A political ideal promoting the equal treatment, standing or status of people in certain respects. Equality has a close, though complex, connection to justice. While equality is a central ideal within liberal democracies (see liberalism), often enshrined as a formal right, its precise meaning and scope remain controversial. Different and often competing contexts for equality exist that variously answer the question: What is the relevant respect in which people are to be compared?

1. **Administrative equality.** The requirement that existing laws (see law) be administered equally to everyone. This minimal view of equality concerns the application of law, not the content. As Bakan (1997, p. 46) notes, it would be met even in a system that made explicit distinctions between people, such as apartheid, so long as laws were equally applied to all members of an oppressed group.

2. **Political equality.** Equality in respect to formal political rights (such as voting or running for office). This issue, of course, has proved controversial, as in the case of the struggle for the extension of the franchise to women, for example. The disenfranchisement of convicts in many US states, or the scalar politics of non-citizen voting (Varsanyi, 2005), attests to the continued relevance of this issue.

3. **Formal equality.** The Aristotelian principle to treat like cases as like: when two persons have equal status in relation to one relevant aspect, they must be treated equally with regard to this aspect. Thus the content of law, rather than its implementation, must not draw distinctions between people on inappropriate grounds. This, of course, begs the question: Which distinctions are legitimate? Modern liberal sensibilities forbid distinctions on the basis of gender, or race, for example. However, children and the insane are treated differently from adults of sound mind. For a law to meet the requirements of formal equality, however, requires only that it not draw illegitimate *formal* distinctions between people: its *effects* may still be unequal between people. A law that forbids all citizens from begging in public space treats all equally: however, given that only the poor beg, its effects are invidious. Moreover, interventions that seek to redress inequality through redistribution (such as social welfare or progressive taxation) compromise formal equality.

4. **Substantive or social equality.** The absence of ‘major disparities in people’s resources, political and social power, well-being and of exploitation and oppression’ (Bakan, 1997, p. 47). Attaining social equality is fundamental to some movements for social justice. Advocates for social equality note that people may attain formal, political and administrative equality, yet any resultant benefits are cancelled out by their manifest social inequality. In 1929, upon learning that women could, for the first time, be appointed to the Senate, the Canadian feminist Nellie McLung asked: ‘Now that we are persons [in law], I wonder if we will notice any difference?’ ([http://www.abheritage.ca/famous5/leadership/legal_social_equality.html](http://www.abheritage.ca/famous5/leadership/legal_social_equality.html)). In other words, political equality was of limited utility while women faced the inequalities of patriarchy. Feminists have also struggled with the tension between equality and difference. For some, feminist struggle should...
seek to erase differences between men and women, as it is a basis for discrimination. Others argue that the differences between men and women should be acknowledged in any adjudication of rights.

As noted, the promulgation of social equality can also conflict with formal equality (as in the case of positive discrimination, for example). For some, social equality can be attained through equality of opportunity: that is, all should be allowed the same chance to compete for social goods and resources. Others insist on the need to attain equality of outcome or results. The parameters of social equality are, however, uncertain: Are people to attain equality in resources, material goods, well-being or capabilities, for example (Gosepath, 2005)?

Equality, particularly social equality, is an important though rarely articulated principle that underlies some geographical scholarship, particularly of a critical orientation (see Smith, 2000a: see also critical geography).

Nick Blomley
Professor of Geography
Simon Fraser University, Canada

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA