

# Varieties of American Ideological Spectra

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WHEN AMERICAN politicians announce that their policy proposals transcend the liberal-conservative or left-right dichotomy, or suggest that the dichotomy is not relevant to their concerns, they are often trying to appeal to all possible sides. Nonetheless, they may also be saying that, in today's America, their ideas cannot be fit into the ideological spectrum as they perceive it. However, what they are not saying, and may not even be aware of, is that, at least since World War II, a number of different spectra have come into concurrent use. While these spectra all have left-right (and center) points, they vary by what they mean by left and right, and even more so by how they divide society up ideologically.

This paper attempts to take a first cut at identifying the variety of ideological spectra now in use and to outline their major characteristics and functions. In what follows, I limit myself to the major *general* spectra—those which classify broad political as well as economic positions. I will not discuss what could be called *specific* spectra—for example, the cultural one in which various lefts and rights differ over “the canon” and multiculturalism, among other things. Except when cultural issues enter the national political agenda, as they did during

the Reagan-Bush era, this spectrum is of concern primarily to academic and other intellectuals.<sup>1</sup>

My paper begins with a description of the basic "format" for American spectra, which has not changed much over the years, and with a brief comparison of "elite" and "popular" general spectra. However, the heart of the paper analyzes what I see as four major elite spectra, presented here in brief ideal-type fashion. The first, the current mainstream spectrum used by politicians and journalists, defines ideological positions in connection with the major political parties. A second emphasizes methods of political change, and a third uses amount and direction of change. The fourth, which I call class-related, groups seemingly unrelated ideological positions which correlate with the class of holders.

Although all four spectra consider equalitarian values as one of their elements, none puts much emphasis on it. For this reason, as for others, the paper ends by advocating a fifth, equalitarian, spectrum.

### *The Format of the Ideological Spectrum*

The format for all American ideological spectra is modeled on the spectra of light, color, radio waves, etc. used in the natural sciences, except that it is conceived as having two sides, left and right, separated by a center. Various gradations of left and right are possible, subdivided by how "far" each is from

<sup>1</sup> Protestant denominations, like Jewish ones, have long been arranged on a liberal-conservative theological spectrum, but in the Jewish community each denomination is then also partitioned. Jewish Orthodoxy is itself commonly divided into left, center, and right Orthodoxies. Somehow, atheists and agnostics do not find places on these spectra, perhaps because they are not organized.

Gender politics is just developing a spectrum, although diverse feminists, gay and lesbian groups, AIDs victims and their supporters, not to mention defenders of patriarchy, may be impossible to place on a single spectrum.

the center, and terminating at each end in a far left and a far right respectively.

Generally speaking, Americans prefer to use a liberal-conservative vocabulary instead of a left-right one; groups on the far left typically are identified as radical, those on the left as left-liberal, and those left-of-center as liberal or moderate liberal. There are equivalent descriptions on the conservative side; the Far Right currently is being described as ultraconservative.

The “absolute” format described above is relativized when the ideological spectra are used for political purposes rather than for description and analysis—at which point opponents resort to pejorative language.<sup>2</sup> The political group defining the spectrum typically chooses its favorite position—for example, the one “truly” conservative, or the only proper representative of the left—and places itself in the center; the group does not describe itself as centrist and accuses its enemies of being as far right or left as political need demands.

As a result, groups on the right often consider all liberals, and sometimes even all Democrats, to be leftists; groups on the far right describe liberals as radical or communist. Likewise, the Left sees most of its opposition, including liberals, as conservative, treating the two major parties as if there were no differences between them whatsoever. The Far Right is seen as paleoconservative, a label that has now replaced the old term reactionary. Radical groups still sometimes belabor those closest to them on the spectrum with the vilest pejoratives, as in the old days when Stalinists viewed Trotskyists and socialists as “social fascists.” Somewhat the same pattern can now be found

<sup>2</sup> A somewhat similar, but less directly political, relativization occurs in setting the boundaries of the middle class, with higher income groups setting the boundaries very differently than the poor. Although the national median family income was little more than \$30,000 in 1992, one of the young Kennedys was quoted that year to the effect that the middle class income threshold was then \$80,000. Journalists and politicians use middle class as a synonym for working class, perhaps because the latter could be interpreted as a Marxist concept.

among the splinter groups on the far right. Meanwhile, the Left often attacks neoconservatives more bitterly than other conservatives because the former were once liberals, socialists, or communists.

