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"Leftists", a Distinct and Meaningful Group?

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Abstract

This article proposes a comprehensive taxonomy of the diverse types of "leftism", grounded in historical and materialist analysis, to inform future comparative research on political systems and ideology. More specifically, it discusses (1) the taxonomic confusion over leftism and liberalism, (2) the plausible overlap between the liberal-conservative and left-right metaphors, (3) leftists as a distinct group versus liberals, (4) leftists as different groups from each other, and (5) the implications of the above for political, psychological research, and activism, in the hope of encouraging debate, advancing our understanding of social reality, and improving cooperation and conflict resolution.

Keywords

leftism, liberalism, social class, social identity, political psychology, political taxonomy

Resumen

Este artículo propone una taxonomía integral de los diversos tipos de "izquierdismo", fundamentada en un análisis histórico y materialista, para guiar futuras investigaciones comparativas sobre sistemas políticos e ideología. Más específicamente, discute (1) la confusión taxonómica en torno al izquierdismo y el liberalismo, (2) la plausible superposición entre las metáforas liberal-conservadora e izquierda-derecha, (3) los izquierdistas como grupo distintivo frente a los liberales, (4) las diferencias entre los distintos grupos izquierdistas, y (5) las implicaciones de lo anterior para la investigación política y psicológica, así como para el activismo, con la esperanza de fomentar el debate, avanzar en nuestra comprensión de la realidad social y mejorar la cooperación y la resolución de conflictos.

Palabras Clave

clase social, identidad social, izquierdismo, liberalismo, psicología política, taxonomía política

Non-Technical Summary

Background

Navigating political debates can be confusing, especially when terms like "leftist" and "liberal" are used interchangeably—as if they meant the same thing. Although they sometimes overlap, these labels represent distinct political traditions with different goals and values, particularly across countries and throughout history. Moreover, there is not just one type of leftism; the category itself encompasses a wide spectrum of ideologies or approaches, from reformists to revolutionaries. This article offers a clearer map to understand not only the differences between liberals and leftists but also the diversity within leftism itself.

Why was this study done?
This research was motivated by the real-world consequences of conceptual confusion. Misunderstanding distinctions between ideologies or groups can lead to fragile political alliances, oversimplified media narratives, conceptual and methodological errors in research, and even citizens supporting policies against their own interests. Without a shared and precise language, effective dialogue—or productive disagreement—becomes nearly impossible.

What did the researchers do and find?
Through historical and theoretical analysis, this study develops a classification system (a taxonomy) of leftist movements and groups. It compares liberalism and leftism—and, crucially, different lefts—on key issues like their ideological foundations, their attitudes towards economic and social issues, and their political strategies. The main conclusion is that leftism is not a monolith. The study identifies several ideological "families", from European social democracy (which may overlap nowadays with US liberalism) to socialist, communist, anarchist, and "new left" traditions. Each has its own vision of how society should work and how change should be achieved.

What do these findings mean?
The proposed taxonomy can allow for more nuanced and better-informed political debates. Researchers can use this framework to avoid conceptual and methodological errors in their studies on people's political beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour. Readers at large would gain a vocabulary to better understand their own beliefs and those of others—and to advocate more effectively for their interests. Ultimately, this work aims to provide a conceptual toolkit that helps everyone—from researchers to activists to engaged citizens—navigate today's complex political landscape with greater clarity.

One primary goal for political psychologists is to understand, explain, and eventually predict people's political beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. This involves examining how personal and group "identities" influence political opinions and actions. Here, "identity" refers to the way individuals see themselves in relation to groups they are part of or not (e.g., nationality, sex, class). Crucially, individuals are more likely to engage in behaviours consistent with their identities and perceived interests (Blader, 2007; Turner & Reynolds, 2003, p. 201). In other words, identity constitutes a more or less accurate set of beliefs about us and our interests within the social structure.

Yet, identities are not formed in a vacuum; they are shaped by social, material factors, including historical narratives and consensual definitions established by others (Cikara et al., 2022; Spears, 2021; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 41). These dynamics are evident in politics, where parties not only appeal to existing identities but also actively shape or even promote new ones (Brown & Hohman, 2022; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Therefore, when trying to understand political behaviour, it is important not only to ask people what they think, but to study the broader framework in which their opinions take place.

In this sense, Flores-Robles et al. (2025) highlight the consideration of "committed leftists" as a "distinct and meaningful" group, outside the traditional liberal-conservative spectrum. They do so largely based on how US leftists understand "their own identity" and how "their moral judgments about the status quo distinguish them from their liberal counterparts". Certainly, such distinction sounds significant, reflecting different ideological frameworks, priorities, and approaches to social and economic issues. Yet, it can be controversial and debatable; the very definitions of liberalism and leftism are.

