

Dunman High School
H1 General Paper
Governments – Part 2: Individual Freedom vs Government Regulation [T2W1]

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Organisation of these notes:

- A. **Key terms** often used in debates about individual freedom and government regulation
- B. **Arguments for and against** individual freedom and government regulation
 - 1. How can we justify **individual freedom** from government control?
 - 2. How can we argue for some **government control** over individuals' lives and actions?
 - 3. How can we **reconcile these perspectives**, resolving the tension between individuals and governments?
- C. **Conclusion:** the importance of identity in debates on individual freedom vs government regulation
- D. **A-Level exam questions related to governments**, grouped into sub-topics, from 2004 to 2023

A. Key terms often used in debates about individual freedom and government regulation

Individual: A person capable of having their own thoughts and making their own choices, including the choices of how to live their life and which groups to identify with.

Community: A group whose members share a common trait that gives members a sense of belonging, eg. the Christian community, the LGBT community, the elderly community, etc.

Society: A collection of multiple communities existing together as a country, eg. the Singapore society, American society, etc.

Freedom/Liberty: There are two kinds of freedom:

- Freedom to do an action you desire: being able and allowed and empowered to do that desired action (eg. freedom to express oneself, freedom to marry); this is sometimes called 'positive liberty'.
- Freedom from something undesirable: being safe and protected against that undesirable thing, not having it threaten or constrain or interfere with one's life (eg. freedom from oppression, freedom from harm, freedom from discrimination); this is sometimes called 'negative liberty'.

Government regulation:

- The government's use of laws or rules to constrain and/or direct actions of people or organisations.
- Those laws or rules are called 'regulations' (plural). There are different kinds of regulations:
 - (i) banning ("you must not do this")
 - (ii) mandating ("you must do this")
 - (iii) drawing boundaries ("you can do this, but only within these limits")
 - (iv) setting conditions ("you can do this, but only after meeting these requirements")
 - (v) imposing costs ("you can do this, but must pay more for it")
 - (vi) offering incentives ("you don't have to do this, but if you do, you'll be rewarded")

The first two are stricter, whereas the latter four options may offer more flexibility.

Individualism:

- This is the belief that individuals' preferences and rights should be valued and prioritised, and not sacrificed in favour of a larger collective. The opposite of collectivism.
- This is also the trend of people seeing themselves more as individuals than as members of a larger community or society.

Social liberalism: This is the belief that individuals should each have the freedom to determine their own lifestyles and identities, and not be pressured by the government or society to conform to traditional and conventional lifestyles and identities.

Economic liberalism / Neoliberalism: This is the belief that the government should try not to control the economic activities of consumers and businesses, and should instead let consumers, businesses and free-market forces determine the economy.

Classical liberalism: This is the combination of social liberalism plus economic liberalism, i.e. the belief that individuals should have freedom to determine their own lifestyles and economic activities.

Libertarianism: This is a more radical version of classical liberalism, advocating that governments should be small and intervene as little as possible in people's lives and the economy, and individuals and businesses should have as much freedom as possible.

Social conservatism: This is the belief that people should preserve and conform to traditional culture. Such a culture often includes closely identifying with one's traditional family, ethnic community and religious community; adhering to a lifestyle based on family, religion and avoiding individual indulgence; and respectfully following authority figures such as family elders, religious leaders and political leaders. This is the opposite of social liberalism.

Economic interventionism: This is the belief that the government should intervene in the economy. This may be done to alleviate inequality, protect vulnerable members of society, alleviate harm to society, grow the economy, and/or strengthen the country. This is the opposite of economic liberalism.

Collectivism: This is the belief that the larger collective (a community or society) should be valued and prioritised, and not sacrificed in favour of individual interests. This is the opposite of individualism.

Communitarianism: This is the belief that individuals should be seen as connected to communities, and not as separate. Communitarians believe that belonging in a community gives meaning to an individual's life, and hence the good life involves strong communities, not just individual freedom.

Note on the Singapore government's alignment with these values:

In terms of social values, Singapore's government generally promotes social conservatism. But over the decades it has been gradually allowing more individual liberty.

The Singapore government also tries to be pragmatic: it recognises that the ideal of social conservatism cannot be imposed totally on everyone, because in reality there will be individual Singaporeans who do not believe in conservative ideals, and hence non-traditional lifestyles and identities must be accepted to some extent.

In terms of the economy, Singapore's government tries to strike a balance between economic interventionism and economic liberalism, but arguably leans towards economic interventionism.

In general, Singapore's government tends to favour collectivism over individualism.