When the pejorative exchanges cause more than just verbal harm, some groups try to escape by name changes. During the Joseph McCarthy witch-hunt, when "fellow travelers" were harassed as if they were actual communists, they called themselves progressives. (However, so did some communists.) In the 1980s, as the Republican White House launched an attack on "the L word," liberals, as well as people further to their left, revived the use of this term.

### *Elite and Popular Spectra*

I presume that everyone has an ideology, even if it is only the intellectuals who develop explicit and relatively consistent ones, either for themselves or for political or corporate leaders who have need for such an ideology. In any case, ideology has been primarily an elite preoccupation.

As a result, little is known about popular ideology and popular spectra, or how much lay people think about either.<sup>3</sup> Public-opinion researchers and political scientists have done many studies which compare how people describe themselves ideologically with data on their voting patterns and political attitudes, with the intent of determining what lay people make out of ideology.<sup>4</sup> However, even though most but not all poll

<sup>3</sup> A notable exception is Robert E. Lane's classic *Political Ideology* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> The best known such analysis is by Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), pp. 206-262. A recent, albeit highly technical, review of studies that test Converse's ideas and those of his critics is M. Kent Jennings, "Ideological Thinking among Mass Publics and Political Elites," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 56 (1992): 419-441.

respondents can respond to pollsters' questions about whether they are liberal or conservative, their answers say little about how salient conscious ideology, and especially the spectrum, is to them, or whether ideology comes up in their private conversations when pollsters and researchers are not around.

The pollsters use a liberal-conservative rather than a left-right vocabulary, with "moderate" or "middle of the road" instead of center. They construct 3- or 5- or 7-point scales, and then ask respondents where they place themselves on that scale. Thus the *New York Times*-CBS News poll limits itself to liberal, moderate, and conservative, while the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey ranges from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative," with liberal, conservative, "slightly" liberal and conservative, and moderate in between. Respondents usually define what they mean by the point on the scale on which they place themselves. Therefore, the polling data on the proportion of people who describe themselves as liberal or conservative in fact report frequency distributions of self-selected labels, since the definitions of the scale terms people use may vary wildly or mildly.

In addition, what people mean by the basic terms may change, and when pundits report that America has become more conservative, they point not only to the fact that the number of self-described conservatives has risen but also that people who describe themselves as liberal today may have different—i.e., more conservative—beliefs than liberals in earlier decades. However, all popular definitions of spectra and ideologies are generally flexible, for people who describe themselves as conservatives often vote for politicians they consider liberal.

### *The Spectrum as an Array of Political Parties*

The most familiar political spectrum, which is used mainly by politicians and journalists but also straddles elite and

popular ideological thought, identifies ideological positions with some principal concerns of the major political parties. In this spectrum, which reflects the mainstream political culture, the Democrats are basically on the left, while the Republicans are on the right. Since this spectrum is mainstream, however, it generally uses the liberal-conservative vocabulary rather than the left-right one.

The two parties occupy the positions they do in part because the Democrats are seen as supporting government intervention in the economy, while the G.O.P. is perceived as favoring as little intervention as possible. Accordingly, the furthest left (or radical) position is allocated to communist and socialist parties or positions, which are seen as advocating total government control of the economy, while the equivalent point on the right logically should belong to the Libertarians, who want to restrict the role of government to little more than national defense and domestic policing. However, since the Libertarians are barely visible, the furthest right position is generally occupied by ultraconservatives.

The mainstream spectrum is also defined in terms of constituencies and their perceived interests; as a result, the left or liberal side is assigned to the working class, moderate- and low-income populations, and racial and ethnic minorities, while the right is allocated to the business community as well as to the suburban upper-middle and upper classes.

