

# Individualism Versus Collectivism And The Troubles Of Conformity

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## ABSTRACT

A healthy balance of individualism and collectivism, with heed to educated conformity, is needed to have a well-functioning, just, and representative government. Too much individualism creates disunity with less focus on government and community, leading to polarization. Excessive conformity/collectivism destroys the unique character of people and communities, destroys other perspectives, and freedom of thought. A balance between the two can be beneficial for social, cultural, economic, and political growth. Synchrony is essential for a non-corrupt society, as too much of either ideology produces adverse effects.

## The Theoretical Basis

“Individualism vs. Collectivism: Our Future, Our Choice” is an essay published in *The Objective Standard*, an Objectivist political philosophy journal, and written by Craig Biddle, co-founder and editor in chief of the journal. Individualism is the belief that an individual has the right to live with liberty and has freedom to choose. Collectivism is the belief that a person belongs, and is inherently a part of a larger collective; this person lacks rights, and serves to better the collective. In regards to the ideologies of individualism and collectivism in society, Biddle states, “The collectivist notion of morality is patently evil and demonstrably false. The good of the community logically cannot take priority over that of the individual. The reason moral concepts such as ‘good’ and ‘should’ are necessary in the first place is that individuals exist and need principled guidance in order to sustain and further their lives.” Furthermore, governments should be based on individualistic principles as the wellbeing of individuals should have priority over the wellbeing of the collective. Biddle forwards this notion; “government does only one thing and does it well—protects the rights of all individuals equally.” From Biddle’s perspective, individualism should be protected first and foremost. The philosophy of Objectivism would state that collectivism should not hinder one’s individual rights and liberties.

## Fractional Factions

“Federalist Paper No. 10,” written by James Madison, is a politically significant piece of American thought. Madison believed factions to be an inevitable part of society; however, they are dangerous because a faction can drag a nation apart. Factions, in this sense, are groups of collectivism amongst a larger society. Madison writes, “The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society.” “The inference to which we are brought is, that the causes of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its effects.” The two ways to remove the causes of factions Madison proposed are by hindering liberty or by programming citizens to think alike, which removes liberty. Removing the causes of factions is unrealistic and undesirable. Firstly, it destroys political life. Secondly, protection of liberty should be the first priority of the government; liberty allows society to prosper in

many aspects. Without liberty, society and the government would be stuck. A diversity of opinions is inevitable. In a democracy everyone has a voice and is their own representative. In a republic, coalitions must form and compromise. There are less opinions deciding, and fewer voices lead to less factions. This creates a more efficient and a more structured approach to governing. The bigger the republic, the more parties, meaning a majority faction is less likely. Federalist Paper No. 10 believes in a large republic; each of the factions would be a minority; therefore, there would be no majority faction to oppress the minority factions.

## **A Combustible Fuel Called Nationalism**

*Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* is a high school world history textbook published by McGraw Hill, an educational publishing company. Nationalism is fueled and fashioned by collectivism. Ultrationalism is a major and key characteristic of fascism. This correlation between collectivism and fascism reveals the danger of a government that has too much power based on collectivism. History holds a diversity of empirical evidence of this occurrence. The end of the Great War stimulated a movement to support the wellbeing of societies more than individualism. In the beginning of the 1900s, there was a significant movement toward collectivism and nationalism in countries including Germany, Russia, Italy, U.S, and Mexico. Fascism attracted millions of followers in the 1920s and 1930s. It became most popular in the middle classes and in the rural areas. These people generally radicalized because of economic and social issues. Fascist movements allude to the revival of a national tradition or ideals. Fascism also includes ultra-nationalism, ethnocentrism and militarism. It is also characterized by strong-man leaders such as Hitler, Mussolini, or Stalin. Fascists emphasize that the leader embodies the state. They are contrary to liberal democracy, which promotes the rights of individuals and their rights of consent. Fascism is also usually motivated by the fear of communism and socialism. Chauvinism is also emphasized, which is placing one's own nationalism over all others. Xenophobia and ethnocentrism are also common characteristics of fascism.

