Political Taxonomy of Modern America

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This document provides a theoretical background for [Uniting the Divided States of America](), presented at Humanist Sunday Forum on Jan 21 2018. It introduces a new community-based taxonomy of political spectrum, which captures some features of political reality that could not be explained by previous models. The new taxonomy is hierarchical in nature and helps understand what is common between people of different ideologies and what can be done to overcome our political divisions.

Traditional Taxonomy

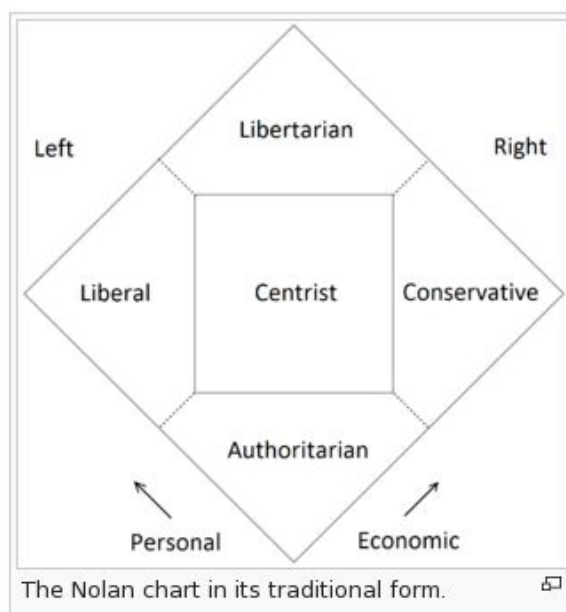Fig. 1 shows a two-dimensional Nolan Chart [1] taught in basic courses in economics and social sciences.

Figure 1. Nolan Chart

Another, more detailed, representation of Conventional Political Spectrum [2] is shown in Fig. 2 (reproduced from http://factmyth.com)
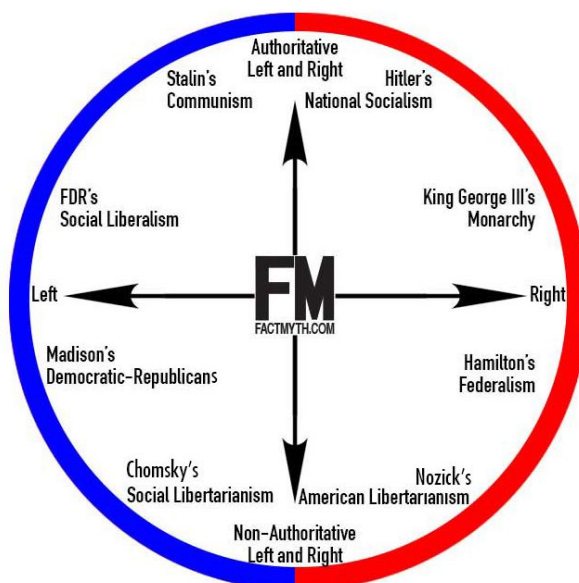

Figure 2. Conventional Political Spectrum

This is a neat diagram, and it acknowledges some complexities involved:

> "Ensuring a thesis, often requires its antithesis (or in terms of left-right politics, ensuring a left-wing position often requires right-wing positions, and ensuring right-wing positions can have left-wing effects, or vice versa).
> Said plainly, mixed positions aren't *just* about ideology, they are about necessity, and single positions aren't just about the position being taken, they are about the effects and the other positions needed to ensure them." [2]

However, it is still too simplistic and not derived from more fundamental psychological and historical forces that shaped our current political spectrum. A recently proposed [Noah Millman's taxonomy](#) [3] tries to address these issues by differentiating between three rather than two axes: Left-Right, Liberal-Conservative, Progressive-Reactionary. Yet, it still pits one group against another, conveying the idea that these groups have nothing in common and destined to fight as boxers at the ring.