This paper examines leftism as a political, dynamic phenomenon. First, it analyses its historical roots and the left-right/liberal-conservative spectrum overlap. Then, it contrasts attitudes between leftists and liberals—and, most notably, between leftists—offering a broader taxonomy of their different ideological foundations and attitudes towards key issues, which may inform future comparative research across political systems. Crucially, this paper argues that identities (or ideologies) are not static but dynamic, shaped by—and shaping—social and material contexts (Blader, 2007; Marx, 1859/1999; Turner & Reynolds, 2003). Political attitudes and behaviours emerge from this dialectic. That is, the attitudinal dimension and identity (or ideologies) are mutually constitutive: shared attitudes reinforce group identity, while group identity raises the likelihood of shared attitudes. This framework avoids treating leftism as merely a label or a fixed set of beliefs. Subsequent sections explore implications for political psychology and activism.

Taxonomic Turmoil

The first use of the term "liberal" by a political group was in Spain in the early 19th century, by those who opposed Napoleon and the subsequent restoration of the monarch's absolute power. The term then spread to other countries and languages with analogous meaning. The label "leftist", meanwhile, emerged in the late 18th century during the French Revolution. This was the origin of the left-right metaphor, being leftists those who opposed absolutism in the French National Assembly. That is, both terms have a common ideological and historical root (Enlightenment principles, ideas of progress and reform, opposition to the *ancien regime,* etc.). Likewise, both reflected the interests of the then revolutionary class, the bourgeoisie, i.e., individual freedom, limited government, and free market (at least initially). Yet, both groups diverged in their approaches to achieving ideal society, especially over time and in different countries. Even the label liberal now carries contradictory meanings (see Ball et al., 2024).

In contemporary usage, the left-right spectrum reflects a continuum from egalitarian, system-change positions (left) to hierarchical, status-quo-preserving ones (right), at least in the bourgeois democracies (Bobbio, 1996). Dominant left-wing factions may also adopt system-maintenance functions upon seizing power, yet their anti-capitalist character would endure provided they suppress the bourgeois counter-revolution and advance socialist construction—even as minority factions further to the left, adhering to more radical critiques, persist (Lenin, 1920/1974). Thus, despite their bourgeois origins, the left-right metaphor maintains its polar or axiological meaning (Bobbio, 1996; Thorisdottir et al., 2007).

The liberal-conservative spectrum, however, operates differently. Where Marxist influence remained limited (e.g., the US), liberalism largely retained its original progressive character (Caprara & Vecchione, 2018). Conversely, wherever socialist movements gained prominence (e.g., Europe), liberalism acquired a right-wing connotation: after all, it was the ideology of the bourgeoisie—progressive in dismantling the *ancien régime*, yet still conservative vis-à-vis working-class interests (see Marx & Engels, 1846/1968, pp. 22-23). Indeed, once the bourgeoisie became the dominant class—either replacing or allying with the nobility—liberalism, as its ideology, became somewhat synonymous with conservatism. It is significant how right-wing parties in Europe call themselves "liberal conservatives" or "Christian democrats". These parties ostensibly champion free market and minimal state intervention (though they may resort to such intervention to protect property relations or safeguard the interest of the dominant class). In turn, they frequently remain traditional in social issues (i.e., they defend the "new" bourgeois status quo). They are sometimes termed or related to "neoliberals", to distinguish them from the social-liberal tradition (see Smith, 2024).

Thus, in Europe, modern leftism may be seen as analogous to 18th century liberalism in that both seek to overcome an oppressive status quo and establish a more egalitarian society. Indeed, advocates of socialism—particularly proponents of "scientific socialism"—view themselves as heirs to Enlightenment principles and French revolutionists (Engels, 1880/2003). Socialism, in turn, laid the foundations for European social democrats, which today constitute one of the two dominant political forces, alongside their centre-right counterparts: the liberal conservatives (or, in some countries, "popular parties" or Christian democrats). Admittedly, there are also liberal parties in Europe (economically liberal, thus right-leaning, yet often progressive on civil rights). These parties frequently act as "kingmakers", enabling either centre-right or centre-left governments by supporting liberal conservatives or social democrats, respectively. Though smaller factions exist on both the right and the left, social democrats and liberal conservatives dominate politics in most European nations and in the EU Parliament. Consequently, in Europe, the left-right divide carries a more polar or axiological weight than the liberal-conservative one.

In the US, meanwhile, liberalism retains a connotation of progress and reform. This may come as a surprise, given that the bourgeois class also rules there, yet, as already noted, one possible explanation is that socialism did not take root in the US. In turn, it would be due to specific material and historical factors. For example, as Flores-Robles et al. (2025) point out, socialism suffered severe persecution there (the "Red Scare"). As the case may be, in the US Congress, there aren't parties other than Republicans and Democrats. The former is generally considered conservative, or more recently, "right-wing populist", whereas the latter positions itself somewhat to the left on economic issues and is considered more liberal on civil rights (Arhin et al., 2023; Smith, 2021). Accordingly, the liberal-conservative metaphor is the meaningful one in the US.

