**Left–right Politics**

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The **left–right** [political spectrum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_spectrum) is a system of classifying political positions, [ideologies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology) and [parties](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_party). [Left-wing politics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left-wing_politics) and [right-wing politics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right-wing_politics) are often presented as opposed, although a particular individual or group may take a left-wing stance on one matter and a right-wing stance on another. In France, where the terms originated, *the Left* has been called "the party of movement" and *the Right* "the party of order." The intermediate stance is called [centrism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Centrism) and a person with such a position is a **moderate**.

There is general agreement that *the Left* includes: [anarchists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anarchism), [anti-capitalists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-capitalism), [anti-imperialists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-imperialism), [autonomists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autonomism), [communists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communism), [democratic-socialists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_socialism), [feminists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism), [greens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_politics), [left-libertarians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left-libertarianism), [progressives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressivism), [secularists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularism), [socialists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialism), [social democrats](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_democracy), and [social liberals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_liberalism).

There is also general consensus that *the Right* includes: [capitalists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capitalism), [conservatives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservatism), [fascists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fascism), [monarchists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monarchism), [nationalists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationalism), [neoconservatives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoconservatism), [neoliberals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoliberalism), [reactionaries](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reactionary), [right-libertarians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right-libertarianism), [social authoritarians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right-wing_authoritarianism), [theocrats](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theocracy), and [traditionalists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditionalist_conservatism).

**History of the terms**

The terms "left" and "right" appeared during the [French Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Revolution) of 1789 when members of the [National Assembly](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Assembly_%28French_Revolution%29) divided into supporters of the king to the president's right and supporters of the revolution to his left. One deputy, the Baron de Gauville explained, "We began to recognize each other: those who were loyal to religion and the king took up positions to the right of the chair so as to avoid the shouts, oaths, and indecencies that enjoyed free rein in the opposing camp." However the Right opposed the seating arrangement because they believed that deputies should support private or general interests but should not form factions or political parties. The contemporary press occasionally used the terms "left" and "right" to refer to the opposing sides.

When the National Assembly was replaced in 1791 by a [Legislative Assembly](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legislative_Assembly_%28France%29) comprising entirely new members, the divisions continued. "Innovators" sat on the left, "moderates" gathered in the center, while the "conscientious defenders of the constitution" found themselves sitting on the right, where the defenders of the [Ancient Régime](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancien_R%C3%A9gime) had previously gathered. When the succeeding [National Convention](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Convention) met in 1792, the seating arrangement continued, but following the coup d'état of 2 June 1793, and the arrest of the [Girondins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girondins), the right side of the assembly was deserted, and any remaining members who had sat there moved to the center. However following the [Thermidorian Reaction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thermidorian_Reaction) of 1794 the members of the far left were excluded and the method of seating was abolished. The new constitution included rules for the assembly that would "break up the party groups."

However following the [Restoration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bourbon_Restoration) in 1814–1815 political clubs were again formed. The majority [ultraroyalists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ultra-royalist) chose to sit on the right. The "constitutionals" sat in the center while independents sat on the left. The terms *extreme right* and *extreme left*, as well as *center-right* and *center-left*, came to be used to describe the nuances of ideology of different sections of the assembly.

The terms "left" and "right" were not used to refer to political ideology but only to seating in the legislature. After 1848, the main opposing camps were the "[democratic socialists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Mountain_%281849%29)" and the "reactionaries" who used red and white flags to identify their party affiliation.

With the establishment of the [Third Republic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Third_Republic) in 1871, the terms were adopted by political parties: the Republican Left, the Centre Right, and the Centre Left (1871) and the Extreme Left (1876) and Radical Left (1881). Beginning in the early twentieth century the terms left and right came to be associated with specific political ideologies and were used to describe citizens' political beliefs, gradually replacing the terms "reds" and "the reaction" or "republicans" and "conservatives". By 1914 the left half of the legislature was composed of Unified Socialists, Republican Socialists and Socialist Radicals, while the parties that were called "left" now sat on the right side.

There was asymmetry in the use of the terms left and right by the opposing sides. The right mostly denied that the left–right spectrum was meaningful because they saw it as artificial and damaging to unity. The left, however, seeking to change society, promoted the distinction. As [Alain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89mile_Chartier) observed in 1931, "When people ask me if the division between parties of the right and parties of the left, men of the right and men of the left, still makes sense, the first thing that comes to mind is that the person asking the question is certainly not a man of the left"

In British politics the terms 'right' and 'left' came into common use for the first time in the late 1930s in debates over the [Spanish Civil War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Civil_War).

