



QUESTION: Why is the Left-Right political spectrum losing its grip? What are the alternatives to the Left vs Right and why has the ‘Open vs Closed’ political spectrum emerged as a frontrunner?

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Hypothesis: The existing order is under siege, whether it comes from Brexit, Trump, or Italy's populist victory. The ease with which mainstream Left and Right parties now coexist in government is a stark indicator that historically established divisions are eroding. There is a talk of political realignment now. But what axis will be realigned? What are the defining axes of the new spectrum if Left vs. Right is no longer the exclusive option? Through my paper, I will uncover the ‘Open vs Close’ political spectrum and analyse if the left-right spectrum has indeed fallen.

Keywords: Left vs Right, Political spectrum, Horseshoe theory, Populism, Conservatism, Liberals, Open vs closed.

Thesis: The origins of the “Left-right” political system can be traced back to 1789, when the French national assembly gathered to discuss the drafting of the new constitution. One of the main discussions in the assembly was the amount of power the king should have. During this revolution, supporters of the king stood to the president’s right, and supporters of the revolution to his left¹. Over the years, this system of political division took precedence in many other countries. In fact, the left and right had other connotations as well, that make the seating arrangement during the revolution, not a mere coincidence. For example, the right symbolizes dominance (for most of the population is right-handed) and the left tended to symbolize subservency or passivity which indicated prone to change.² The Industrial revolution, led to socialism-state ownership of means production and redistribution of wealth being accepted as a political ideology. Those people who originally identified on the “left” but did not support socialism started moving to the right. This instance created a division in the left itself called the “19th century left “(revolutionaries who opposed aristocracy) vs 20 the century left (people who opposed capitalism). Furthermore, the left failed to provide a viable solution for neoliberalism or capitalism and the fall of the USSR and China’s acceptance of capitalism as an economic ideology worsened the credibility of the left’s claims and people started to question its power and purpose.

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*, 1837, Book VI, Chapter 2

² Cambridge University, *Left/Right Symbolism and the Body in Ancient Maya Iconography and Culture*, 20 January, 2017

Thus, the supposed failure of the “left” calls into question the need for an opposition- the right.³ Many Governments are the epitome of a coalition where parties from both left and right join hands to rule the legislature. Austria, Italy and Netherlands have shown this behaviour over the past few years. Then, there come the populists who don’t belong to the left at all and classify themselves as right winged populists. For example, The UKIP in the UK, Danish People’s Party in Denmark, The League in Italy etc. These refer to themselves as “right winged” but lean toward certain aspects of the leftist ideology. If the past 40 years have taught us anything, it’s that dreams of universal equality can segue very easily into dreams of universal market access, which means that leftism and capitalism can be equated thus defeating the purpose of the conventional left once again. Thus, the conventional left and right are no longer the same. They has evolved to become something inconsistent with their prior form. The left-right paradigm raises more questions than it solves. For one, where do the libertarians go? They support free trade and yet go against basic conservative practices. Should the right winged populists be placed to the right of mainstream conservative parties? But then again, their economic policies usually are more toward the left . Thus, many attempts to resolve conflicts and provide alternatives to the left-right political systems were made: Nolan Chart⁴ and the Political Compass to name a few. Again, it was observed that the Nolan Chart would ignore political issues like individual freedom, omitted capitalism and even treated economic and personal liberty as two different entities⁵. Then came the open vs closed political spectrum-the one that is quickly taking over the conventional left vs right. Drawing its origins from British politics⁶, the open vs closed system was used to describe the cleavage in North America and Europe in the 21st century. Before socialism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the main political division in Britain was between classical liberalism (Whiggism) and traditional conservatism (Toryism), as seen by conflicts over free trade and the Corn Laws. The development of the socially liberal new Left and socially conservative religious right in the 1970s, as well as the ensuing "culture wars," marked the beginning of the open-closed divide in the United States. Two fundamental factors underlie political conflict in Britain: one economic (which corresponds to the economic idea of left vs right) and one cultural. This cultural dimension includes a variety of social concerns including equal opportunities for minorities and the appropriateness (or not) of the death penalty, as well as a number of issues strongly linked to globalisation, like immigration, foreign aid, and European integration. By 2017, this component, frequently referred to as "open" vs "closed," appeared to be stronger in terms of organising voters' political orientations than the economic dimension. The open society has many dimensions . For example, it is open to ideas like free media and open to immigrants. An open society is open to change in terms of technological innovation, free market dynamics etc. Open parties can hold left-wing or progressive ideas on a variety of subjects while firmly supporting the historically more rightist free trade policies. This in itself gives people a broader area to conform to than the traditional left-right paradigm.

It is evident that today, the left-right system of politics is not the right option for the spectrum. Just like everything else in the universe has moved forward, the political spectrum has also moved beyond its arcade system. A lot of countries are observing a decline of the left since it is believed to have “no distinct ideology”. This decline in turn questions the need for a right and what it is challenging. For instance, the actual definition of communism is not what those people believe it to be (i.e.. censorship, surveillance, authoritarian rule, everything they consider bad). Communism simply refers to a system in which the workers control the means of production, which means under this standard, Vietnam is not a communist nation. Since the 1980s, it hasn't been that way. Like much of the rest of the world, Vietnam has a free market economy, albeit with certain government involvement (also like most of the world). Vietnam adopted communism and put it into practise in an effort to regain its independence. At their core, the Vietnamese people who fought in the name of communism and went by the moniker of Viet Cong were patriots rather than communists. Thus ,the question remains, does communism actually exists in countries like China, Vietnam and Cuba or is it just a mere label for them that no one is changing?

³ The new Statesman , DID the Left win the twentieth century ?edition,15 April. 2013

⁴ Created by David Nolan, the Nolan Chart presents views along two axes representing economic and personal freedom

⁵ Ritnakar Mallick, The Psychology of Politics in two-dimensional charts with Nolan and Pournelle by The Armchair Journal, June 2021

⁶ In 2006, British Prime Minister Tony Blair described the main cleavage in politics as not left versus right, but open versus closed.

The conventional left vs right had a common issue they took sides on however, today the left vs right political spectrums are not divided on a common issue. They're not even diametrically opposed. The existing order is indeed in siege as we see the two 'ends' of the spectrum slowly merging into one as described in the horseshoe theory. In French politics, a centrist candidate (Emanuel macron) defeated candidates from both, the hard left and the hard right proving that the voters tended to see both ends of the extreme as similar and decided to reject them both, resulting in the choice of a "neutral" candidate⁷. In today's society, people are more adamant about looking at policies and opinions and breaking them down on an issue- by-issue basis; voters vote according to which party will make their living standards better and not based on their ideologies. To add to that, the libertarians and the populists do not identify with either side of the spectrum and yet they hold strong opinions that both sides have connotations with. Social media has it made it easy for people to connect with other people having similar opinions but does that truly make them aligned with a side? Another problem with the left-right spectrum is that it has no regard for people who have a multidimensional viewpoint. For instance, a person with conservative religious practices may be economically liberal and vice versa. The "centre" is now a stance taken by elitists while the extremes are left for the "populists"⁸. Thus, in a world like this politics should be redefined and the only viable solution till now is, well, the "open vs closed" spectrum.

"Forget Left and Right. The real political division of the 21st Century is the same as it was in the 19th. Should we be open or closed?"⁹

⁷ The horseshoe theory states that the extreme left and the extreme right are closer to each other analogous to the way of a horseshoe than being far apart from each other like in a linear spectrum

⁸Adam lent, "Centrism must embrace anti elitism or face extinction" ,15 july,2016

⁹ The telegraph, James kirrkup ,2014