In short, the label liberalism became conservative in Europe (post-bourgeois consolidation) but retained progressive connotations in the US (due to socialism's marginalisation). Yet, certain overlap between the two spectra might be considered.

Overlap Between the Two Spectra

Following the above, Europe may seem more liberal or leftist than the US. European social democrats seem stronger advocates of welfare states than US Democrats. Even European liberal conservatives seem more in favour of welfare states than US Democrats, and certainly more than Republicans (Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). In fact, the latter tend to align themselves with the European Conservatives and Reformists Party, i.e., a political bloc further to the right than liberal conservatives. This could also be explained by material, historical factors: the working-class roots of European social democrats, the Christian democrats' determination to counter the "Red Menace", and proximity to the USSR, could have made European politics gravitate more towards socialism (Dudziak, 2000; Gilman, 2003, pp. 42-46, 58, 2017; Gregory & Stuart, 2014, p. 290).

On another note, EU governance is often shaped by *de facto* coalitions of social democrats and liberal conservatives, with liberal and green support (see Raunio, 2022). Such coalitions dominate the European political landscape, giving it a degree of stability vis-à-vis Eurosceptic parties. In fact, European parties could be placed on one Europeanist-Eurosceptic axis, without clear equivalent in the US. Euroscepticism can be found both on the right of liberal conservatives (i.e., among European Conservatives and Reformists, Patriots for Europe, and Europe of Sovereign Nations groups) and on the left of social democrats (i.e., among European United Left-Nordic Green Left groups). In the US, too, there would be secessionist sentiments, most pronounced among Republican voters (Jacobs, 2024). Yet, it would not, in principle, be as singled out, or branded as anti-system, as Eurosceptics are (Brack, 2018).

Notwithstanding the foregoing, we can consider an overlap between both liberal-conservative and left-right spectra (see Eldridge, 2024). That is, American and European political systems would be not so different after all. First, though European social democrats and liberal conservatives may unite against populist or Eurosceptic parties, they ultimately compete for power, mirroring the dynamic between Democrats and Republicans in the US. That is, both social democrats and liberal conservatives, and Democrats and Republicans, represent two sides of the same bourgeois project. The former advocate more market regulation and social justice; the latter, free market and traditional values (at least on paper).

Second, the defence of welfare states is less contested in the EU than in the US. However, this is ceasing to be the case due to material, historical factors such as the fall of the USSR and the weakening of the "Red Menace" (Gilman, 2017). In fact, European welfare states are being dismantled to a large extent and European social democrats are moving to the right, further away from their socialist origins (Navarro, 2013). Consider Tony Blair's *Third Way,* or how British Labourites get closer to (neo)liberalism (Navarro, 1999). Occasionally, e.g., in times of economic crisis, socialist-inspired leaders emerge within the European social democrats (e.g., Jeremy Corbyn in the UK) or even within the US Democrats (e.g., Bernie Sanders), though their tenure tends to be short-lived.

Indeed, the far-right seems to be growing in Europe (Aktas, 2024). The European political landscape arguably heads towards two large political coalitions; one of social democrats, liberals, and greens, and perhaps some liberal conservatives (which would amount to US Democrats), and other liberal conservatives, conservatives and reformists, patriots, and sovereigntists (closer to Republicans). Both would defend, to varying degrees, liberal positions (in an economic sense). None would question society's material foundations (the capitalist mode of production) nor confront the ruling elite. Differences would be confined to civil rights.

So, there would not only be an overlap between the two spectra; there would also be, or would tend to be, an overlap between European social democrats (and other centre-left forces) and US Democrats, on the one hand, and between European liberal conservatives (and other right-wing forces) and US Republicans, on the other. Meanwhile, leftists remain absent from the US Congress and are a dwindling minority in the European Parliament (see Aktas, 2024; Azmanova, 2004). Yet, they still advocate welfare states and the regulation of capitalism to a greater extent than social democrats, and to a much greater extent than US liberals. Therefore, it seems reasonable, in principle, to posit leftism

as a distinct and meaningful "anti-capitalist" (or "post-capitalist") option, in both Europe and the US, even outside the political spectrum. Yet it may be a hasty conclusion.

Leftists as a Distinct Group

Political groups, be they parties or social movements, are often defined in relation to other groups, on the basis of what differentiates them. Thus, to define leftists we may compare them with US liberals (and/or with European social democrats). Let us see some differences:

Ideological Foundations

Liberals and social democrats typically advocate social justice, civil rights, and some economic regulation. They often advance gradual reforms, emphasising the importance of government intervention to address inequalities (hence the labels "gradualist", "incrementalist" or "reformist"). Leftists, meanwhile, tend to criticise the foundations of capitalism and advocate radical changes, seeking to dismantle systemic structures they view as oppressive (Caprara & Vecchione, 2018; Marx & Engels, 1848/1969).