The Scottish sociologist [Robert M. MacIver](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_M._MacIver) noted in *The Web of Government* (1947):

The right is always the party sector associated with the interests of the upper or dominant classes, the left the sector expressive of the lower economic or social classes, and the center that of the middle classes. Historically this criterion seems acceptable. The conservative right has defended entrenched prerogatives, privileges and powers; the left has attacked them. The right has been more favorable to the aristocratic position, to the hierarchy of birth or of wealth; the left has fought for the equalization of advantage or of opportunity, for the claims of the less advantaged. Defense and attack have met, under democratic conditions, not in the name of class but in the name of principle; but the opposing principles have broadly corresponded to the interests of the different classes.

**Political parties in the political spectrum**

Seating in the 2009 European Parliament
[European United Left–Nordic Green Left](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_United_Left%E2%80%93Nordic_Green_Left) (35)
[Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive_Alliance_of_Socialists_and_Democrats) (184)
[European Greens–European Free Alliance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Greens%E2%80%93European_Free_Alliance) (55)
[Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alliance_of_Liberals_and_Democrats_for_Europe) (84)
[European People's Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_People%27s_Party) (265)
[European Conservatives and Reformists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Conservatives_and_Reformists) (54)
[Europe of Freedom and Democracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europe_of_Freedom_and_Democracy) (32)
[Non-Inscrits](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-Inscrits) (27)

Political scientists have observed that the ideologies of political parties can be mapped along a single left–right axis. [Klaus von Beyme](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klaus_von_Beyme) categorized European parties into nine families, which described most parties. He was able to arrange seven of them from left to right: [communist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist), [socialist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist), [green](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_politics), [liberal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberalism), [Christian democratic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_democratic), [conservative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservative) and [right-wing extremist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Far_right). The position of agrarian and regional/ethnic parties varied. A study conducted in the late 1980s on two bases, positions on ownership of the means of production and positions on social issues, confirmed this arrangement.

There has been a tendency for party ideologies to persist, and values and views that were present at a party's founding have survived. However they have also adapted for pragmatic reasons, making them appear more similar. [Lipset](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seymour_Martin_Lipset) and [Rokkan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stein_Rokkan) observed that modern party systems are the product of social conflicts played out in the last few centuries. They said that lines of cleavage had become 'frozen'.

The first modern political parties were liberals, organized by the middle class in the 19th century to protect them against the aristocracy. They were major political parties in that century but declined in the twentieth century as first the working class came to support socialist parties and economic and social change eroded their middle class base. Conservative parties arose in opposition to liberals in order to defend aristocratic privilege. But in order to attract voters they became less doctrinaire than liberals. However they were unsuccessful in most countries and generally have only been able to achieve power through cooperation with other parties.

Socialist parties were organized in order to achieve political rights for workers and were originally allied with liberals. However they broke with the liberals when they sought worker control of the means of production. Christian democratic parties were organized by Catholics who saw liberalism as a threat to traditional values. Although established in the 19th century, they became a major political force following the Second World War. Communist parties emerged following a division within socialism first on support of the First World War and then support of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Right-wing extremist parties are harder to define, other than being more right-wing than other parties, but include [fascists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fascism) and some extreme conservative and nationalist parties.

Green parties were the most recent of the major party groups to develop. They have rejected socialism and they are very liberal on social issues.

These categories can be applied to many parties outside Europe. Ware (1996) asserted that in the United States both major parties were liberal, even though there are left–right policy differences between them.

**Usage in Western Europe**

In the 2001 book *The government and politics of France*, Knapp and Wright say that the main factor dividing the left and right wings in Western Europe is class. The Left seeks [social justice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_justice) through [redistributive social and economic policies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Redistribution_of_wealth), while the Right defends private property and capitalism. The nature of the conflict depends on existing social and political cleavages and on the level of economic development. Left-wing values include the belief in the power of human reason to achieve progress for the benefit of the human race, secularism, sovereignty exercised through the legislature, social justice, and mistrust of strong personal political leadership. To the Right, this is regularly seen as [anti-clericalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-clericalism), unrealistic social reform, doctrinaire socialism and class hatred. The Right are skeptical about the capacity for radical reforms to achieve human well-being while maintaining workplace competition. They believe in the established church both in itself and as an instrument of social cohesion, and believe in the need for strong political leadership to minimize social and political divisions. To the Left, this is seen as a selfish and reactionary opposition to social justice, a wish to impose doctrinaire religion on the population, and a tendency to authoritarianism and repression.

The differences between left and right have altered over time. The initial cleavage at the time of the French Revolution was between supporters of [absolute monarchy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Absolute_monarchy) (the Right) and those who wished to limit the king's authority (the Left). During the 19th century the cleavage was between monarchists and republicans. Following the establishment of the Third Republic in 1871, the cleavage was between supporters of a strong executive on the Right and supporters of the primacy of the legislature on the Left.