Although still in general use, this spectrum is showing its age—its New Deal and Great Society heritage—for it cannot adequately accommodate that organized interest groups count for far more in politics than individuals, and that, in an age of PACs and television campaigning, these groups support incumbents or give money to both sides. Furthermore, parts of the white working class may vote for Republicans both on racial grounds and to keep taxes low. Conversely, the Democratic Party is now also home to affluent, economically conservative entrepreneurs and executives who favor govern-

ment intervention only for a variety of “social” issues. This shift, in fact, accounts for the fourth spectrum, described below.

Despite its age, the mainstream spectrum remains in active use. The Reagan and Bush administrations applied its definition of liberal—enthusiastic New Dealer—and transformed it into an insult. Indeed, during his first months in office, President Clinton was so effectively denounced as a “tax and spend liberal” that he finally, and at this writing (June, 1993), even described himself as a “centrist,” an almost-never-heard term in political jargon.

In doing so, the president had also temporarily expanded the mainstream spectrum. Because it serves mainly politicians, this spectrum generally operates without a center, since no one in American politics can afford to favor the status quo, and everyone has to be for change. Perhaps this is also why pollsters use terms like “middle of the road” or “moderate” as synonyms for the center.

In addition, the mainstream spectrum omits other positions, considering neofascists, neo-Stalinists, and others defined as “extremists” as outside spectrum boundaries. For example, the Far Right was embarrassed when David Duke, heretofore relegated to outlier status, sought respectable ultraconservative and conservative support when he ran for the United States Senate in Louisiana. Positions not represented by visible political organizations, such as anarchists, are deemed irrelevant.

News media panels generally make room for only a liberal and a conservative, reflecting their scarcity of both time and space and the correlative belief that news stories usually have two “sides.” During the Reagan-Bush era, the panel representative on the left was almost always moderately liberal and the spokesperson on the right was often an ultraconservative, perhaps in deference to the White House. Whether the Clinton administration will cause a change in this practice remains to be seen; it could depend in large part on where—and whether—President Clinton decides finally to

position himself, as well as on what spectrum, and on what the pollsters and journalists decide about where the country stands ideologically.

*The Spectrum as a Method of Sociopolitical Change*

The second of the five spectra is basically concerned with whether change occurs by democratic or nondemocratic methods. In Europe, the nondemocratic method is usually thought of as revolutionary; here, the prevalent term is radical or, more recently, militant, which includes groups who resort to violent and even nonviolent civil disobedience.

In this spectrum, the Far Left and the Far Right are viewed as preferring radical methods of change. As a result, the normally straight-line spectrum appears to be a circle, with the two opponents "meeting" because their methods are roughly similar. This is, of course, not visible to either side. The "splinters" on the far left, which continue to fight over who is most revolutionary, do not see that there are some parallels in political method on the far right, but no one on that end of the spectrum would ever even use the word revolutionary.

The news media apply this spectrum in circular fashion as well. They report militants of any kind as newsworthy mainly when they make "trouble"—that is, engage in civil disobedience or riot—and the fact that their ideology is on the right or on the left is of little interest. However, this practice may reflect popular ideology as well, for the general public places great weight on social order and is usually opposed to any extralegal protest.

The circular quality of this spectrum extends to other political methods and concepts. For example, direct democracy, once advocated mostly by parts of the Left, including anarchists, is now also popular on the right, which, in California and elsewhere, uses referenda to obtain tax reductions for big property owners.

Likewise, liberal advocates of community control discovered in the 1960s that conservatives favor giving poor neighborhoods control over their own budgets, thus ending the municipal subsidies for poor neighborhoods wherever they exist. In the 1990s, community policing may turn into the same ideological chameleon; while it has been favored by the Left for its community-control features, conservative citizens may use it to pressure their local police into driving objectionable strangers out of their community.

*The Spectrum as Indicator of Amount and Direction of Change*

The third spectrum assumes that political change comes in amounts, and that these amounts are indicated by distance from the center, with the Far Left and Far Right wanting more change than others on the left and right. In addition, this model describes the direction of change, with the Right viewed as defending tradition and the Left seen—at least by its advocates—as looking forward.

