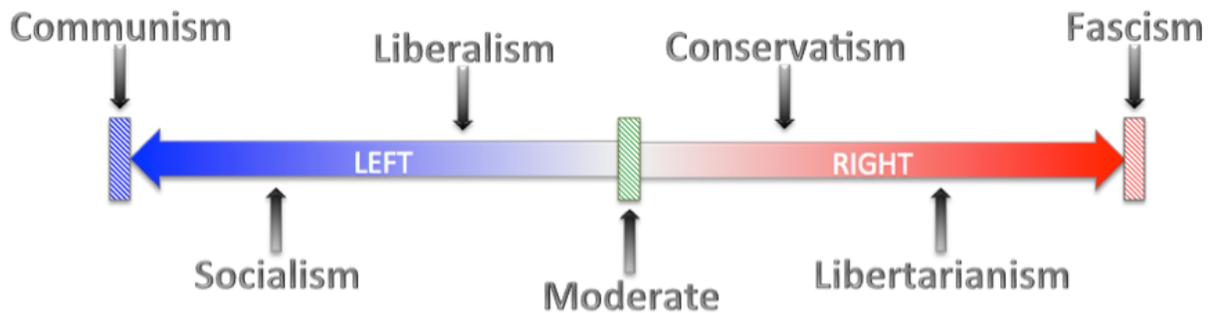
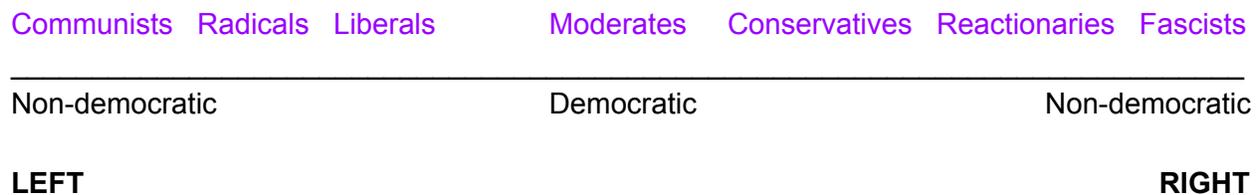
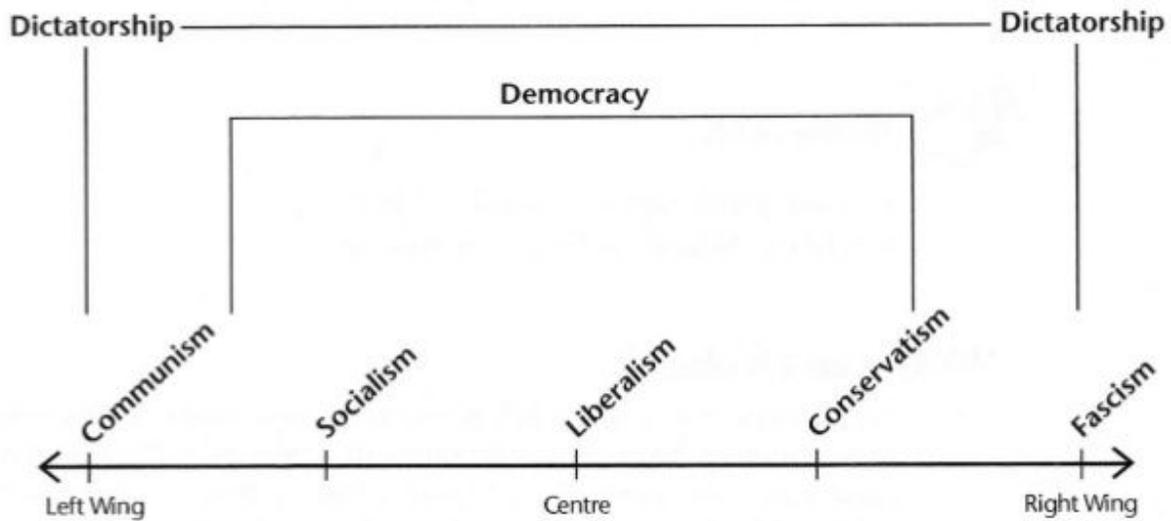


## Understanding the “Political Spectrum”

The political spectrum is a term used to show how different political perspectives relate to one another. Political scientists frequently illustrate that relationship by locating the various labels for these perspectives on a line extending from left to right. The center segment of the line is made up of individuals and groups who are strong supporters of democratic principles. As one moves outward toward the ends of the spectrum, one encounters individuals and groups who believe democracy is not an effective form of government and, in practice even if not in theory, they see powerful individuals as the most effective controls in a society. Traditionally, the spectrum is outlined in the following way:





The origins of the two most basic terms, **left** and **right**, can be traced back to the French Assembly in the period right after the French Revolution, where the more liberal thinkers gathered on the left side of the chamber and the more conservative ones sat on the right. There is no simple explanation for what is liberal or conservative. The explanation here will focus on the extremes of the left and right, as the extremes weigh heavily in the demise of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler.

