

# The Myth of Ideological Polarization

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## FULL TEXT

A tweet by Elon Musk recently went viral among one of the least viral groups in society: political scientists. In an effort to explain why he no longer identifies as a liberal, Mr. Musk shared a cartoon (created by Colin Wright) that relies on the familiar "left-right" political spectrum. In this image, the centrist protagonist and conservatives remain stationary while liberals sprint to the "woke progressive" left. As a result of what the cartoon called "fellow liberals" stretching the political spectrum leftward, Mr. Musk indicated, he had gone from being center-left in 2008 to center-right in 2021 – even though his political beliefs hadn't changed.

Our fellow political scientists, most of whom identify as "liberal" or "progressive," were incensed at the suggestion that their side had become extreme. They cited a vast academic literature, much of which relies on a statistical application called "DW-NOMINATE," arguing that the Republican Party has moved to the "extreme right" in recent decades while their own Democratic Party has remained relatively moderate and sensible.

But the entire debate is based on a misconception. "Left" and "right" aren't fixed and enduring philosophical belief systems. They're merely social groups whose ideas, attitudes and issue positions constantly change. Since the meanings of "left" and "right" evolve, it makes little sense to speak of individuals, groups or parties moving "to the left" or "to the right." Nonetheless, talk of left and right dominates our public discourse and claims about "ideological polarization" fill the political science literature. In assuming that left and right have a fixed meaning, both Mr. Musk and political scientists are sorely mistaken. Polarization is a myth.

The left-right model ignores that politics is about many issues. Like every other realm of life, it is multidimensional, yet we describe it using a graph with only one dimension. It's true that many Americans hold their views in packages that we call "liberal" and "conservative" – those who currently support abortion rights, for instance, are also more likely to support vaccinations, income-tax increases, free trade and military intervention in Ukraine. But the question is why. Why is there a strong correlation between these seemingly unrelated issues, and why do we find them clustering in patterns that are predictable and binary instead of completely random and pluralistic?

The answer is socialization. When the Democratic and Republican parties change (as they have many times), the content and meaning of their ideologies change, too, meaning that ideologues ("liberals" and "conservatives") will change their views to stay in line with their political tribe. Social conformity, not philosophy, explains their beliefs. Those who refuse to conform and maintain their political views independent of tribe will appear to have "switched" groups – even though they stayed consistent while the ideologies changed around them.

This is what happened to Messrs. Musk and Wright. Liberals didn't move to the left; they redefined the left (e.g., to be less concerned with free speech and more with stopping the spread of infectious disease, even at the cost of exacerbating educational inequity), and Messrs. Musk and Wright disliked the new version.

This is also what happened to many Never Trumpers: It isn't that conservatives moved "to the right." Conservatives redefined "the right" – e.g., to be more nationalist, nativist, isolationist, protectionist and statist than it had been previously – and Never Trumpers didn't like the new version. Many of them insisted in 2015-16 that Donald Trump wasn't a "true conservative." Some subsequently held to their own earlier views, while others changed their positions on issues like abortion and race to fit in more with their newly acquired social group.

It doesn't make much sense to say, for instance, that Democrats "moved left" by turning away from free speech

when it was once a defining value of "the left." It is equally nonsensical to say that conservatives or Republicans "moved right" by turning away from values like entitlement reform, emphasizing personal morality in elected officials, and free trade when those once defined "the right."

But what about our common-sense intuition that our politics has become more extreme? True, politicians are increasingly breaking the norms of decency, ideologues are increasingly uncivil, protesters are increasingly militant, and increasing numbers of Americans are unwilling to accept the outcomes of elections. But these extreme behaviors aren't the product of extreme commitment to ideas so much as to political tribes.

On some issues both parties have taken more extreme positions than they did in the past, but on other issues they have moderated or switched positions entirely. Democrats favor gay rights far more than they did in the 1950s, but so do Republicans. Republicans favor lower income taxes more than they did in the 1960s, but so do Democrats. Democrats call for greater government intervention in the economy more than they did in the 1990s, but so do Republicans, and from the 1860s to the 1910s Republicans were the party of "big government." Democrats are more interventionist in foreign policy, but a decade ago Republicans were more interventionist. Can any of this be described as moving to the left or right? Obviously not.

Political scientists sometimes call the increasing anger between the parties "affective polarization," but we would be better off just calling it increased hostility. The term "polarization" confuses the matter by suggesting that the parties have moved toward fixed ideological poles. Yes, partisans are increasingly angry, tribal and isolated in media echo chambers. But to attribute this to positions on a mythical left-right spectrum misunderstands our politics entirely.

Although America has two dominant ideological tribes, there is nothing uniting all of the positions of either side. The parties have coalesced around the concepts of "left" and "right," but the concepts themselves are fictions. The ubiquitous left-right model of politics frames our thinking, shapes our language, and sets the terms of public debate, but it is completely wrong. There are many issues in politics. We confuse ourselves by using a political model that reduces them to one.

Rather than fighting over which group has moved farther leftward or rightward on a spectrum, Democrats and Republicans – not to mention political scientists – should dispense entirely with the fiction that there is a single spectrum to move around on. Doing so would help them think clearly about political issues and act charitably toward those outside their political tribe.

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Credit: By Verlan Lewis and Hyrum Lewis

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