity distinct from other individuals, groups, and institutions in his or her society in order to buy into individualism. Beyond that, we need not agree on much, and scholars have found many ways to disagree on how important this distinction is to individuals and how that self-perception affects individual expectations of the state and society.

For instance, what do we expect of the relationships among and between citizens? What is the natural tendency here? Are we naturally compassionate? Are we naturally selfish? What is in our own best interest? These answers are not nearly as clear cut, even among those who would agree that individual primacy is a natural condition.

The political discussion requires us to consider the individual in concert with others, and working toward the creation and maintenance of a functional state. We must determine what the needs of the individual are in this regard, and how best to meet those needs in the context of the society we live in. For example, does the ideal political system have a citizenry that serves its government or a government that serves its citizenry? Are individuals intelligent and reasonable enough to retain some inborn desire to control themselves and their destiny? Or are there others who are more capable of making these choices for them?⁴

From an American perspective, some things are clear regarding the relationship between the people and the state. American individualism promotes and protects the individual's rights and abilities to control his or her own destiny free of unreasonable governmental intervention.⁵ It can also be consistent with the creation of a government, given that such a government reflects and protects those individual desires. Thomas Jefferson's Lockean defense of revolution, which he documents in the Declaration of Independence, together with the Constitution's commitment to a separation