Can we think of more realistic model that could provide some hints on how we could overcome or mitigate our bitter political divisions?

Let's start from observation that all people want to be successful and safe at the same time, and most people feel some affinity with others resulting in certain group identities. Historically the left-right division originated from a conflict between two major groups - the affluent ruling class (the right), and the mix of working class and nascent capitalists who were deprived of real political power (the left). Since "the right" tried to keep their privileged position, they were naturally "conservatives," i.e. fighting against any changes, while "the left" hoped that any change would bring them more liberty and will be a progress compared to what they had. Hence the "left-right," the "progressive-reactionary," and the "liberal-conservative" axes were closely aligned. This is not the case anymore after a split between labor and capital became apparent and the capital assumed the role of the engine of progress (although not necessarily the kind of "progress" that other classes would be happy with). Moreover, the capital is also split between more traditional industries, trying to monopolise their positions and suppress competition, and the "innovators" creating new products and the whole industries. The other classes are not so desperately poor and have something to loose, hence they don't embrace any change as "progress," these times are gone.

New Taxonomy

The proposed taxonomy is very different from traditional models of fixed dimensionality, such as proposed in [1 - 3]. Since group identities play so fundamental role in human psychology, the new taxonomy is based on the notion of "communities" as social groups shaping political preferences of their members. The community can be big or small, homogeneous or diverse. If we depict all possible communities on the plot with vertical axis for increasing community size and horizontal axis for increasing diversity of community from right to left, then all major political groups can be related to different community types as shown in Fig. 3.
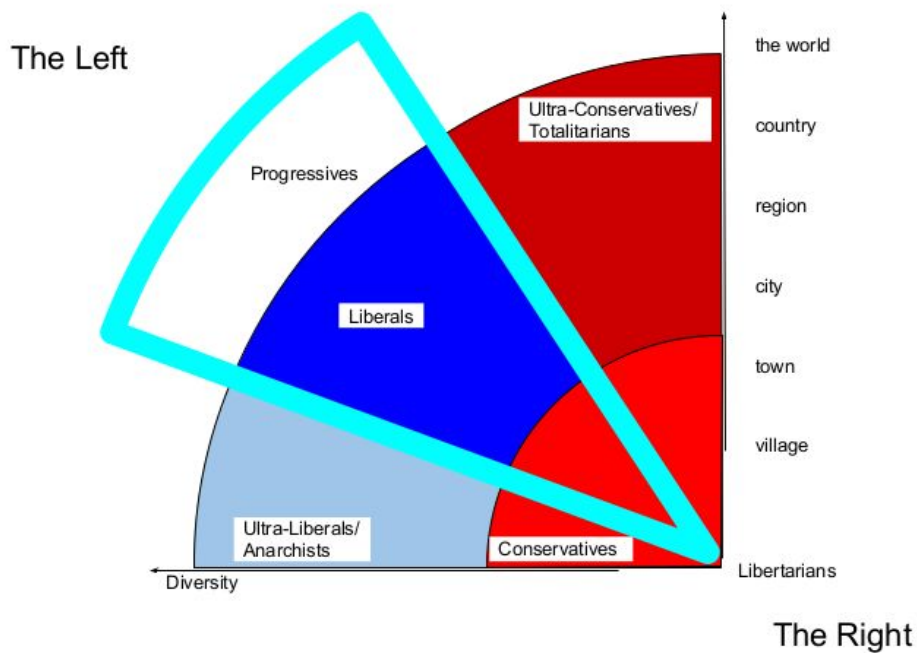
The Left

Ultra-Conservatives/
Totalitarians

the world

country

region

city

town

village

Progressives

Liberals

Ultra-Liberals/
Anarchists

Conservatives

Libertarians

Diversity

The Right

Figure 3. Community-based political taxonomy

Libertarians

We can't say anymore that people in political and business elites are conservatives. Some of them may be, but most of these people are libertarians. Their strongest motivator is success, and their defining trait is individualism. They routinely use others as the means to their ends since this is what they need to do to achieve and retain the leadership positions in corporations and the government. They can be well-intentioned and creative people who can, with some luck, accomplish something of high value to society. The problem is that they always try to accumulate as much wealth and power as possible. If they have their way, they don't stop until they rig the rules of the game in their favor. It's noteworthy that many of Republican ideologists and big donors, including Koch brothers, are libertarians.