The Nazis are found on the extreme right. Hitler patterned his Nazi Party on Mussolini's Fascist Party in Italy. As a result, the extreme right is usually labeled **fascist**. In general, fascists are extremely nationalistic; believe the individuals should serve the state, not the reverse; believe in racism and inequality, and want to maintain a social class system; support a capitalist economy with close government supervision; and believe in total government control over virtually all aspects of life, including family life, religion, and the arts. They are violently anti-communist and their support comes mainly from the middle and upper classes.

The **communists** are found on the extreme left. They promote an international revolution where national governments no longer matter; advocate a classless society; and support a socialist economy in which the government owns all large enterprises and lays out a master plan for the whole economy. The slogan by which all are to live is: "From each according to his ability, to

each according to his needs.” Support for communism comes primarily from the working class and the underprivileged. However, in their attempts to carry out their programs, they too resort to a dictatorship that exercises total control over all aspects of life. Communists are violently anti-fascist. Unfortunately for the student studying the spectrum, communism in practice is often in sharp contrast to its ideology.

Because communism and fascism both end up with **totalitarian** rule ( a twentieth century phenomenon), some political scientists think the spectrum is clearer if drawn as a circle.

***\*\*\*This spectrum activity is based on the political spectrum during the interwar years in Germany. It does not cover all areas of modern American political ideologies.\*\*\****

Nations with names that look democratic, but are not:

People’s Republic of China  
Democratic People’s Republic of Korea  
Democratic Republic of the Congo  
German Democratic Republic ( former East Germany)

## Why do the most totalitarian countries always have the most democratic-sounding names?

By Juliet Lapidos



The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (i.e., North Korea) **accused the United States** Wednesday of intruding on its airspace with surveillance planes—the latest tension between the two countries. Though nominally Socialist, the DPRK is a totalitarian regime, rather like other states that include the words *Democratic* or *People's Republic* as part of their official names. Like the People's Republic of China, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and don't forget former East Germany—the German Democratic Republic. Why is it that the least democratic countries always brandish democratic-sounding names?

Soviet influence. After the 1917 October Revolution, the newly established Soviet regime couldn't very well keep the moniker "Russian Empire," which connoted czarist rule. But "Russia" plain and simple wouldn't get at the seismic shift envisioned by the Bolsheviks. So, like the French in 1792—who tagged on the word *Republic* to mark the end of monarchic rule—the Bolsheviks called their new nation the "Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic." It was a fairly accurate title at the time: **Soviet** means council—like the councils of workers and soldiers who'd been organizing their communities as the government fell apart; *socialist* highlighted the difference between the new Russia and the bourgeois nations of Europe. A few years later, the RSFSR unified with other SSRs—including the Ukrainian SSR and the Belarusian SSR—to form the USSR, which became less "soviet" as time went on.

After World War II, countries influenced by the Soviets or forcibly occupied by the Red Army started adopting the "People's Republic" tag line instead of the SSR ending—like the People's Republic of Macedonia, the Hungarian People's Republic, and the Romanian People's Republic. This change partly reflects a shift away from the concept of grass-roots governance toward a unitary state structure and reinforces the idea that the state and its people are synonymous. (The phrase *People's Republic* actually dates back to the founding of the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1917 and the Tuvianian People's Republic in 1921, but it didn't become widespread until after the war.)

Just as Soviet political models would filter into the Far East, so would Soviet naming practices. To signal solidarity with pro-Soviet states, the Supreme People's Assembly in Pyongyang established the new Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948. The word *Democratic*, in this case, was used to distinguish North Korea from the (very

short-lived) "**People's Republic of Korea**" to the south. In 1949, Mao **officially declared** the founding of the People's Republic of China. Similar to the North Korean case, the word *People* was used to distinguish the name from Chiang Kai-shek's "Republic of China."

Although the North Koreans used the modifier *democratic* to claim a unique local identity, other countries—like Laos (1975) and East Germany (1949)—had a more specific intention. These weren't bourgeois republics, like those found in Western Europe, but countries organized to serve the **demos** or common people. So "democratic" was really just another way of saying "socialist republic." Like many other socialist states, they went the way of totalitarianism. Thus we get the seemingly inverse relationship between the use of the word *democratic* and the actual democratic structure of the country in question.

In the African context, the use of populist words in state names is a way to emphasize freedom from colonial rule. (Since many anti-colonial uprisings had a Communist tinge, the state names also reflect a leftist inclination.) Thus, post-independence from Belgium, the Belgian Congo became the Republic of the Congo and later the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And after liberation from France, Algeria became, officially, the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria.

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