Economic Views

Liberals and social democrats generally support mixed economies, with both market and government playing a role. They favour policies like progressive taxation and social safety nets. Leftists, meanwhile, often reject free market, and argue for a more extensive redistribution of wealth, nationalisation of key industries, and even to overthrow the capitalist mode of production and supersede it with a revolutionary transition to communist relations of production, abolishing wage labour and private ownership of the means of production (Marx, 1875/1970; Wu, 2011).

Social Issues

Liberals and social democrats may align on progressive social reforms (e.g., LGBT rights, racial equality). New leftists, meanwhile, often employ "intersectionality" to analyse how overlapping oppressions (race, class, gender, etc.) compound marginalisation (Samie, 2025). It leads them to demand structural change beyond liberal "incrementalism", but also beyond economic reductionism. Classical socialists already criticised economic reductionism or "economism", considering that class struggle should respond to "all cases" of oppression (Lenin, 1902/1977, p. 412). However, contemporary leftists often abandon materialist, class analysis, suggesting further division among leftists (Hanappi & Hanappi-Egger, 2018).

Political Strategy

Liberals and social democrats often work within major existing political parties (e.g., US Democrats, EU social democrats) or major trade unions. Revolutionary leftists partially and circumstantially align with this strategy. For instance, Lenin (1920/1974) advocated participation in bourgeois institutions as a tactic for agitation and political activity, arguing not to leave the masses "under the influence of the reactionary leaders" (p. 53). Yet, other leftists such as left communists or anarchists remain more sceptical of mainstream politics. Likewise, new radical leftists are divided between those that engage in electoral politics and those that reject institutional participation (March & Mudde, 2005).

The findings of Flores-Robles et al. (2025) would confirm the above differences between liberals and leftists in the US. Sampled liberals were less likely to make structural attributions for poverty, and more likely to justify the system, to support free market and capitalism, and incremental (vs. radical) change, than sampled leftists (differences that we would probably find between social democrats and leftists in Europe). Likewise, the study suggests that leftists in the US are reluctant to vote Democrats as the "lesser evil" (which, by the way, is also to be expected from European leftists with respect to social democrats).

On another note, Flores-Robles et al. found that their sampled liberals perceived leftists as different "only in degree", while their sampled leftists considered liberals a "different political group altogether". This perceptual asymmetry—likely rooted in liberals' system-justification tendencies versus leftists' anti-capitalist framing—may indeed foster taxonomic confusion across contexts. For example, in the US, where leftists lack representation in the Congress, it seems intuitive to view them (and for them to view themselves) as a distinct and homogenous group. In Europe, however, where diverse left-wing parties hold institutional power, and putting aside the different connotation that the liberal concept might carry, the perceptual gap would manifest somewhat differently. For example, social democrats often dismiss leftists' proposals as impractical, while the latter frequently accuse the former (and other leftists collaborating with them) of systemic complicity. This dynamic may exacerbate intra-left factionalism beyond the US context. Either way, even in the US, leftists could exhibit significant diversity.

Different Lefts

Classifying the existing lefts is a major challenge, given the many variables and nuances in their ideologies, strategies, and historical contexts. Yet, let us consider a working taxonomy, based on the same aspects that we saw to explain differences between leftists and liberals/social democrats.

Ideological Foundations

Pre-Marxist Left

One might ask whether there are—or could be—parties or movements, heirs of the French revolutionary tradition or social liberalism, uninfluenced by Marxism (or whether, if so, they would qualify as leftists). To some extent, the philanthropic proposals of utopian socialists (e.g., Owen, Fourier) or the anti-statist traditions of anarchism (e.g., Proudhon) could be considered examples of this approach. While scientific socialists dismissed these currents as idealistic, they also acknowledged their role in laying groundwork for the working-class movement (Engels, 1880/2003; Marx & Engels, 1848/1969). Social-democratic or labour parties (e.g., the British Labour Party), meanwhile, integrated pre- or anti-Marxist elements like Fabian Society's gradualism. Yet their later embrace of neoliberal policies marked a departure from leftist principles (Navarro, 1999, 2013).