This model also shows its age, for the notion that the Left represents progress has not been voiced often in recent years. By now, Lincoln Steffens's report, during his 1933 visit to Soviet Russia, that he had "seen the future and it works" has been forgotten.

In truth, of course, the linear theory of progress and regress never fit properly, since many traditions turn out to be of recent vintage and even ultraconservatives did not and do not now plan to return to any actual past. In fact, ultraconservatives frequently advocate a romantic past in which private enterprise was neither regulated nor subsidized by government, the Bill of Rights was not applicable to the Left, and conservative churches were exempt from the separation of church and state. Likewise, the revolutionary Left defends a Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist/Trotskyist model of society which is equally romantic, and also has roots in the nineteenth century.

Recent events in Eastern Europe—particularly as reported by the American media—played particular havoc with this model. Once the beginning of the end came for the Communist Party, it was treated as representing the Right, although properly speaking it belonged in a center seeking the retention of the status quo. (The failed last-minute Soviet coup against Gorbachev could, however, have been described as a Far Right maneuver.)

Conversely, the groups that overthrew the communist states all over Eastern Europe were described as being on the left, even though they were clearly not even socialists. Their main aim was the reestablishment of an independent civil society and, later, a market economy dedicated to the rapid privatizing of public property. Since most of these groups were established in the major cities and were dominated by intellectuals, many of them Jewish, they were perhaps automatically thought to be on the left, since that is where Eastern European Jewish intellectuals were traditionally to be found.

#### *The Spectrum as a Dual Track Class-and-Culture Model*

The fourth spectrum may be a uniquely American mixture of ideology and class, in which position on the spectrum is determined both by the class and class-culture of the population involved and by particular ideological stands. It may also be distinctive in dealing with diverging social and economic values, and in developing separate “tracks” for them.

Its emergence—though not necessarily its origin—can be associated with the late 1960s, and particularly the Vietnam War and the ghetto uprisings. At that point, observers of the American scene first became aware of the existence of white working-class people who were “economic liberals” but socially and culturally conservative, as represented by the fact that they were opposed to racial integration and militant antiwar protest. Later they were also viewed as favoring what the Right

now calls “family values”—for example, opposition to sexual liberation, teenage sexual activity, abortion, and the poor (black) single-parent family. What most of these whites had in common was working-class or lower lower-middle-class status.

They were contrasted with economic conservatives who viewed themselves as “social liberals,” an ideological position which rejected Democratic Party–Great Society economic initiatives but was supportive of environmentalism, abortion, a moderate form of feminism, and an integrationist version of racial equality.

Most of the people favoring this combination of issues were, and are, upper-middle-class professionals, particularly those earning their living from fees, such as doctors and lawyers, as well as some executives and entrepreneurs, although most of these remain conservative on both tracks.

What I find most interesting is the possibility that spectrum positions are being assigned as much on the basis of class as on ideological principles. For example, the upper middle class is generally viewed as the most health-conscious and thus supportive of preventive medicine and public-health measures. It supplies supporters of food labeling and nonchemical fertilizers—and, once again, the position seems to be thought liberal partly because it is most vocally held by upper-middle-class professionals. The working class is usually thought to be less enthusiastic about dietary and other forms of preventive-health measures, although the major opposition, for price and profit reasons, comes from food-producing and -distributing corporations.

The correlation between liberalism and high status is hardly perfect, but it is a drastic change from the past, when higher class position was thought to be equivalent to conservatism. A good example of the old and new pattern can be found in environmental issues. Once upon a time, “conservation,” as it was then called, was an upper- to upper-middle-class issue identified with Republican and other conservative WASPs; in fact, they were sometimes thought to be saving “nature” from

being "overrun" by the poor, non-Protestant immigration of the turn of the century.

Since the 1960s, however, the class correlation has changed almost completely. Being for the environment, although still supported mainly by high-status people, is a liberal position, while being against the environment is identified with working-class people who are fearful of losing their jobs. (The conservative upper class has become intentionally or otherwise invisible, in part because corporations who oppose environmentalism for economic reasons do not publicize it.) The same pattern may be found in the historic preservation field, once dominated by conservative WASPs defending their cultural heritage, and now treated as a liberal cause by many urban (and suburban) upper-middle-class professionals.