## **A Collective Dream Is the Catalyst for Collective Action**

Hank De Zutter was a respected journalist for the Chicago Daily News for nearly fifty years and also taught journalism in a number of Chicago area colleges. In his 1995 article "What Makes Obama Run?" he analyzes President Obama's observed need for collectivism in political and social practice. Collectivism is essential for progress. Complete individualism is chaos. In this source, President Obama says "Individual actions, individual dreams, are not sufficient. We must unite in collective action, build collective institutions and organizations" (qtd. in De Zutter). To forward political or social movements, to have a functioning government, collectivism is essential. Collectivism, rightfully used, can promote the individual and individual rights through better, more inclusive government. Civic activism, in particular, holds great power in collectivism. Historically, movements have depended on the togetherness of social groups and their collective action. Obama heeds collectivism as a key characteristic to his success as a politician and activist.

## **Does Individualism Engender Greater Wealth?**

Andreas P. Kyriacou is a researcher and professor of economics. In his article "Individualism–Collectivism, Governance and Economic Development," which appeared in the *European Journal of Political Economy*, he emphasizes that the degree to which a society prefers individualism or collectivism can have a direct and measurable impact on the society's economic growth. The author's thesis is that individualistic societies do better because they put a premium on individual control and autonomy. He explains the reason is because "empirical evidence is provided suggesting that insofar as individualism affects economic development it does so because it promotes good governance." The article notes that personal control and autonomy are the most important aspects in an individualistic society. A collectivist society underscores the group cohesion and stresses mutual obligations. This, the author argues, can

pressure the redistribution of wealth among society members, which will affect the long-term economic growth of the society.

## **A Cautionary Tale of Group Think**

From another perspective, in “The cultural evolutionary trade-off of ritualistic synchrony,” from *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, by Michele J. Gefland, Nava Calouri, Joshua Conrad Jackson, and Morgan K. Taylor, “synchrony rituals” were shown to promote harmonization, cooperation, and togetherness. Some argue that synchrony rituals enable community cohesion and widespread community cooperation. Synchrony rituals can also have an anti-social effect by creating group conflict, groupthink, and unquestioning obedience. Groupthink can be harmful in that it reduces points of view and decreases levels of ingenuity and creativity, which can be negative byproducts of becoming more collectivist.

## **Measured Collectivism May Elicit Economic Growth**

While previous examples have shown collectivism’s dangers, a right amount of collectivism can aid the development and progress of societies as well. *World History: Modern (1200 - Present)*, an Advanced Placement high school textbook, provides instances in U.S. history in which collectivism had positive impacts. For example, a collective movement was the U.S. labor rights movement pushing unions to advocate for workers’ rights instead of allowing businesses to abuse people by forcing them to work in harmful conditions or work for non-living wages. Labor unions improved health conditions, and gave workers greater say in management. This was a landmark in U.S. history. Without a healthy amount of collectivism, unions and actions that promote the wellbeing of individuals would not succeed.

## **The Undercurrent of Political Conformity**

Ricardo Perez-Truglia is a UC-Berkeley professor and author of the academic paper “Political Conformity: Event-Study Evidence From the United States.” In this study, Perez-Truglia found “individuals are more politically active in more like-minded social environments... We find that conformity effects are economically significant. Additionally, we conduct counterfactual analysis that shows that these effects are important for understanding geographic polarization.” Political conformity can contribute to higher financial activity/donations to political causes. The same political conformity promotes dichotomization based upon location, meaning close-in proximity communities will grow to be more like-minded and polarized. This driven polarization incites greater activity from the majority party in the region, but deters the minority party from taking part in politically driven actions. This, in turn, generates higher polarization and conformity, engendering a democratically unstable cycle.