Marxist-Inspired Left

The adherence of social democrat parties to Marxist principles today is debatable, limited mostly to certain leadership figures and internal factions. Nevertheless, a constellation of groups continues to self-identify as Marxists across various traditions (Marxism-Leninism, Trotskyism, Maoism, etc.). Communist parties in power (e.g., in China, Cuba or Vietnam) explicitly uphold this legacy. Though their ideological fidelity varies—e.g., stricter Marxism-Leninism in Eastern Europe versus diverse adaptations elsewhere—communist parties retain electoral relevance in some Western "red belt" regions and in post-Soviet states (March & Mudde, 2005). Likewise, national liberation movements in the Global South—such as Lumumba's in Congo, Sankara's (or more recently Traoré's) in Burkina Faso—or insurgent movements and guerrillas like the FARC in Colombia or the Naxalites in India, fuse or have historically fused Marxism with anti-imperialism and nationalist rhetoric. This reflects different approaches to Marxist theory and practice, shaped by their unique historical and material conditions—often sparking fierce debates among Marxists themselves.

Post- or Non-Marxist Left (or "New Left")

Especially after the USSR's collapse, newer parties identify as left-wing while disregarding Marxism. They prioritise minority rights and environmentalism, seeking to channel diverse social movements into political action. However, their fragmented approach—lacking a coherent meta-narrative or alternative developmental model—renders them susceptible to elite co-optation or political marginalisation (March & Mudde, 2005). That is, to neglect production relations and confining themselves to ameliorating subsidiary aspects of the system risks entrenching neoliberal hegemony by

naturalising its economic foundations. Examples include green parties, Spain's *Podemos*, Greece's *Syriza*, and *La France Insoumise* (the latter perhaps retaining stronger ties with socialist universalism). Yet, despite some attaining governmental power—independently or through coalitions—their tenure has typically been short-lived. Also, just as Marxism has inspired and continues to inspire leftists worldwide, the same applies here, such is the case of Japan's new left (Ando, 2013) or the Marxist-to-human rights transition in Tunisia (Schade-Poulsen, 2024).

Economic Views

Keynesian

It advocates counter-cyclical economic intervention through public spending and tax policies to stimulate demand and prevent unemployment and economic downturns. Although some of Keynes's proposals had transformative potential, after the Second World War his ideas were often reduced to what Robinson (1974) termed "bastard Keynesianism", i.e., a diluted version that preserves the fundamentals of capitalism, focusing merely on crisis management. Nevertheless, many left-wing parties, especially social democrats, adopted this moderate Keynesianism. After the 1970s some of them ultimately embraced neoliberal positions (Navarro, 1999, 2013).

Indicative Planning (or "dirigisme")

It entails stronger state intervention in the economy. Governments set objectives and guide the private sector to align it with national goals but without owning the means of production. Occasionally, the state might nationalise strategic sectors. Socialist and communist parties tend to adopt this approach. A priori non-left political leaders such as De Gaulle in France or Peron in Argentina may also adopt it (arguably situating them, in economic terms, to the left of many contemporary Western leftists). It could be argued that Putin in Russia has been progressively moving towards this model, due to state dominance of GDP and strategic sectors (Abramov et al., 2017; Arshakuni & Yefimova-Trilling, 2019), and even more so today under wartime pressures.

Central Planning

Government dictates economic activity and resource allocation to build socialism, leaving little room for market forces and private appropriation of the surplus value produced. Traditionally linked to Stalin's Five-Year Plans, such extensive intervention is rare today—more typical in exceptional circumstances (e.g., wartime) and not exclusive to the left. The Soviet Union itself saw periods of market tolerance, e.g., during Lenin's New Economic Policy and post-Stalin reforms. "Socialism with Chinese characteristics", following Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic reforms from 1978 onwards, combines central planning and strong state intervention including control of strategic sectors (e.g., banking, energy, transport) with market mechanisms to promote economic growth, initially trialled in "Special Economic Zones" (Lan, 2024; Moak & Lee, 2015).

Socialist Self-Management

It advocates workers' direct control of the economy, sharing ideological roots with mutualism or *operaismo* (workerism), and experiences like anarchist communes during the Spanish Civil War. Such systems often emerge during revolutionary periods, although they typically prove unsustainable long-term due to external pressures in hostile contexts. Perhaps the most extensive implementation occurred in Yugoslavia, where market-socialist self-management was presented as an alternative to both Soviet-style planning and capitalism. Yet the system ultimately failed to sustain itself, succumbing to both internal contradictions and external pressures following the Eastern Bloc's collapse (Unkovski-Korica, 2014).

Social Issues

Materialist Left

This tradition employs dialectical-materialist analysis of social reality, centring on relations of production and class struggle while seeking to elevate working-class consciousness from trade-unionist spontaneity to revolutionary class

consciousness (Lenin, 1902/1977; Marx & Engels, 1848/1969). While acknowledging intersecting axes of oppression, it maintains that workers—by virtue of their structurally determined position within capitalist relations and numerical predominance—constitute the "revolutionary subject" (i.e., the only social category that could bring about significant system change). Historically, communist parties advocate this approach.