B. Arguments for and against individual freedom and government regulation

1. How can we **justify individual freedom** from government control?
2. How can we **argue for some government control** over individuals' lives and actions?
3. How may we **reconcile these perspectives**, resolving the tension between individuals and governments?

1. Justifying individual freedom	2. Justifying government control
<p>1a. Giving individuals freedom is a way of respecting them as <u>mentally capable</u> adults.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- When individuals reach the age of adulthood, the law grants them freedom to do many things that they were restricted from doing as children and minors, even things that are potentially harmful. This freedom is a sign that society recognises that adults are capable of exercising rational judgement and self-control to avoid these dangers, or to manage the consequences for themselves.- This is because when individuals mature into adults, they are presumed to become mentally capable of rationally discerning the best course of action for themselves, and thus capable of being responsible for their own well-being. Authorities ought to respect this capability.- By contrast, when a paternalistic government (or a nanny state) micromanages adult individuals' lives and treats them like children, individuals feel disrespected. <p>Eg. Film classifications</p> <p>Media authorities often classify films according to age-suitability. Classifications such as 'R' in the US and 'R21' in Singapore restrict younger audiences from watching films depicting strong violence and sexual content, to protect impressionable, vulnerable young minds from being morally corrupted. But media authorities grant adults the freedom to watch such films, respecting their mature and responsible ability to separate fiction from reality, and to avoid having their morality unduly influenced by such content.</p>	<p>2a. Individuals sometimes act <u>irrationally</u> and <u>against their own self-interest</u>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Individuals, even when they are adults, should not be assumed to always be rational and responsible decision-makers. Even the most mature adults have human weaknesses, and can be manipulated into irrational behaviour that go against their own interests. When governments regulate individuals' actions in such cases, it is not out of disrespect but rather out of a respect for the individual's well-being and a duty to protect. <p>Eg: Smoking regulations</p> <p>Individuals addicted to smoking are not rationally, responsibly choosing the best action for their well-being; on the contrary, even when they know that it harms their health and that they ought to quit, they are driven by their addiction to continue smoking. An individual's addiction is thus not something to be respected, since addiction is undesirable for that individual too, as it undermines the individual's free will.</p> <p>Hence, instead of respectfully giving individuals full freedom to smoke, governments have a duty to protect individuals from such self-damaging actions, and protect from tobacco companies that prey on individuals' vulnerability to addiction.</p> <p>Regulations that discourage smoking include heavy taxes on cigarettes, banning smoking in most public places, and forcing cigarette companies to display graphic warnings or plain packaging on cigarette packs. In 2022 New Zealand become the first country to implement a 'generational ban' on smoking for anyone born after January 2009 (though this law has recently been reversed). The UK government has announced plans for a similar ban on smoking for everyone born after 2008.</p>

1b. Individuals have greater knowledge of themselves.

- If the government starts regulating individuals' actions for their own good, hypothetically this could lead to a slippery slope of more and more government control. A government could extend control over more and more aspects of individuals' lives, and justify this by claiming to be protecting individuals from their own harmful or sinful actions. For instance, from a medical perspective, consuming red meat, alcohol and sugary drinks could be viewed as harmful to individuals' health. And from a religious perspective, lifestyles that deviate from religious beliefs could be viewed as sinful and spiritually harmful to individuals.

From a social liberal perspective, imposing such top-down control over individuals' lifestyles 'for their own good' is problematic. This is because each individual has more **specific knowledge of their own preferences, abilities and circumstances**, which no government can know the full, exact details of. This makes the individual better equipped than the government at judging how to run their own life.

- **Different individuals find fulfilment in different ways**, so the government should not impose a one-size-fits-all lifestyle on all individuals, otherwise it may stifle some individuals' development and happiness. Instead, it should give each individual freedom to explore and develop their own opinions and lifestyle.

- This was famously argued by the respected moral-political philosopher John Stuart Mill, whose influential '**Harm Principle**' states that **the government should always allow a person's action, as long as that action does not harm others**. Mill argued that even if many others disagree with an individual's opinion and lifestyle, that individual should be allowed to think and live according to her individual preferences, as long as others are not harmed.

- This arrangement enables the **individuals to flourish in their own way**, and also makes society more **inclusive, tolerant and diverse**. At the same time, the prevention of harm protects individuals' safety and security.

Eg. Freedom of religion

Different individuals find fulfilment through different religions (or sometimes irreligiosity); this depends on individuals' deeply personal beliefs, experiences and backgrounds, which each individual knows best about themselves. Hence, instead of forcing a majority religion on everyone, governments often grant citizens the freedom of religion. In the US, for instance, this is enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution.