The libertarians as individualists take a position at the right-bottom corner of the plot in Fig. 3.

All other people are "collectivists" affiliated with different "collectives," groups, and communities (religious, ethnic, political, professional, etc.). Hence, there is no continuous "individualism - collectivism" spectrum as usually assumed. Using traditional terminology, we can still say that the powerful and wealthy elites are "the right" and individualists while all the others are "the left" and collectivists. This dimension still makes sense, but it is not that useful anymore for categorizing people as liberals, conservatives, etc. We have to look deeper into different group identities and to ask what psychological needs of people are satisfied by belonging to or self-identifying with any specific group.

The smallest groups are families, which play a huge role in shaping individual experiences. However, this role is the same across political spectrum. Most people inherit their political

and moral views from their parents. These views can change later, but these changes already happen outside the families and within the larger groups - the communities.

Conservatives

People living in small and homogeneous communities, typical for rural areas and small towns, can rely on their neighbors (and religion, if they live in religious communities) for security and support. As a result, they develop a strong sense of fairness [4]. If you work hard and help your neighbors and can have a decent life - this is fair, anything else is not. These people are conservatives in most direct sense of this word, because they want to conserve their communities and lifestyle. Their mantra is fairness, security, and family values. They occupy a red sector in the right-bottom corner of the plot (Fig. 3). Their main weakness is that if they feel that their communities are threatened, they become an easy target for xenophobic ideas.

Not all conservatives are alike. They may be poor or relatively rich. They may be working people, farmers, or small business owners. The latter group is in especially precarious position, since they are torn between their community obligations and individualistic motivations to get rich. If their businesses outgrow their communities, the motive of profit becomes increasingly important, pushing them closer to "libertarian pole." At some point they are cutting even geographical ties with their communities by moving to affluent suburbs, where they can enjoy the lifestyle of wealthy elites.

They need some luck, however, to achieve success they desire, and luck is the rare commodity. Therefore, most would-be libertarians don't leave their communities, but remain susceptible to libertarian propaganda, so they frequently vote against their own economic interests.

Liberals

Some people feel comfortable in much larger and diverse communities, such as big cities, either due to certain genetic traits, or because they were exposed to such communities in their formative years. These people, who we usually call "liberals" (they occupy a blue sector next to "conservative" red sector in Fig. 3), learn to appreciate the values of freedom and diversity. They care about the same things as conservatives do, but their "community" can be "scaled up" to the whole human race, and their "security" becomes a global security. This explains why they are so active in antiwar and environmental movements. Their mantra is freedom and human rights.

Although liberals share with conservatives concerns about fairness and security, they don't always acknowledge this commonality and tend to focus on the differences. For instance, as J. Haidt noted in [4], conservatives and liberals have slightly different concepts of fairness (proportional vs. egalitarian).

On the issues liberals as a group are even more divided than conservatives are. Some liberals support international aid and free-trade agreements. This school of thought is known as "neoliberalism". In fact, the main beneficiaries of neoliberalist policies are the libertarian wealthy elites, but even if these policies helped reduce extreme poverty in some countries,

this would not make happy "pro-labor" liberals, who care about Americans losing their jobs or income as a result of outsourcing. Likewise, it may be hard to find a common ground between liberals concerned about anti-Semitism and those who support Palestinians at "occupied" territories. All these divisions fracture the "liberal camp" and make it inherently weaker than "conservative America" despite the fact that many liberal policies are widely popular.