Post-Materialist Left

This tendency prioritises cultural analyses and subjective experience over material conditions, redefining progress beyond economic parameters (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). While rejecting classical liberalism's universalistic framework, its proponents paradoxically adopt neoliberal individualism, frequently engaging in a "culture war" with conservative sectors over moral and identity issues. Critics argue that their fragmentary approach—particularly their abandonment of broader, objective frameworks like class struggle—could reinforce neoliberal hegemony (Hanappi & Hanappi-Egger, 2018; Losurdo, 2014). This approach is a defining feature of the "new left".

Social-Conservative Left

It reacts to post-materialism by prioritising materialist analysis and economic issues (Horn et al., 2025). Its "conservatism" manifests in preserving welfare states and universalistic socialist principles, while refraining from challenging—or even accommodating—certain traditional norms. Post-materialists accuse their proponents of endorsing right-wing narratives (e.g., on immigration regulation). In turn, they accuse post-materialists of being idealist and self-righteous, and thus the ones who reinforce the right (Wagenknecht, 2021). Examples include Germany's Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance and Slovakia's *Smer – sociálna demokracia*, alongside classical materialist leftists that blended socialism with nationalism, like Russia's Communist Party (March & Mudde, 2005).

Political Strategy

Revolutionary or Reformist (or Seeking "Radical Societal" vis-à-vis "Incremental" Change)

This represents a fundamental, historical division between leftists and liberals/social democrats, and between leftists (Luxemburg, 1900/1986). However, explicit revolutionary positions remain rare outside minority, extra-parliamentary groupings, or national liberation movements. Even revolutionary parties, once they achieve power (e.g., communist parties), typically adopt gradualist approaches (even "conservative", in the sense of preserving the status quo).

Electioneering or Grassroots Action

This similarly represents a fundamental historical division between leftists and liberals, as well as among leftists themselves, though combining both approaches is possible (Lenin, 1920/1974). Revolutionary parties may contest elections, work within liberal/social democrats, and enter governing coalitions with them. Likewise, social movements frequently institutionalise as parties (or tacitly support existing ones). Simultaneously, electoral success requires grassroots backing. On another note, we could discuss whether genuine grassroots movements exist or whether they are or become astroturf campaigns (i.e., top-down initiatives mimicking organic movements).

Authoritarian or Democratic

This division—concerning both political groups' internal organisation and their societal project—also carries historical significance while arguably constituting a false dichotomy (Engels, 1872/1978). That is, we might discuss the viability of either truly non-hierarchical or wholly non-participatory organisations. In practice, groups invariably tend to develop either into rigidly hierarchical structures with strong leadership and vertical decision-making, or into more horizontal and participatory systems (at least formally).

Universalistic or Particularistic (or "Catch-All" vis-à-vis "Niche" Strategy)

This (also apparent) dilemma concerns political groups' target identities. The former appeals to society as a whole—to "the people", or to broad categories like the working class—enabling wider popular support while potentially

overlooking specific group needs. Conversely, the particularistic strategy focuses on narrower demographics like social minorities, offering perhaps tactical cohesion in times of political retreat but risking social fragmentation and mass alienation (March & Mudde, 2005; Samie, 2025).

Implications for Research

The foregoing highlights several types of leftist movements and approaches. Each category could be further subdivided or nuanced, though such classifications must account for the dynamic nature of political landscapes. Parties frequently shift their stances on issues, while internal factions or traditions may advocate for divergent, even contradictory, stances. These tensions generate passionate debates that can lead to splits, the formation of new parties, and seemingly irreconcilable standpoints. At other times, ostensibly opposed groups may form tactical alliances in pursuit of shared objectives. Together, these dynamics underscore the complexity of categorising leftist movements.

A parallel challenge would apply to the taxonomy of "rightists". It may also seem that they form a "distinct and meaningful group" from US conservatives (or from liberal conservatives, Christian democrats, etc.). That is, just as leftists may be conflated with liberals, rightists are often labelled as, or merged with, fascists, neoliberals, anarcho-capitalists, etc., perhaps due to their shared opposition to socialism. Yet, like their leftist counterparts, rightists too exhibit significant ideological and strategic diversity, even as they forge alliances with centrist or moderate factions. While no classification can fully capture this heterogeneity, the proposed framework offers a provisional map to help situate researchers.

Also worthy of mention is the potential limitation of the Eurocentric perspective inherent in the concepts employed. This is, to some extent, unavoidable given the subject matter. On the one hand, the very origins of terms such as left/right and liberal/conservative lie in Europe, emerging during a period when much of the world was under its colonial domination. Like technological advancements and other ideological or cultural productions, their influence was largely unidirectional—though it occasionally provoked resistance, leading to reinterpretations or hybridisations, such as African or Arab socialism (Takriti & Safieddine, 2022).