2b (i). The government has greater knowledge of indirect, intangible, long-term harm.

- Some private actions **do not appear** to harm others because the harm is **not immediately observable**. Yet **in reality** they can result in **indirect harm, long-term harm, intangible harm, and/or increased risk** for others. As individuals we **often focus on immediate and personal context of our lives** and our loved ones, and may not think about this larger and long-term societal context.

- The government is better equipped to see the **big picture**. Unlike individuals, the government is **better informed** due to extensive **expert data** from researchers and analysts whom it hires, giving it a **bird's-eye view** of society, enabling it to look at the long chain of effects in a large-scale context, take into account the many possible effects of people's actions, do a **cost-benefit analysis** of what is best for society overall, and regulate accordingly.

Eg. Social distancing and masking

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments imposed lock-downs and other restrictions on individuals' movements, as well as mandating mask-wearing. These regulations were based on expert advice that governments received from epidemiologists, who analysed scientific data on how the virus spread, and analysed how seemingly innocuous individual behaviour such as gatherings could indirectly lead to more deaths. The benefit (countless lives being saved) outweighed the cost (individuals' discomfort of mask-wearing and frustration of having to stay home), and so this cost-benefit analysis justifies the regulations.

2b (ii) The government has consideration of a broader range of competing needs, rights and duties.

- A government is **responsible for a broad range of stakeholders**, and engages with their **competing rights and needs**, which can give it a more balanced perspective than an individual narrowly focused on their own rights.

- A government must also consider that **rights often come with duties**. An individual's right to freedom comes with the **duty to use that freedom responsibly**; failure to do so justifies the curtailment of the freedom.

1c. A government's top-down view is still fallible; it may suffer from blind spots and faulty assumptions.

- A government fixating on a bird's eye view of society as a whole may overlook perspectives of individuals on the ground. It may neglect some aspects of individuals' experiences, view them in a simplistic or reductive way, and insensitively sacrifice their interests for the greater good.

- Expert data and large-scale analysis does not make a government omniscient and infallible. Society is so complex that even expert data and analysis cannot fully represent society in its entirety – the government's big picture of society will always have some gaps here and there. To fill in the gaps, the government makes assumptions, and sometimes these assumptions are wrong.

Eg. Singapore's ban on PMDs / e-scooters

In Singapore in 2018-2019, personal mobility devices (PMDs) were widely used by food delivery workers to travel efficiently on footpaths. After a collision with a PMD user resulted in a pedestrian's death in 2019, the government immediately banned PMDs from footpaths, since safety was more important than efficiency. But the government may have wrongly assumed that delivery workers could easily afford to replace PMDs with delivery bikes. It overlooked that these were lower-income workers who had lost hard-earned money on their PMD, and could not easily afford to quickly replace it with a bike. Hence there was a public uproar from delivery workers whose livelihood was threatened.

Eg. Robert Moses' planning of New York City

The urban planner Robert Moses was a powerful New York city government official who made the city more efficient, modern and orderly by replacing old buildings and dense, messy neighbourhoods with expressways and orderly spaces. His bird's eye view of the city's development overlooked important aspects of the areas he was demolishing: for the individuals living there, these old, dense, messy areas provided heritage, vibrancy and long-standing community, all of which were at risk of being destroyed by Moses' top-down redevelopment plans. This was pointed out by the famous urban theorist Jane Jacobs, who successfully rallied opposition to Moses' plan to replace her neighbourhood with an expressway.

2c. A government can improve its regulations through feedback and consulting the public.

- Although government regulations may suffer from blind spots and faulty assumptions, the solution is not to abandon regulations, but rather to make better regulations by working with individuals on the ground.

Following the initial implementation of a regulation, the government can gather critical feedback from the public, so as to better understand the perspectives of individuals on the ground and learn from them about the shortcomings of the regulations, thereby correcting blind spots and faulty assumptions, and refine the regulations. Regulation can thus be a process of trial and error, and two-way partnership with individuals on the ground, not a uni-directional act of top-down control by a hubristic government.

Eg. Singapore's ban on PMDs / e-scooters

After the uproar from delivery workers following the sudden ban on PMDs on footpaths, the government listened to the critical feedback and responded by launching the \$7 million E-scooter Trade-in Grant, which provided riders up to \$1000 to switch to a bicycle or e-bike.

<p>1d. A government may be <u>unable to fully control people's actions</u></p> <p>- Some things that governments seek to restrict, such as drinking alcohol, are so persistently present in a society that banning them is unlikely to get rid of them. People are likely to continue doing such things in secret; realistically a government cannot monitor every individual at all times. In such situations, it may be more pragmatic for the government to give individuals some freedom to access those things, and educate or guide them to responsibly regulate their own behaviour.</p> <p>Eg. Alcohol prohibition</p> <p>When the US government banned the sale and production of alcohol from 1920 to 1933, people continued to consume alcohol illegally supplied by criminals, leading to crime organisations thriving. Similarly, when the USSR heavily restricted the sale and production of alcohol in the 1980s, it did not quell Russians' demand for alcohol. It led to an increase in illegally produced alcohol, and consumption of more dangerous substances.</p> <p>Today, despite alcohol being a risk to health and public safety, most governments do not ban it. In Australia, where drinking is embedded in the culture and getting drunk is a rite of passage to adulthood, the government uses frequent publicity campaigns to publicly educate citizens about responsible drinking, as it knows it must ultimately rely on individuals themselves to responsibly regulate their alcohol consumption.</p>	
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3. How can governments reconcile these two perspectives, balancing individual freedom and government regulation?

3a. View regulation as a partnership with individuals

- **Responsibilities should be divided up** between individuals and governments, based on each side's strengths and limitations. Perhaps individuals should have more freedom over aspects of life that are deeply personal and not clearly harmful to others, while governments should regulate aspects of life that have significantly greater risk of harm to others.
- Regulation should **not be seen as a zero-sum conflict** in which one side's gain means the other side's loss. Giving individuals more freedom and responsibility to self-regulate can lessen the burden on government regulators. Having more regulation of individual actions can help provide individuals with greater safety and health.

3b. View regulation as flexible and proportional, not rigid and absolute

- Consider the broad range of regulations with **different degrees of strictness**, depending on the degree of seriousness and circumstances:

i. **Mandate**: "You must do this."

(Eg. In Singapore: compulsory primary school education; compulsory military service; compulsory measles vaccinations.)

ii. **Ban selected things**: "You must not do this."

(Eg. Many countries ban speech that incites violence, and hate speech.)

iii. **Draw boundaries**: "You can do this... but only within these limits."

(Eg. In Singapore, although prostitution is legal, sex workers are not allowed to solicit customers in public.)

iv. **Set conditions**: "You can do this, but only after meeting these requirements."

(Eg. In Singapore, to hire a domestic helper, a person must first complete the 3-hour Employment Orientation Programme.)

v. **Impose costs**: "You can do this, but you must pay more for it."

(Eg. In Singapore, taxes on cigarettes make them expensive to disincentivise smokers.)

vi. **Offer incentives**: "You don't have to do this, but if you do, you'll be rewarded."

(Eg. Many countries have tax credits for individuals who buy electric vehicles.)

- **Different approaches allow for different degrees of control.** Some approaches (i. and ii.) are more **strict and uncompromising**, for more severe problems. Other approaches **allow individuals some freedom and personal responsibility**, while subtly nudging them in a particular direction (v. and vi.), or limiting their risk (iv.) or scope for harm (iii.). Depending on the problem and how individuals respond, the government can flexibly adjust approaches to best balance freedom and control. It can use stricter regulations for more harmful actions and less responsible stakeholders. It can use lighter regulations for less harmful actions, less controllable actions, or more responsible stakeholders.

- This is important, because the answer to the question, 'Is regulation justified?' isn't always a blanket answer "Yes, totally" or "No, not at all". A better answer may be: "It depends." It depends on **what's being regulated, how it's being regulated** and whether **there are better approaches to regulation**. Where greater freedom is needed, the solution may not be no regulation at all, but rather a more suitable, less heavy-handed approach to regulation.

Eg. Stricter regulation of drugs vs lighter regulation of unhealthy food

In Singapore, 'Nutri-Grade' ratings are now displayed for drinks sold in fast food outlets. This does not take away individuals' freedom to consume the drinks, but they subtly remind individuals of the health consequences of their meal, and thus **nudge individuals in the right direction, instead of banning** unhealthy food the way that harmful drugs are banned.

This is because, firstly, unhealthy food is not as harmful as say drugs; secondly, consumption of unhealthy food is not fully controllable, since demand for it is embedded deeply in our culture; and thirdly, individuals can responsibly self-regulate by exercising and eating unhealthy meals in moderation.

C. Conclusion: the importance of identity when debating individual freedom vs regulation

For a society to find a rational balance between individual liberty and top-down regulation, it helps if citizens identify as both individuals and a members of a larger collective where other people are affected by one's actions.