Liberal and conservative ideologies constitute the political mainstream because they reflect the values of most typical and stable types of communities. Small and homogeneous communities are relatively stable because of uniformity of conditions and the effect of self-segregation. Those few who don't fit can leave and move to other places where they feel more comfortable.

Large communities are more dynamic, but this dynamism usually fosters diversity due to natural variability of conditions and of psychological types in every new generation. Some sources of diversity can be exogenic, created by migrants from other cities or neighboring countries.

Ultra-Conservatives / Totalitarians

Life in diverse communities can be stressful and make some people unhappy, but in normal times most people can adjust. However, the ongoing accumulation of wealth and power by libertarian elites inevitably generates social or economic inequality and distress. This creates a fertile ground for ultra-conservative totalitarian ideologies as people are defending fairness as they see it against minorities or strangers perceived as a threat ("abusers" or "exploiters" or "enemies"). These ideologies are ultra-conservative because, in contrast to traditional conservatism of small communities, they aim to make the whole country or even the world a single large and homogenous community. And they are totalitarian because such a community can only be stabilized by establishing a total control over its population.

Although different ultra-conservative movements and states could, and did, fiercely fight with each other, they all represent essentially the same political phenomenon that can't be easily understood in terms of "left-right" opposition. The leaders of such movements are always libertarians at extreme "right" pole. They may embrace certain ideas and revolutionary slogans resonating with mass sentiments, but their real goal is to hold (conserve) and extend their power. However, they usually enjoy support of majority of their subordinates based only partly on fear of oppression, but mostly on strong feelings of solidarity with other like-minded people, usually associated with the "left" side of political spectrum. Conventional political taxonomy arbitrarily classifies some totalitarian movements as "left" and others as "right" (see Fig. 2) and does not fully recognize the basic common nature of all ultra-conservative ideologies (depicted by a single dark-red sector in Fig. 3).

Totalitarian movements are known as communist, if they target people of certain "parasitic" classes, and fascist, if they target groups of different race or nationality. The KKK and other white supremacist groups can be seen as an example of modern fascists in the USA.

However, many ultra-conservative movements don't fit in this dichotomy. For instance, some of them can be directed against people of different religion. Religious wars are the old and

well-known phenomena of human history. The militant islamism, fighting to establish the Caliphate or the rule of Sharia, is the modern example of ultra-conservative religious movement.

The islamists and white supremacists are two distributed grass-root movements that mutually reinforce each other. They both present a significant threat to national security and social stability of our country by inciting violence and encouraging the acts of terror.

Putinism in Russia (the authoritarian system incorporating the elements from Russian intelligence agencies, corporations, and criminal groups affiliated with Putin and his family) is another example of ultra-conservative system that does not fit in traditional political taxonomy. It does not embrace socialist, fascist, or any ideology other than a traditional Russian nationalism with imperialistic overtones and mistrust to Western liberalism. It favors the Orthodox church, but carefully avoids open discrimination against other religions or ethnic minorities. It sometimes assassinates political opponents, but doesn't oppress people en masse and doesn't prevent emigration from the country. It doesn't look like Stalinism, but achieves the same effect - all-powerful and popular leader ruling the country unopposed. This seems to be the Putin's "know how," doing everything that is needed to hold the power, but not much beyond that.

It is important to differentiate between totalitarian intent and reality. Although the ambitions of totalitarian leaders span over the whole world, in practice they could never come close to it. It is not always easy to make even a single country a homogenous community supporting a totalitarian dictator. For instance, both V.V.Putin and D.Trump are totalitarian leaders (affinity between them is not accidental), and their ardent supporters share the same ultra-conservative ideology. However, two Presidents are operating under different constraints. Putin inherited and enforced "vertically integrated" power structure that allowed him with minimal effort to take control over country. There is no doubt that Trump would be happy to do the same, but he is facing a strong opposition from usual "checks and balances" and from many Americans. Only the future can tell how successful Trump will be in overcoming the opposition.

