

# A Ternary Diagram of Western Political Systems

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## Introduction

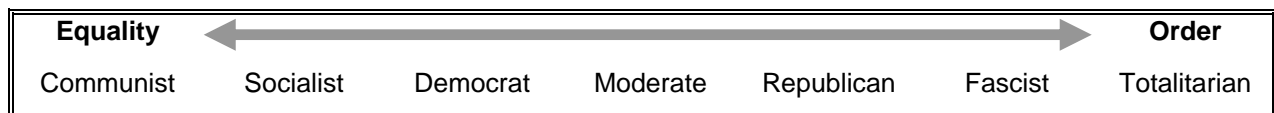
Allegedly the United States has a two-party system, where Democrats and Republicans compete with one another for control of government power. That is a simplified view however, which ignores the fact that the two major political parties are composed of "special interest groups". These (often single issue) groups ally themselves with other groups as coalitions to form viable political parties.

The list of interest groups within our parties is vast. Everyone has their own goals and agendas. Fiscal conservatives, liberals, conservative Christians, social liberals, blue-collar unionists, environmentalists, feminists, retired persons, the economically disadvantaged, media, and every conceivable industry (oil, tobacco, medical, legal) view government lobbying (aka., politics) as a means to further their own interests. But while some political issues fall along party lines, more often there is some level of dissent within parties, because there are several tensional values that are typically in conflict.

## One-Dimensional Political Spectrum

The oversimplification of our system of political parties leads to a general labeling of political agendas as being either conservative or liberal, and defining these along a one-dimensional spectrum (with the extremes being labeled right or left-wing). Often, the two terms really only apply to which groups want something to be changed (liberals) and those who want to keep them the same (conservatives). This spectrum fails to adequately describe the basis for the political landscape because it attempts to reduce all political conflict to one dimension. The following figure displays a similar simplified spectrum. It graphically charts "left" and "right" wing political groups, however this chart only describes the relationship between promoting equality of outcome (the egalitarian "welfare state") versus promoting a secure, national order (the militarized "warfare state"). What is conspicuously absent in this spectrum is the promotion of liberty (freedom from coercive government action).

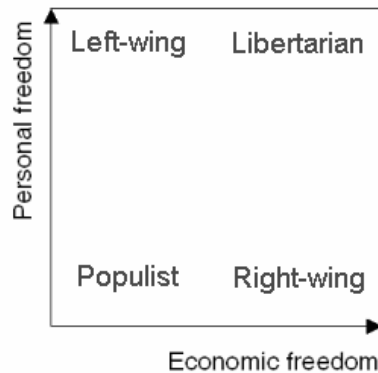
**Figure 1 - Simplified Political Spectrum**



## Two-Dimensional Political Charts

As described in "Political Spectrum"<sup>1</sup>, square or rhombohedral-shaped two-dimensional graphs have been developed, each a slight variation on the two-axis approach. The chart developed by David Nolan is displayed as Figure 2. This chart graphs "personal" and "economic" freedom, creating four quadrants; Libertarian, Populist, Left-wing, and Right-wing. This diagram however would lump Nazi Fascism with Soviet Communism together because both governments were authoritarian and socialist<sup>2</sup>. Other two-dimensional graphs have similar limitations.

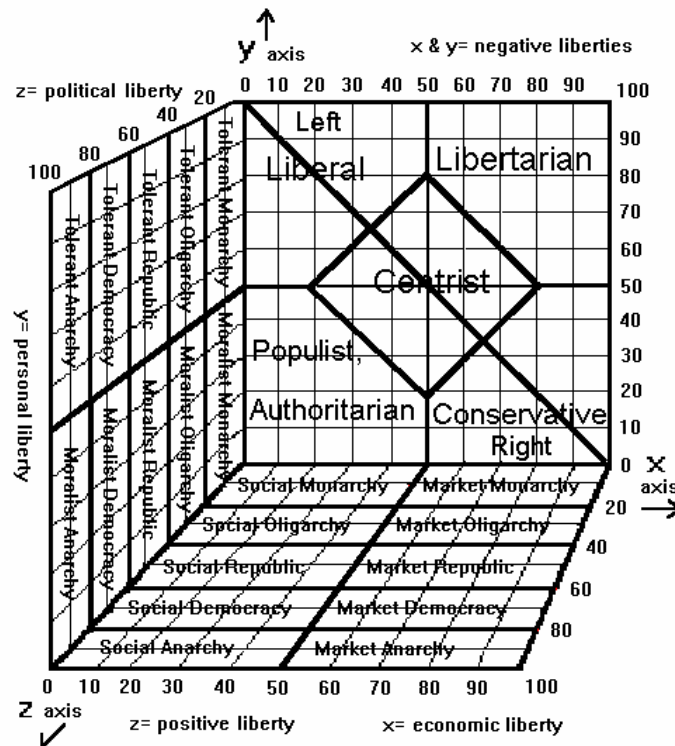
**Figure 2 – Nolan Chart**



### A Three-Dimensional Political Graph

A variation on the Nolan chart has been suggested by adding a third axis “upward” from the page. This third axis, political liberty, reflects the distribution of political authority. This effectively “stacks” Nolan charts. Such a chart is presented from the Friesian Institute as Figure 3. The difficult nature of this three-dimensional chart is that it cannot be easily depicted in two-dimensional media - paper or computer screens.

**Figure 3 – Liberties in Three Dimensions<sup>3</sup>**



### A Trilinear Diagram of Politics

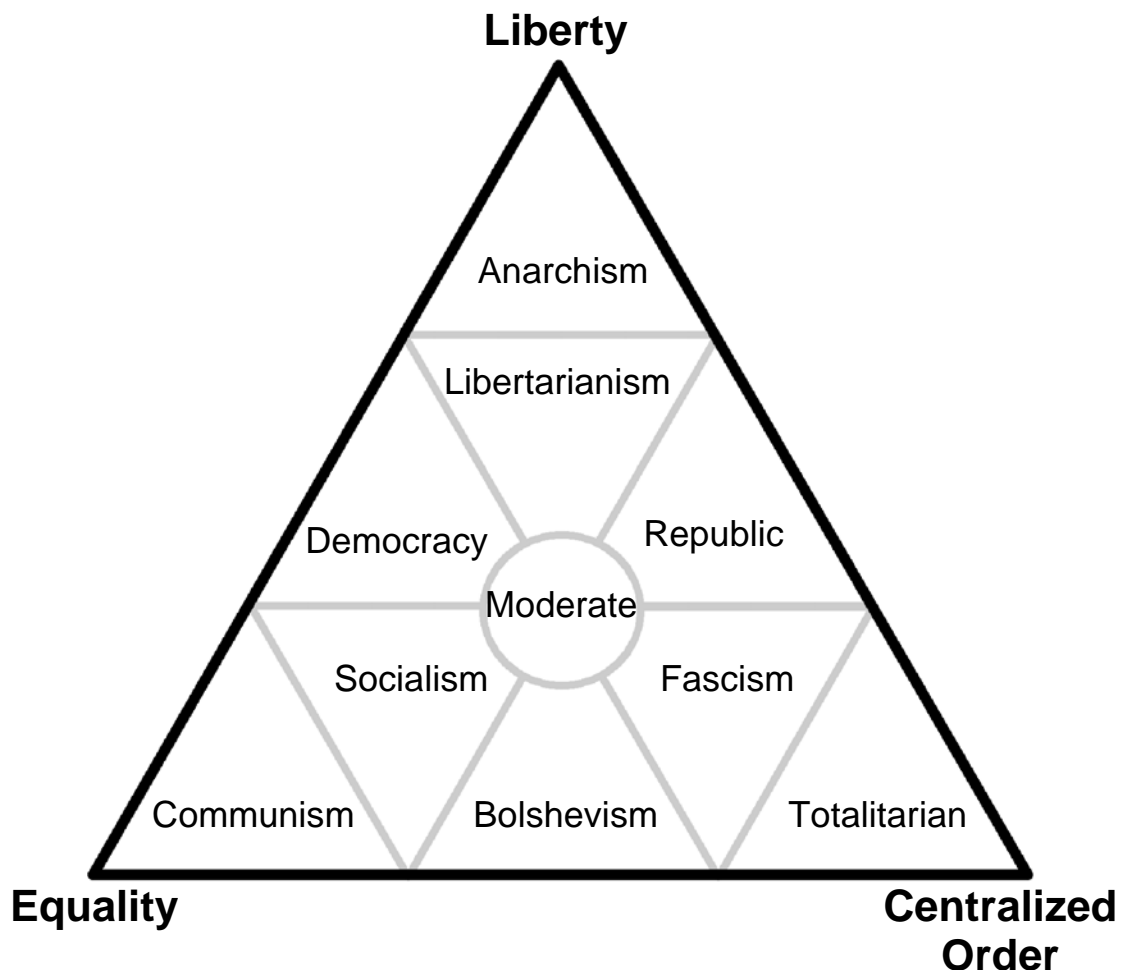
To display three dimensions on a flat page, ternary diagrams are commonly used in geosciences. This type of diagram is composed of three axes plotted together in an equilateral triangle.

Figure 4 presents a ternary diagram that plots the following:

- **Centralized Order:** How is decision-making authority distributed? Is power concentrated with the central government (totalitarian) or dispersed to citizens (democracy)? Does voting by citizens determine issues directly? Do they vote for representatives? Can the executive/head of state issue orders by decree (i.e., Executive Order)?
- **Equality:** How much redistribution of property is just? How far should coercive egalitarian “fairness” be pursued at the cost of discouraging capital formation?
- **Liberty:** What is the distribution of property rights and the right of free association? Are these rights truly inalienable, or does the central government “grant” and therefore control these rights? Does government “own” its citizens (i.e., conscription)?

Individuals and governments can be plotted on this diagram by considering the relative emphasis they place on these three values.

**Figure 4 - Ternary Diagram of Western Politics**



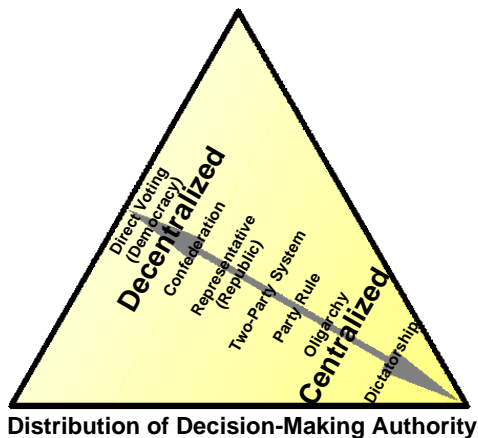
## Understanding the Diagram

In a ternary diagram, each of the three axes is drawn from the tip of the triangle straight across to the middle of the opposing side. To plot individuals and governments on the ternary diagram, the relative position on each axis would be used to determine the intersect point of the three. For example, a person who wants a small amount of property distribution, is not particularly concerned about individual liberty, and wants a strong, decisive executive authority (elected or not) would plot in the Fascist portion of the plot. These axes are further described as follows.

### Centralized Order – Distribution of Decision-Making Authority

The dimension of order is plotted on Figure 5 starting from Totalitarianism in the lower right corner (most power in the hands of the fewest decision-makers) through Fascism to Democracy on the left side on the diagram (fully decentralized government/direct voting/universal suffrage).

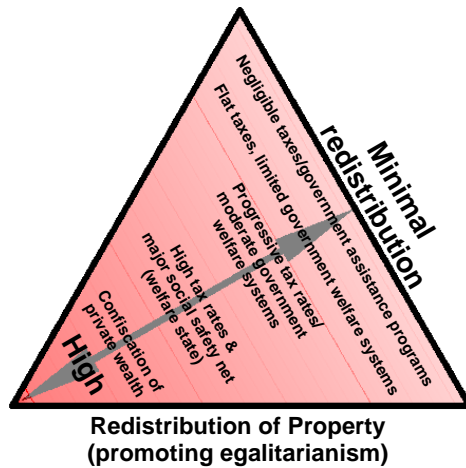
**Figure 5 - Centralized Order**



### Equality – Redistribution of Property

The dimension of equality is plotted on Figure 6 starting from Communism in the lower left corner (most thorough and coercive redistribution of wealth/property) through Socialism to Republic on the right side on the diagram (no government redistribution of wealth/property).

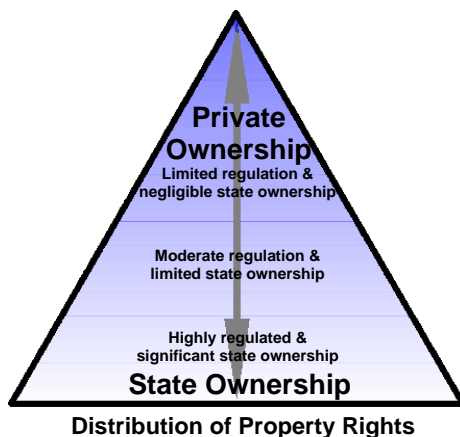
**Figure 6 - Equality**



### **Liberty – Distribution of Property Rights**

The dimension of Liberty is plotted on Figure 7 starting from Anarchism at the top (property rights and right to self-determination are inalienable and no government law can nullify these rights) through Libertarianism to Bolshevism at the bottom of the diagram (personal and property rights are controlled and granted by government). It must be emphasized that “property rights” do not just apply to wealth or real estate, but also the lives of citizens. Liberty is understood to include the rights of free association. As government (however “well-intentioned”) grows in size and usurps private property rights, it removes the means by which citizens control their own lives.

**Figure 7 – Liberty**



### **Alternative Ternary Diagrams**

This diagram is most useful for describing "western" governments and politics. Other tensional values could be substituted, such as replacing liberty with a secular-theocratic spectrum which would more appropriately differentiate many governments of Islamic countries. Saudi Arabia

and Iran both have very conservative governments and ordered societies, but their governments are differentiated by voting privilege and influence of religious clerics (In Iran, legislative and executive functions are governed by elected representatives, while the justice system is theocratic. In Saudi Arabia, the system is monarchical, with only limited elections.).

Social/cultural divisions could also be substituted for order, helping to differentiate socially conservative democrats from liberal democrats and “Rockefeller Republicans” from Christian conservatives. One final example could be substituting environmentalism for equality because it is a redistributive scheme where wealth and property that would otherwise be used for human uses are effectively transferred from property owners to wildlife or for some other “common” good.

## Conclusion

The ternary diagram can be used to display the more complex relationship between political ideologies in one diagram. Most “Western” systems can be classified and plotted on this diagram using Liberty, Equality and Centralized Order as their defining conflicts. Alternative diagrams can be constructed for cultures in which different values are in conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia contributors, “Political spectrum”, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Political\\_spectrum&oldid=70035239](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Political_spectrum&oldid=70035239) (accessed August 18, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> George Reisman, “Why Nazism Was Socialism and Why Socialism Is Totalitarian”, *Ludwig von Mises Institute*, <http://www.mises.org/story/1937> (accessed August 18, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Kelley L. Ross, Ph.D., “Positive & Negative Liberties in Three Dimensions”, *The Proceedings of the Friesian School, Fourth Series*, <http://www.friesian.com/quiz.htm#three> (accessed August 18, 2006).