On the one hand, if we do not identify as unique and independent-minded individuals, we risk conforming mindlessly, not thinking critically and creatively for ourselves, and becoming mere sheep blindly following the herd. Our society risks becoming blandly uniform.

On the other hand, if we do not also identify as members of a larger society, and we think of ourselves purely as individuals, we risk becoming narrowly focused on our individual interests, failing to see the need to sometimes forego our individual interests for the benefit of others. We may judge the government in terms of whether its actions affect us individually, rather than in terms of the government's duty to weight up many different people's competing interests in a system of give-and-take and compromise. We may judge every regulation purely in terms of whether it satisfies our demands, rather than whether such consequences are a necessary compromise to serve others' more fundamental needs.

People may find it harder to identify with the larger society in today's growing culture of individualism, where people increasingly demand individual rights, satisfy their individual tastes as consumers, curate their individual profiles, and have their social media feed personalised to their individual preferences.

On the other hand, people may find it harder to identify as a unique individual if they are part of a culture that is very collectivist, conformist or socially conservative.

One of the government's challenges is to not only make policies and explain them to citizens, but also to cultivate citizens' complex identities as both individuals *and* members of a larger collective. It is difficult to shape the way citizens think of themselves, because identity is something intangible (it cannot be seen or felt physically) and amorphous (it cannot be sharply defined).

However, our identities as citizens are shaped not only from authorities above, but also by our own individual reflections, and by our exchanges with one another. Our identities are shaped by the way we talk about ourselves, the identities we adopt, the values we use to argue, and the perspectives we consider when debating politics with one another. In our arguments with one another, we shape one another's identities, alongside our own.

And that is why it is crucial that we have a deep understanding of identities, individuals and governments, and how we might construct complex, balanced and well-informed arguments about them.

D. A-Level exam questions related to governments, grouped into sub-topics, from 2004 to 2023

By what criteria do we judge the quality of a government? (Success? Morality? Efficiency? Economic management? Popularity? Circumstances?)

As long as people in the public eye do their job well, does it matter what they do in private? (2009)
[Note: 'People in the public eye' may include people in politics, entertainment, media or sports.]

'No politician's reputation can survive the judgement of time.' How true is this? (2010)

Consider the view that efficient government is more important than democracy. (2011)

'The key criterion for good government is how well the economy is managed.' Is this a fair assessment? (2012)

What should influence a government's decisions? (Religion? Popularity? Leaders' views?)

'The view of the majority is always right.' Do you agree? (2007)

How far should religion influence political decisions? (2009)

Should politicians pursue the popular view or their own convictions, if they conflict? (2020)

How should a government spend and manage public money?

In your society, to what extent is it acceptable for public money to be used for the acquisition of works of art? (2017)

How far is the government responsible for people's well-being?

Consider the view that we do not take enough responsibility for our own well-being. (2018)

How much influence do leaders really have, and what influence do they lack?

Do events, rather than politicians, shape the future? (2017)

Consider the view that social media has more influence than politicians. (2019)

'Power these days lies more with the people than the politicians.' To what extent is this true? (2021)

How far should a government's powers extend?

'People, not the government, should decide how to organise their lives.' Is this a fair comment? (2004)

To what extent should the State involve itself in the world of business? (2005)

How far should a state have a right to monitor the actions of people within its borders? (2007)

'What an individual eats or drinks should not be the concern of the state.' What is your view? (2021)

What should be the extent of people's rights and liberties (to vote, to express themselves, etc.)?

'Only the educated people should have the right to vote in elections.' What is your view? (2009)

How far, in your society, should unpopular views be open to discussion? (2013)

Is regulation of the press desirable? (2017)

'In a free society, there should be no restrictions on freedom of speech.' Discuss. (2020)

Consider the argument that there should be no censorship of the arts in modern society. (2023)

What affects democracy?

Is modern technology a benefit or a threat to democracy? (2020)

What political attitudes *do* people have, and what attitudes *should* they have?

To what extent do young people in your society take an interest in politics? (2006)

Should a love for one's country be encouraged? (2009)

How much should a government or leader care about other countries' needs?

'A good leader must always look beyond the needs of his or her country.' Do you agree? (2003)

In times of economic hardship, should a country still be expected to provide financial or material aid to others? (2014)

'A leader's responsibility should always be to his or her own country, not other nations.' Discuss. (2019)

2018 Paper 2 passage topic: Young people not voting due to political disillusionment and disinterest