## **Aggressive Political Conformity Can Drown Democracy**

American University professor Elizabeth Suhay is the author of “Explaining Group Influence: The Role of Identity and Emotion in Political Conformity and Polarization.” She explains how political conformity and collectivism can impair individualism and independent thought. Suhay adds to this nuance, “Conformity generates peer approval and leads to personal pride. Deviance generates disapproval and causes embarrassment or shame. These emotional reactions color an individual's political perspectives, typically generating conformity.” Because of the inherent effects of social pressure and collectivism, people are often seen conforming to the majority party, pushing aside their self-thought opinions and perspectives. This can be threatening to a democratic society because inherent social dynamics from collectivism can dismiss individualism and self-promotion.

## The Dichotomy of Diverse Views in a Collective Outcome

Relatedly, *The Holdout* by American painter Norman Rockwell, highlights the point that for a jury to fulfill its mandate, full consensus needs to be met. However, people can observe the same facts but come to a different conclusion based on their own lens of life experience. They can also express their ideas differently because of their unique perspectives, background, and status in society. A jury is a basic component of democratic government and is essential for a fair trial by peers. Further, working together in juries can be great examples of beneficial, fair, and symbiotic relationships, where each individual's views are all equally weighted. Juries also reflect the delicate balance between collectivism and individualism in society. Collectivism is needed to make a decision; however, individualism is demonstrated as each has the full right to maintain his or her views regardless of what the majority thinks. If consensus is not met, the jury fails.

## Horizontal Versus Vertical Collectivism

Xiang Yao, the author of "The Role of Individualism-Collectivism in the Individual Creative Process," has a Ph.D. in public administration. In this research article, Yao found that "Partial correlation results showed that both horizontal individualism and horizontal collectivism have positive influences on idea generation, but vertical collectivism had a positive impact on idea implementation." In addition, "vertical" or unequal individualism abated potential extremism from said environmental orientations. To elaborate, in an environment where all people are held in equal standing, creativity and the creation of ideas prosper. While in an environment of unequal standing and ranging status, ideas are better implemented. Thus, inequality and equality, as well as individualism and collectivism, can be beneficial in certain conditions in a democratic society.

## Individualism or Just Plain Contrarian

Peter Beinart is an American journalist and political commentator. In his article for *The Atlantic*, "Measles as Metaphor," Beinart, through the wave of anti-vaccination and the historical context of the measles virus, reveals the significant "...influence of historical amnesia and individualism on diminished trust in the government." Following the 1960s, a greater trend in the US towards self-thought, individualism, and self-determinism led to decreased vaccination rates and a lowered confidence in government, which subsequently put the nation's public health at risk. Concurrently, greater and misplaced confidence was placed on individuals. A widespread decline of confidence in government, simply put, leads to a disrupted and unstable democracy.

## How the Emphasis Differs

"Individualism, Innovation, and Long-run Growth" is an academic paper published by the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. The authors, Yuriy Gorodnichenko and Gerard Roland, found "individualism emphasizes personal freedom and achievement. Individualist culture, therefore, awards social status to personal accomplishments such as important discoveries, innovations, or great artistic achievements." Individualism in societies plays a significant role in the promotion of scientific findings, innovative feats, and economic progress. Individualistic societies can be synonymous and often a characteristic of a capitalist society. Albeit, societies focused on individualism often find difficulty with collective actions, and discourage much conformity.

## Coexistence of Both to Sustain Democracy

Synchrony of systematically pushed individualism and willing collectivism have an indispensable role in achieving a thriving democracy. Edified conformity is also a part of a working democracy. This pronounced collectivism should not obstruct or impede individualism, rather it should promote the wellbeing of the individual. Too much collectivism in society can lead to ultranationalism and even fascism. The proper amount of collectivism is needed for civic activism and any successful political movement. An emphasis on individual rights and liberties, however, is better for overall economic growth, but conformity in society can also stimulate political economic activity, such as fundraising. Education on the importance of this difficult balance and having systems in place to bring and maintain symbiosis can significantly help a society develop into a healthy, equitable, and just democracy.

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