A New Platform for the Free Democrats (FDP) (October 25–27, 1971)

Abstract

The Free Democrats' political renewal in the 1960s reached a preliminary highpoint with the Thirty-Seven Freiburg Theses, which called for a liberal social policy and "social capitalism" as party objectives, thereby signaling a shift away from conservative social policies and traditional neoliberal economic policies.

Source

The Freiburg Theses of the FDP

Introduction: Liberal Social Policy
Preface

Liberalism was and is the bearer and heir of the democratic revolutions that started at the end of the 18th century in America and France and were based on the idea of human freedom and dignity.

The liberal tradition emerged from these bourgeois revolutions and became rooted in the later movements to reform the state. It grew out of the bourgeois Enlightenment as an intellectual countermovement to the absolutism and mercantilism of the monarchic state and feudal society and has had a two-fold objective from the very beginning.

It aims for a democratization of the state, creating, at first with the third estate and most recently with the fourth, the right to vote and run for office for all citizens of the state, and thus the right for the greatest possible and equal participation and codetermination in the organization and activities of the state.

At the same time, it aimed in both bourgeois revolutions for a liberalization through the constitutional guarantee of inviolable civil liberties and of the human rights of citizens vis-à-vis the state. Free development of the personality, equal status before the law, freedom of opinion and of the press, freedom of religion and freedom of assembly, but also the right to life and health, and so on, are the great democratic achievements of this liberalization of the state.

[…]

This new phase of democratization and liberalization, in the original and not in today's often misused sense of these words, arises from a new understanding of freedom and liberty that opens up modern liberalism to the new political dimension of a liberalism that is no longer merely democratic but also social.

For modern liberalism, as first conceived by John Stuart Mill in England and Friedrich Naumann in Germany, freedom no longer means the freedom of an autonomous individual derived from society and diametrically opposed to the state, but the freedom of every autonomous and social individual—who is always at once an individual and social being—as he or she truly lives in state and society.

This kind of social liberalism thus understands the freedom and happiness of a person not merely as a matter of legally guaranteed liberties and human rights but of socially fulfilled liberties and rights. What

matters are liberties and rights not only as mere formal guarantees for a citizen vis-à-vis the state but as social opportunities in the everyday reality of society. As in the area of education policy, social liberalism in the area of social policy advocates for the expansion of liberal civil liberties and human rights through social rights of participation and codetermination [*Mitbestimmung*], no longer just in the constitutional organization of the state, but in the organization of society based on the division of labor.

Liberality and democracy, also in the sphere of society as previously in the sphere of the state, are derived from the same revolutionary idea of human dignity and self-determination that is the basis of all transformation from the un-free authoritarian state to a liberal state under the rule of law. This leads to a fundamental change from the former, un-free estates-based or class-based state to a liberal welfare state.

The following theses on liberal social policy sketch out the political practice that will manifest this new spirit of democratizing society also in the area of social policy, taking postulates of principle and rendering them as precise theories of a future liberal social policy. In our party, this spirit made its way first and foremost in the area of education policy, in the struggle for equal education and professional opportunities for all citizens: for a civic right to education. […]

Thesis 1: Liberalism stands up for human dignity through self-determination.

It gives precedence to the person over the institution.

It believes in the greatest possible freedom for the individual and in upholding human dignity in every existing or changing political and social situation.

The permanent purpose of classical as well as modern liberalism continues to lie in asserting the human dignity and self-determination of the individual in the state and before the law, in the economy and in society, against the destruction of the individual through heteronomy and through pressure to adapt from the political and social institutions.

The supreme goals of liberal social policy are therefore to preserve and develop the individuality of personal existence and the plurality of human coexistence.

[…]

Thesis 2: Liberalism takes a stand for progress through reason. It supports liberating the individual from a state of immaturity and dependence.

It believes in countering ignorance with knowledge and in breaking down prejudice, to enable people to speak for themselves, and to abolish dependence.

Intellectual freedom and the principles of tolerance and competition are the initial prerequisites for liberal social policies that aim to support such an emancipation of individuals and thus the evolution of humanity.

Only on this basis is a free and open society possible, in which truth and justice are not simply passed down and accepted as standard answers, but rather will continually be presented and discussed as new questions to be answered in the face of changing conditions.

[…]

Thesis 3: Liberalism demands democratization of the society.

Based on the principle that “we all make up the society,” liberalism strives to democratize society

through the greatest possible and equal participation by all in efforts to satisfy individual needs, as made possible through the division of labor, and to develop personal abilities. It favors a corresponding codetermination in exercising rule in society that is needed in organizing processes on the basis of the division of labor.

Based on the principle that "society cannot do everything," liberalism strives at the same time within a liberal welfare state for the liberalization of society by means of limited rule—through separation of powers, legally bound authority, guaranteed basic rights, and protection of minorities—by people over people in the division-of-labor-based organization of our society.

[…]

Thesis 4: Liberalism demands the reform of capitalism.

The historical achievement of liberalism was to free the individual for the development of modern industrial society. Supported by competition and individual motivation, capitalism led to great economic success but also to social injustice. Liberal reform of capitalism strives to eliminate the imbalances of advantages and the amassing of economic power that follow from the accumulation of money and property, and the concentration of the ownership of the means of production in the hands of very few. It therefore reconciles the laws of a private economy with the goals of a liberal society. It also serves to increase the productivity and humanity of such an economic and social system, which is based on the private initiative of economic citizens and private ownership of the means of production.

[…]

Source: Die Freiburger Thesen der FDP; reprinted in Wolfram Bickerich, ed., *Bilanz der sozialliberalen Koalition*. Documentation: Helmut Pape. Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1982, pp. 190–201.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: A New Platform for the Free Democrats (FDP) (October 25–27, 1971), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-903> [September 13, 2026].