Ultra-Liberals / Anarchists

Although small and diverse communities are usually unstable, there are exceptions. If there is a constant influx of people with diverse backgrounds, such as at university campuses, this creates an environment that fosters creativity, passionate debates, and taking non-conformist positions on many issues. Such environment generates an unique "ultra-liberal" anarchist culture, boldly experimenting with new ideas and lifestyles and rejecting traditions and authorities. This explains why riots and revolutions frequently begin at university campuses, and why so many innovations in all fields, not only in science and technology, are also originated there.

It would be a mistake to see the ultra-liberal ideology only as an expression of rebellious spirit of students related to their young age. Many university professors of old age are also ultra-liberals (Noam Chomsky is an archetypical example).

Although there are not many ultra-liberals at any given time, their influence can't be overstated. Many new ideas, initially perceived as controversial, were first discussed in ultra-liberal communities before they "percolated" into mainstream liberalism and later became almost universally accepted. Some of the ideas embraced by most reactionary, ultra-conservative totalitarian ideologies, had also been conceived or popularized in ultra-liberal circles. This is another evidence of connections between liberals and conservatives, even in their "ultra" form.

Progressives

Liberals sincerely try to help people who seem most needy, but with so much suffering in the world, any choice of group of people that need most help is somewhat arbitrary. Moreover, with so many tensions and conflicts it's nearly impossible to help one group without alienating others.

The problem is further exacerbated by the sense of urgency in helping people who are really suffering. This creates a strong incentive for quick fixes to do something "right now" that may be not very helpful and can be even counterproductive in the long term. Refugee camps that become a fertile ground for terrorists come to mind, but examples are too many to list here. Liberals are very effective in raising awareness and bringing attention to issues that need to be solved, but not so effective in finding and implementing long-term solutions.

This inherent weakness of liberal mindset could be addressed only by people who care about one more thing - the future. We don't have a good term for people sharing with liberals their pain and concerns, but with this special focus on the future. The terms "pragmatists" and "technocrats" that are used sometimes imply a degree of moral relativism, but this is not the case here. "Futurocrats" would be the closest, but it sounds too awkward. So, for the lack of better term, let's reuse the word "progressives" that is usually considered as almost synonymous to liberals.

Note that in our political jargon progressives usually take place at the far-left fringe of political spectrum (think of Bernie Sanders). However, it would be more fair to see them as the most reasonable sort of liberal-minded people, who are more than willing to work patiently with all stakeholders to find solutions that would work for all. In Fig. 3 the progressives are depicted by the longest sector with cyan border encompassing mainstream liberal and conservative sectors.

The whole political spectrum as described here is not "linear" from right to left, but rather a sort of "hierarchical," with each group inheriting most traits of the other. Conservatives are libertarians who care about their communities and focus on security and fairness. Liberals are conservatives who appreciate larger and more diverse communities, care about global security, and focus on human rights. Progressives are liberals who care about the future and focus on finding long-term solutions that would make life of most people better and safer. Their mantra is democracy, balance, and sustainable development.

This hierarchical nature of political spectrum can be better captured by Fig. 4 that ignores for simplicity the "ultra" wings of liberals and conservatives.

Future; *democracy, balance, and sustainability* — Progressives
Large and diverse communities, world; *human rights* — Liberals
Community, family; *safety, security, and fairness* — Conservatives
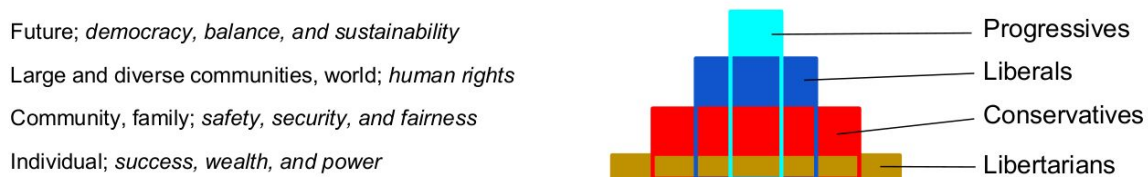Individual; *success, wealth, and power* — Libertarians

Figure 4. Hierarchical representation of political spectrum

It should be noted that the hierarchical model of political spectrum does not imply any moral hierarchy. We could not say, for instance, that progressives are "better" people than liberals or conservatives. All people are different. All people and all groups of people have their strengths and weaknesses, and progressives are no exception. They tend to be well-educated people, using careful analysis and data crunching to evaluate policy options. These good traits, however, have a flip side, a sort of technological arrogance. Progressives tend to rely too much on technology. Sometimes they fail to connect to people who are not as tech savvy as they are. They don't always appreciate the value of direct human interactions.

However, progressives may be able to overcome these weaknesses since they have strong incentives to leave their tech bubble and to work with diverse people. This is the only way to implement the long-term solutions they want - by bringing all stakeholders together. Moreover, progressives are well-positioned for doing this, they are problem solvers and coalition builders par excellence. This is what we need as a society if we want to bridge the political divide, to unite around common goals, to restore democracy and use it to reverse the libertarian power grab and its disastrous results - political corruption, inequality, and environmental degradation. Progressives can play a critical role in these efforts.

Discussion

As any generalization, the community-based taxonomy entails a great deal of simplification. The same person can belong to different communities, corresponding to different places in Fig. 3. This can create multiple group identities that may be closely aligned or conflicting. Furthermore, there are very large and influential communities, such as nations, religions, or political parties, superimposed on smaller communities and creating complex interference patterns that cannot be shown in any two-dimensional plot.

In two-party political system, such as what exists in the U.S., one of two major parties always defends the governing positions of libertarian wealthy elite, simply because the elite has better opportunities for political organizing. Therefore, this "conservative party" tends to be the right-wing party of the ruling class, lead by libertarians and supported by conservatives - the groups occupying the right-bottom corner in Fig. 3. The members of this party may have different views regarding certain foreign or domestic policy issues, but they are always united when it comes to protecting the interests and positions of the ruling class. Hence, this party is usually more monolithic and disciplined. This cohesiveness is further strengthened

by strong feelings of group loyalty inherent to conservative mindset. In the U.S. this is the Republican Party.

Politically active people of less conservative views don't have much choice other than to join another party, especially if they don't occupy the privileged positions in a society. This second party is more diverse "by design," since it has to include people of different ideologies: liberals (this is already a very diverse group), ultra-liberals, progressives, and possibly even some of ultra-conservatives and libertarians who happen to have their own agendas not aligned with the interests of the ruling elite. Therefore, this "liberal party" is almost always weaker, and it has a hard time competing with "conservative party" despite the fact that it has a broader base of support. In the U.S. this is the Democratic Party. It cannot be depicted graphically as clearly as a "conservative party." At best, it could be shown in Fig. 3 as an amorphous cloud of irregular shape, varying depending on political situation.

Conclusion

As follows from this brief discussion, the new community-based taxonomy captures some features of political reality that could not be explained by previous models of political spectrum:
- Close alignment between political leaning of population and types of communities, with liberals concentrated almost exclusively in big cities, and conservatives living mostly in small towns and rural areas;
- Asymmetric relationship between liberal and conservative "ends" of political spectrum;
- Internal divisions and fractures within the liberal camp;
- Asymmetry between major parties in two-party system;
- Affinity between different kinds of totalitarian leaders and ideologies;
- The role of universities as "incubators" and testbeds for new ideas and social norms;
- The role of progressives as problem solvers and coalition builders.

However, the main advantage of new taxonomy is its hierarchical nature highlighting what is common between people from different political groups. Understanding and acknowledging this commonality is a first critical step if we want to overcome our bitter political divisions.

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