

## Our Big Fight Over Nothing: The Political Spectrum Does Not Exist

One of the real tragedies of contemporary politics is that our most bitter disagreements are about something that doesn't even exist—the political spectrum. Left and right are entirely tribal designations and have no unifying philosophy or principle behind them that can be represented on a unidimensional spectrum.

This may sound like an absurd claim, but before rejecting out of hand, consider that the political spectrum rests on an essentialist theory of ideology that has been soundly falsified. The essentialist theory says that, although it may seem that there are many distinct political issues in politics, there is actually just [one big issue](#)—an underlying essence that ties them all together (e.g., change vs. preservation, equality vs. freedom, order vs. liberty, realism vs. idealism, etc.). If politics is unidimensional (about one essential issue), then a unidimensional political spectrum is adequate to represent politics.

An alternative to this essentialist theory is the “social theory” of ideology, which says that distinct political positions correlate because they are bound by a [unifying tribe](#). If the right-wing team is currently in favor of tax cuts and opposed to abortion, then those who identify with that team will adopt those positions as a matter of [social conformity](#), not because both are expressions of some underlying principle. If the social theory is correct, the political spectrum is useless because there is no single essence; instead there are many unrelated political issues and therefore many political dimensions.

To figure out which theory is correct, let's test the predictions that each makes. The essentialist theory predicts that, since core principles define the political spectrum, we should find people holding a consistent set of “left” or “right” positions independent of socialization. In fact, we find the opposite. Jason Weeden and Rob Kurzban have shown that people don't hold political views that fit ideological molds *until after they are socialized into the [left-right way of thinking](#)*. The less tribal and the more ignorant of the political spectrum someone is, the less their views will [align neatly](#) with current ideological configurations.

The social theory, by contrast, predicts that since the positions associated with right and left are not natural, but tribal, we should expect to see ideologues changing their positions depending on what the tribe is doing. This is exactly what we find. Ideologues will hold opposite policy positions, depending on [who else they think supports them](#) and they are far more likely to [change their positions](#) to [fit the politicians for whom they vote](#) than they are to change their vote to a politician who fits their positions. Ideological self-categorization “taps not what the respondent thinks about various issues but rather the ideological label he or she [finds most suitable](#).” As the social theory predicts, they first choose *whom* to identify with and [only then choose what to identify with](#) in terms of policy. In the [words of psychologist Dan Kahan](#), they “endorse whichever position reinforces their connection to others with whom they share important ties.” Social influence, not an underlying “essence,” explains the correlation we find between right and left-wing views on fiscal, social, and foreign policies. The game is “[follow the tribe](#)” as the social theory says, not “follow the principle” as the essentialist theory says.

Public opinion polls further reinforce the point, showing that left-right ideologues constantly [switch their beliefs](#) to conform to the tribe. In the past decade alone we've seen self-described conservatives go from being vehemently anti-Russia to vehemently pro-Russia, strongly pro-trade to strongly anti-trade, believing that personal character matters a great deal in politicians to believing that it matters not at all, highly concerned with the budget deficit to highly indifferent to the budget deficit, staunchly interventionist in foreign policy to staunchly isolationist. Where is the "essence" behind all of this variation? [It doesn't exist](#). The views associated with left and right are constantly shifting for [social reasons](#) that have nothing to do with essential principles.

The essentialist theory says that people come to join political tribes by [starting with an essential principle](#), using that principle to arrive at hundreds of distinct political positions, and then joining the tribe that agrees with them on all of those positions. The social theory, on the other hand, says that this is backward: people first anchor into an ideological tribe, adopt the positions of the tribe as a matter of socialization, and only then invent a story to explain how an essential principle binds all of those positions together. Ideology is reverse-engineered to fit tribal actions and attachments. If the social theory is correct, then ideologies are, to use [Jonathan Haidt's words](#), "*post hoc* constructions designed to justify what we've just done, or to support the groups we belong to."

Once again, the social theory is vindicated. Through an extensive analysis of election and public opinion surveys, Donald Kinder and Nathan Kalmoe found that people first anchor into an ideological tribe—because of family, peers, or a single issue they feel strongly about—and only then adopt the full-range of beliefs associated with that tribe. Kinder and Kalmoe conclude that ideological identification is primarily [a cause, not an effect](#), of a person's political views. The social theory agrees with political theorist [Michael Oakeshott who said](#), "Far from a political ideology being the quasi-divine parent of political activity, it turns out to be its earthly stepchild...political activity comes first and a political ideology follows after." The essentialist theory says that tribe follows principle, but, actually, principle follows tribe.

The two theories also differ in how they view political parties. In the essentialist theory, ideologies are unchanging, transcendent principles while parties are evolving social organizations that can be ["captured" by the ideologies](#). In the social theory, by contrast, ideologies don't capture parties; *parties capture ideologies*—that is, they redefine them. Once again, the predictions of the social theory [are borne out](#) while those of the essentialist theory are not: what is considered "right-wing" or "left-wing" is simply whatever the [Republican and Democratic Parties happen to stand for](#) at a [given moment](#). In the essentialist theory, left-right ideologies are the philosophies that underlie the many disparate issues of each party; in the social theory, left-right ideologies are tools of self-delusion—they let us indulge the fantasy that our partisanship is principled rather than tribal, i.e., that there is some noble ideal connecting all the distinct and unrelated issues that our party happens to support. In nearly every prediction it makes, the essentialist theory is falsified.

The common retort of many essentialists to such studies is that conservatives or liberals who would switch their positions so easily aren't ["true conservatives"](#) or ["true liberals"](#), but in this the essentialists are falling prey to the "private language fallacy"—the erroneous belief that a *private* individual can arbitrarily determine the meaning of *public* words. The thousands of Fox News-

watching, Bush-voting, Limbaugh-listening, CPAC-supporting people in these studies call themselves “conservatives,” the media calls them “conservatives,” and the politicians they support are coded as “conservative” in ideological voting measures; they are, therefore, “real conservatives” in the only sense that it’s possible to be a “real conservative.” (If the Conservative Political Action Conference isn’t “truly conservative,” then nothing is.) Saying that these people are not “real conservatives” is akin to saying FDR was not a “real liberal,” corn flakes are not “real cereal,” or Toyota Corollas are not “real cars.” Since there is no transcendent definition of ideology beyond the tribe, then those who compose the liberal and conservative tribes are, by definition, “true” liberals and conservatives.

I understand why so many of us want to believe in the political spectrum—it makes politics simple and gives us the illusion that everything our party believes has an underlying ([and righteous](#)) philosophical coherence—but it’s time to face up to the facts. We simply must stop pretending that “right-wing” and “left-wing” are anything other than tribal designations. If we do, we can become more rational, more humble, less tribal, and ultimately, more open-minded when it comes to public issues.