Similarly, animal-rights advocates are also thought liberal, and the movements to save whales and fur(coat)-bearing animals are sometimes militantly so. Why being in favor of saving animals is more liberal than helping the people, many of them poor or working class, who make their living from killing and processing these animals for human use is unclear. However, during the 1950s, being in favor of saving rural land from suburban "sprawl"—that is, the building of moderate-price housing—was also a liberal cause.

To be sure, the correlation may be a function of class interests on both sides, for liberals who opposed sprawl and favored urban renewal were thereby able to put some distance between themselves and people of lower status. The latter are, in return, often hostile to upper-middle-class liberal professionals, who try to "renew" working-class neighborhoods, using zoning to bar "tract housing," oppose popular culture, and attack working- and lower-middle-class facilities and lifestyles in other ways. Last but not least, environmental causes can eliminate working-class jobs. Conservative, especially corporate, interests also reduce employment and otherwise interfere with workers' interests, but they do not make an ideological and thus moral issue out of it. This may help to explain why

workers sometimes find it easier to identify with the conservative sectors of the higher classes than with liberals.

*Toward an Egalitarian Spectrum*

The profusion of ideological spectra is confusing and makes discussion difficult. It is not even clear whether the present ones serve any essential functions, including whether they are necessary to uphold the interests and values of their various advocates and partisans. In any case, I want to argue for a simpler spectrum, one which reflects and to some extent incorporates elements of the others.

This spectrum is egalitarian, with the Left being defined in favor of more equality and the Right in favor of less. Correlatively, those seeking maximum equality are placed on the far left, and those wanting the least are located at the far right. Presumably people who are against more equality do not mind being identified as being on the right, although this position is usually formulated as supporting greater "efficiency" or more "freedom"—even if the emphasis is on the freedom to pursue conservative interests. Whether equality is the most desirable social goal, or even a desirable goal together with others, is not at issue here; the spectrum exists simply to locate various egalitarian positions.<sup>5</sup>

As already noted, the previously discussed spectra all have some egalitarian undertones, insofar as the left positions usually involve, directly or indirectly, some reduction of inequalities, and the right ones some increase. Consequently, an egalitarian spectrum would, among other things, simplify the existing mixture of spectra. Despite some definitional difficulties around the concept of equality, they would also add logical clarity to specific ideologies, and spell out in more detail

<sup>5</sup> I should indicate that I have written in support of greater equality. See, e.g., my *More Equality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973).

their implications for social action and public policy—that is, who benefits and who pays the costs, be these material or nonmaterial.

In America, equality is usually defined as equality of opportunity. However, equality of opportunity is hard to measure, and its consequences are ambiguous enough that it is sometimes egalitarian only in theory, especially when the opportunity is equalized among people in highly unequal socioeconomic positions. For this and other reasons, it makes more sense to conceptualize this spectrum in terms of an equality of results or outcome, whether of material resources, power, or other socially valued goods.

One needed task is to decide which kinds of equality—for example, economic, political, racial—should be considered in formulating the spectrum. A possible solution is to ask the general public which kinds of equality it finds most important and how it would rank them. Another solution is to determine which kinds of equality are causally most important to the achievement of other kinds and rank them that way.

Most likely, economic equality would be placed at or near the top by either ranking method, and then being left means redistribution of income and wealth in an egalitarian or downward direction, and being right means supporting redistribution in the upward, or inegalitarian, direction. In such a spectrum, any plans or policies which directly or indirectly help improve the condition of the poor, as long as the poor feel that improvement, also belong on the left, while those which help to make the rich richer belong on the right.