**Contemporary usage in the United States**

The terms *left-wing* and *right-wing* are widely used in the United States but, as on the global level, there is no firm consensus about their meaning. The only aspect that is generally agreed upon is that they are the defining opposites of the United States [political spectrum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_spectrum). *Left* and *right* in the U.S. are generally associated with [*liberal*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_American_liberalism) and [*conservative*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservatism_in_the_United_States) respectively, although the meanings of the two sets of terms do not entirely coincide. Depending on the political affiliation of the individual using them, these terms can be spoken with varying implications. A 2005 poll of 2,209 American adults showed that "respondents generally viewed the paired concepts liberals and left-wingers and conservatives and right-wingers as possessing, respectively, generally similar political beliefs", but also showed that around ten percent fewer respondents understood the terms *left* and *right* than understood the terms *liberal* and *conservative*.

The contemporary [Left in the United States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Left) is usually understood as a category that, in addition to more radical [socialists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialism) and [anarchists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anarchism), includes [New Deal social-liberals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_American_liberalism) (in contrast to traditions of [social democracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_democracy) more common to Western Europe), [Rawlsian liberals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Rawls), and [civil libertarians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_libertarianism), who are often identified with the [Democratic Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_Party_%28United_States%29). In general, the term *left-wing* is understood to imply a commitment to [egalitarianism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egalitarianism), support for social policies that favor the [working class](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Working_class), and [multiculturalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multiculturalism). The contemporary center-left usually defines itself as promoting government regulation of business, commerce and industry; protection of fundamental rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion; and government intervention on behalf of racial, ethnic, and sexual [minorities](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minorities) and the working class.

The contemporary Right in the United States is usually understood as a category including [social conservatives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_conservatism), [Christian conservatives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Right) and [free market](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_market) liberals, and is generally identified with the [Republican Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republican_Party_%28United_States%29). In general, *right-wing* implies a commitment to [conservative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservatism) Christian values, support for a free-market system, and traditional family values and [civil libertarians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_libertarianism). The contemporary center-right usually defines itself as promoting [deregulation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deregulation) of banking, commerce, and industry.

Whether something is considered to be Left or Right depends on one's point of view. According to liberal commentator [David Sirota](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Sirota), writing in [Salon.com](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salon.com), "On economic issues, we are often told that right is center, center is left, and left is fringe."

**Relevance of the terms today**

Main article: [Political spectrum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_spectrum)

Some political scientists have suggested that the classifications of "left" and "right" are no longer meaningful in the modern complex world. Although these terms continue to be used, they advocate a more complex spectrum that attempts to combine political, economic and social dimensions.

However, a survey conducted between 1983 and 1994 by [Bob Altemeyer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Altemeyer) of Canadian legislative caucuses showed an 82% correlation between party affiliation and score on a scale for [right-wing authoritarianism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right-wing_authoritarianism) when comparing right-wing and social democratic caucuses. There was a wide gap between the scores of the two groups, which was filled by liberal caucuses. His survey of American legislative caucuses showed scores by American Republicans and Democrats were similar to the Canadian Right and liberals, with a 44% correlation between party affiliation and score.

[Norberto Bobbio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norberto_Bobbio) saw the polarization of the Italian Chamber of Deputies in the 1990s as evidence that the linear left/right axis remained valid. He thought that the argument that the spectrum had disappeared occurred when either the Left or Right were weak. The dominant side would claim that its ideology was the only possible one, while the weaker side would minimize its differences. He saw the Left and Right not in absolute terms, but as relative concepts that would vary over time. The key distinction was one of equality. The Right was committed to inequality while the further left one went the more committed to equality one was. In his view, the left/right axis could be applied to any time period.

The political philosopher [Charles Blattberg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Blattberg) has proposed *response to conflict* as the basis of a reinterpreted political spectrum. According to Blattberg, those who would respond to conflict with conversation should be considered as on the left, with negotiation as in the center, and with force as on the right. See his essay "Political Philosophies and Political Ideologies."

[Libertarian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libertarianism) writer [David Boaz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Boaz) argued that terms *left* and *right* are used to spin a particular point of view rather than as simple descriptors, with those on the "left" typically emphasizing their support for working people and accusing the right of supporting the interests of the upper class, and those on the "right" usually emphasizing their support for individualism and accusing the Left of supporting [collectivism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collectivism). Boaz asserts that arguments about the way the words should be used often displaces arguments about policy by raising emotional prejudice against a preconceived notion of what the terms mean.