On the other hand, countries in the so-called Global South continue to employ similar terminology, albeit adapted to local contexts. Even the names of political parties and movements often overlap with their European counterparts. That said, analogous political dynamics exist worldwide, with the economic question—i.e., the production and distribution of wealth—forming the foundational axis of political conflict, even if it is not always the most visible dividing line. Ultimately, one might expect to find, in every context, at least two fundamental political tendencies: one defending the interests of a privileged minority and another opposing it (albeit with intermediate variations and context-dependent compositions). While these tendencies may be labelled differently, they reflect universal structural tensions.

From a social psychological perspective, replicating the study of Flores-Robles et al. overseas could prove illuminating. For example, analogous differences between leftists and social democrats would likely emerge in Europe, though mediated by differing historical and material conditions. Likewise, deepening this line of research—both within and beyond the US—would significantly advance scholarly understanding in the field. For example, the US leftists examined in their study could be categorised as: (1) classical socialist leftists, (2) post-materialist leftists, or (3) liberals dissatisfied with Democrats. Further meaningful subdivisions could include leftists who: (1) instrumentally support Democrats for immediate self-interest seeking (e.g., career advancement), (2) systematically reject Democrats (whether they participate in politics or not), viewing both major parties as components of the same bourgeois project, or (3) paradoxically align with Republicans out of other, immediate self-interest seeking (e.g., right to bear arms). While additional context-dependent subdivisions could be identified based on secondary aspects, leftists across contexts would generally conform to the taxonomy outlined in the "different lefts" section.

Also from a social psychological perspective, we might explore the relationship between dispositional factors, personality traits and/or basic motives, and attitudes towards social issues or political strategies. Various conceptual frameworks have been proposed for this analysis. For instance, Eysenck (1956) introduced a two-dimensional model consisting of a horizontal *radicalism-conservatism* spectrum (R-axis) and a vertical *tender-minded/tough-minded* dichotomy (T-axis), with the latter reflecting varying degrees of authoritarianism. However, critics argue this framework

problematically conflates left-wing radicalism (typically rooted in egalitarian principles) with right-wing authoritarianism under the "tough-minded" label, thereby obscuring their distinct motivational foundations (Costello et al., 2022; Eldridge, 2024; Stone, 1980).

Eysenck's model inspired subsequent biaxial tools like the Political Compass, which positions ideologies along *left-right* (economic) and *libertarian-authoritarian* (social) axes. However, these instruments inherit Eysenck's core limitation: they reduce complex, dynamic ideologies to static positions, artificially conflating incompatible forms of extremism (e.g., Stalin's centralised collectivism with Hitler's ethnonationalism) within oversimplified categories. The Political Compass has drawn particular criticism for its libertarian bias—reflecting a tendency to narrowly equate authoritarianism with state power while systematically neglecting corporations and other non-state structures of domination (Eldridge, 2024; Mudde, 2019).

Additionally, biaxial models would fail to capture how individuals strategically shift positions across issues (e.g., supporting both economic redistribution and immigration restrictions). This may tempt researchers to add additional axes, as many as there are social issues and ways to deal with them, aiming thus to capture the complexity of human political behaviour and situate respondents (e.g., *short-* versus *long-term foresight*, *centralisation* versus *decentralisation*, *protectionism* versus *free market*, *developmentalism* versus *degrowth*, *nationalism* versus *internationalism*, *communitarianism* versus *individualism*, *interventionism* versus *non-interventionism*, *clericalism* versus *anticlericalism*, etc.). Although this may be helpful for exploring beliefs, attitudes, etc., of individuals and groups at specific moments, regarding specific issues, it is important not to lose sight of the contextual dependency and the dynamic nature of such beliefs, attitudes, etc. For example, during economic crisis, support for populist, radical, or even authoritarian political options may increase (Funke et al., 2016; Hernández & Kriesi, 2016). In turn, individuals choose among the available options and create new ones (Alesina et al., 2001; Żuk & Toporowski, 2020). Narrow, static models might fail to account for the context-dependent and dynamic nature of human political behaviour.

Admittedly, social psychology has a long-standing tradition of examining how dispositional factors determine political preferences. For instance, leftists/liberals are typically characterised by higher *openness to experience*, lower *conscientiousness*, and reduced *social dominance orientation,* compared to rightists/conservatives (Adorno et al., 1950; Bakker, 2023; Caprara & Vecchione, 2018; Duckitt, 2015; Federico, 2022). Likewise, empirical studies suggest a direct linkage between the Big Five personality traits and ideology, though their predictive power may be weaker than that of social attitudes like authoritarianism (Gerber et al., 2010). Moreover, others suggest that the effect of dispositional factors on ideology may have been overestimated, with no direct influence of the former on the latter, such influence varying across countries and contexts, or ultimately there being no significant physiological differences between leftists/liberals and rightists/conservatives (Bakker et al., 2020, 2021; Fatke, 2017; Panagopoulos & Lehrfeld, 2015).