Furthermore, as long as money “makes the world go round” and is also easily quantified, who gets more income, in money and/or kind, can be determined with relative, if hardly total, ease, and the same applies, with somewhat less ease, to increases and decreases in total wealth.<sup>6</sup> Thus public and

<sup>6</sup> Much of the difficulty stems from people’s ability to hide their income and wealth,

private policies can be analyzed for their effects on income and wealth, and arranged, at least roughly, on a scale from right to left. In a society like the United States, private income and wealth are most important, but even so, what people obtain in publicly allocated incomes, including incomes in kind as well as public goods, could be placed on the spectrum. Even the argument by Milton Friedman and other ultraconservatives—that public policies which mean to be egalitarian are in fact regressive, while market policies, which are on the surface conservative, actually have egalitarian effects—can be treated as an empirical question and then tested on the spectrum.

A second kind of equality, perhaps as important as the first, is political equality, with the Left being defined by redistribution of power downward among, or at least in behalf of, the general public, and the Right favoring upward redistribution to give more power to one or another elite. Changes in political equality are harder to assess than economic ones, and what kinds of access, or lack of it, to the polity—for example, voting, interest-group membership, lobbying—affect political power is not so easy to say. Moreover, people may not agree whether increased or decreased political power is an end or a means to other kinds of equality.

The importance of political equality is underlined by its close but complex relation with economic equality, for often, if hardly always, a group's increase in political power can be translated into an increase in economic equality and vice versa.

Gender, racial, ethnic, and religious minorities would presumably favor egalitarian measures which produce results in favor of more minority rights, less segregation, and the elimination of glass ceilings and other obstacles to upward mobility. Those favoring such changes belong on the left; those opposing them would be placed on the right.

In theory, an egalitarian spectrum should also be able to

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including from those who collect the statistics. As best one can tell, the most affluent also have the greatest ability to hide their resources.

handle autonomy, but since autonomy often involves rights, one group's autonomy may be another's responsibilities. However, to some extent, economic equality can incorporate autonomy, at least insofar as economic condition correlates with the ability to make choices. The affluent can almost always afford to choose more often and more freely than everyone else.

An egalitarian spectrum would be particularly useful for evaluating public policy, especially at the national level, for both its immediate and long-term results—and the implications for economic equality are always most easily analyzed. Because equality of results emphasizes resources, the evaluation, once measurement problems are solved, would be relatively clear and unambiguous.

Being simpler than the other spectra, an egalitarian spectrum may have greater interest for lay people than the current spectra. Thus it might also increase public understanding of the workings of ideology—and in that case, politicians could use such a spectrum to indicate when, how, and for whom particularly legislative proposals have egalitarian or inegalitarian implications.

If people were familiar with an egalitarian spectrum, and were used to seeing it applied to public policy, the Democrats might have been able to fight the disastrous Reagan-Bush economic policies more effectively than they did, by pointing out specifically who was being benefited and hurt by the various programs. An egalitarian tradition in the analysis of public policy could have charted the effects for different sectors of the population, beginning with the 1981 tax reforms that first enriched the higher-income groups and effectively ended the progressivity of the income tax, the reductions in safety-net programs that further impoverished the poor, and the increases in unemployment and social-security tax increases that hurt the moderate and middle-income majority.

Finally, in an era in which socialism and socialist concepts have lost much of what little support they once had in

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America, an egalitarian spectrum would be a useful substitute at least in part—and in good part because socialist thought remains valuable for its stress on egalitarian values.<sup>7</sup>

### *Conclusion*

While an egalitarian spectrum should be considered as a replacement for all the others, I have no illusion that this is likely to happen. However, such a spectrum could also exist in combination with, or as a complement to, one or more of the others. But even if the current spectra remain in use, it is time to start demanding clarity and to persuade the users of ideological concepts to define what they mean by the various positions on the spectra they use, and to specify in what sense, by what standard, and in relation to what social value or goal a particular ideological position is conservative or liberal.

If pollsters also altered their ways and defined the terms they use—or asked their respondents to define *theirs*—or both, we would all know much more about what Americans think are the issues of the day. We might even think more clearly about these issues as well.

<sup>7</sup> For a similar argument, see James B. Rule, "On Political Identities," *Dissent*, Fall 1990, pp. 478–480, and my "Heilbroner-Howe: Take I," *Dissent*, Winter 1991, pp. 139–140.

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