That is to say, dispositional factors might have probabilistic effects upon individuals' political preferences, though an individual's position within the social and economic structure—along with profound changes to that very structure—typically proves more decisive (Brandt, 2013; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018; Wright, 2015, pp. 124-125 and 153). Indeed, the fact that people sometimes rebel, while at other times they do not, fundamentally resists explanation through stable dispositional factors. The reason activists with similar personality traits (e.g., openness) adopt opposing strategies (e.g., reformism versus revolution) most likely lies in their material and historical context. One specific example: openness generally correlates with preferences for equality, but is linked to left-wing ideologies in Western Europe and right-wing in Eastern Europe, while need for security is associated with right-wing in Western Europe and left-wing in Eastern Europe (Thorisdottir et al., 2007). Material, historical factors beyond dispositional or motivational variables should be considered.

This tension between bottom-up and top-down explanations lies at the heart of political psychology's explanatory challenge (see e.g., Jost, 2019; Owuamalam et al., 2019; Owuamalam & Spears, 2020; Turner & Reynolds, 2003). As a conciliatory approach, one might propose rejecting both strict structural determinism (top-down) and atomistic individualism (bottom-up), recognising instead that political identification emerges from perceived interests shaped—but not wholly determined—by power asymmetries and other contextual factors. It would retain space for human agency.

Thus, to understand why certain ideologies and political strategies prevail over others, and eventually predict phenomena such as system-challenging collective actions, multidisciplinary approaches appear advisable, prioritising the broader context in which individuals' political behaviour takes place. For its part, political psychology will always

play an essential role; beyond mapping human potential and limitations, it would help us to understand and, ultimately, to predict how individuals might react in given circumstances.

Implications for Activism

Finally, with regard to activism, the assumption that political preferences are entirely top-down—determined solely by forces beyond individual agency—leaves little room for change. The same applies to purely bottom-up perspectives, which treat social identities as context-independent phenomena or view the system as merely reflecting innate individual differences. Arguably, people align with what they perceive as beneficial, while having these very perceptions shaped within asymmetric power structures. But they remain active agents, whether through action or inaction. In this sense, a well-organised group conducting rigorous scientific analyses, coupled with strategic planning and effective communication, could significantly enhance its capacity to effect societal change.

Yet, groups operate within ever-changing contexts, often facing dilemmas that might challenge their political strategy (i.e., *revolutionary or reformist*, *electioneering or grassroots*, etc.). These dilemmas warrant in-depth discussion, and many more dilemmas can arise (as many as there are social issues and ways of dealing with them exist). Some, if not all, may be false or apparent dilemmas. E.g., we are often confronted with discussions about whether the economy should be subject to intervention or not, and yet someone always does it, whether it is the state or business. The dilemma in this case would be who intervenes and for what purpose, or for the benefit of what class.

Electorally, the liberal-leftist (or among leftists) distinction has practical significance: participating in the institutions (e.g., by voting for liberals/social democrats, joining their parties, or even entering coalitions) or remaining outside them (e.g., pressing on the streets to influence rulers). The first option may offer short-term advantages, such as advancing certain policies and gaining governance experience. However, this risks systemic co-optation, which can lead to voter disillusionment, thereby paving the way for rivals. The second option, meanwhile, preserves ideological purity. However, it often struggles to scale demands and risks marginalisation, which can also foster disillusionment and also pave the ground for rivals. The context determines the optimal approach. Those who know history will be better able to choose. Even so, there is no perpetually effective option. The most sensible course for leftists in this case, as Lenin (1920/1974) suggested, is to combine institutional participation with sustained mass mobilisation.

In short, any political group seeking to attain power must ground their efforts in rigorous scientific analysis, develop adaptive strategies and need-based programs, and communicate them effectively, all while preserving the flexibility to navigate changing political landscapes.

Conclusion

Leftists constitute a heterogeneous group, divisible by ideological foundations, socioeconomic stances, and political strategies. This results in diverse political parties and social movements, sometimes complementary to each other—and even to options further to their right, such as liberals or social democrats. At other times, however, differences in beliefs, identities, and/or interests, arising from distinct historical and material experiences, lead to irreconcilable positions. In such cases, internal splits or conflicts may occur, which opposing forces can exploit.

As a take-home message for researchers and activists, it is essential not to separate ideologies from those who produce them, nor from the objective, material, and historical contexts that allow their production. For instance, when analysing—or attempting to influence—beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours towards wealth distribution, one must first consider how wealth is produced. While a complete grasp of reality remains a chimera—given its elusive, dynamic, and ever-changing nature—the very attempt to comprehend it may enhance effective cooperation and conflict resolution strategies.

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