

Oversimplified Online Presence of Politics: Political Alignment Tests

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Political opinions are often hard to define and sort, because of their complexity and individuality. Personal opinions are formed by personal experience, political opinions are no different. A person's political opinions cannot be defined with only one ideology or as a mixture of two ideologies, and political compass tests surely fail to understand this. Whilst persistently trying to categorize people's political opinions, political compass tests are continuing to ignore the uniqueness and versatility of the opinions. Using one or two spectrums definitely is not adequate to assign someone a political ideology, let alone placing the centuries worth of political thought into four squares. Aside from the individuality of one's opinion, political ideologies are too profound to be categorized according to only two aspects. The creation of the compass with "economic right – economic left" and "libertarian – authoritarian" axis is very diminishing to both the historical value and the philosophical value of the political ideologies, for example, two ideologies with the same "degree" of libertarianism and economic thought can represent totally different values and have opposite ideas on other topics than liberty and economy.

Like the test itself is not problematic enough, the mathematical methods used to calculate the results of the test have immensely flawed logic. Firstly, calculating and ordering the ideologies according to only 2 criteria is degrading to the ideologies and the values those ideologies represent, as we previously explained. Secondly, taking an arithmetic average of two different ideologies should not result in getting another ideology, because every ideology is unique and they cannot be represented with only two variables and the numerical values of those variables. Lastly, the quantity of the policies the test-taker agrees with should not determine the degree of their agreement with that certain policy, for instance, you are still center-right whether you support 5 center-right policies or 15 center-right policies. Hence, putting 2 mild policies into account and getting one extreme policy just does not make sense, and the whole methodology used on calculating the test answers is illogical. Unfortunately, the results those calculations give end up being illogical too.

Now we come to the very "field" where all the alignments are laid onto, if you will. The political alignment map is a central component of many political tests, and I will now argue that all of them are actually worse for it. The prototypical example is the political compass. I assume most readers would be familiar with it, but for the uninitiated, it is a special cartesian coordinate system. The vertical axis measures liberal-authoritarian alignment and the horizontal one measures right-left alignment. For example, the top right corner of the compass is "Auth-Right". The way this system ends up working is that there is one variable for the vertical axis and one for the horizontal. The answers given to the test increase or decrease the value of the variables and the end values of the variables determine the point that the test taker falls on the compass. Sometimes the number of variables or exact shape of the map might change, but this is the essence of the political compass method.

So, what is wrong with this approach? First of all, it does not fulfill the primary requirement you would expect from a political compass. It is not one to one, and thus not invertible. In less mathematical terms, two different starting points can map to the exact same point on the political compass, so in effect, it is actually impossible to deduce a person's political stance from political views from where they land on the map. As an example, let us say you ranked moderately left and moderately liberal. The first ideology that comes to mind is social democracy in that case. However, some forms of market socialism might also fit those descriptions. The two ideologies are very different in actuality, but the same on the compass.

Another point of fault occurs when authors of political tests try to map alignments out onto the compass in order to tell you which ideology fits you the most. A stillborn idea, of course, even if going by nothing but our arguments in the preceding paragraphs, considering that we have already established two different ideologies could occupy the same region on the compass, but that is not all. If you are mapping ideologies onto the compass, you have to have cutoff points. Obviously, there are no cutoff points for actual political alignments, the border is either ambiguous, or there is a valley between them and you have to make a jump. Even if we eliminated the "jumpy" parts, we would still have something resembling a spectrum rather than some cleanly partitioned map. Finally, there are ideologies that simply cannot be represented on a map. Georgism is a fairly liberal and center-aligned ideology (depending on your interpretation, of course), yet it would be impossible to call someone Georgist just by observing they are on the corresponding point on the map. To be a Georgist, you have to think that all land belongs to the human race equally.

Our last argument against the compass might be the first question most would ask immediately after seeing the political compass. It goes something like this: "Wait, just two axes? That's it?". That is a valid question. Having just axes is very misleading. In practice, it is equivalent to saying that there are only 2 qualities to every political alignment, liberality, and left-right placement. This is not true of course, but you cannot very well map 10 axes in an easily digestible way. So, if you are creating a political alignment test, you either give up the map or the accuracy. As an aside, even if you give up the map, trying to represent ideologies with 10 variables carries the same fundamental shortcomings as doing it with just two.

Actually, let us keep the assumption that you are creating a political alignment test. This is not an unreasonable assumption. Very often, political alignment tests are created and maintained by just one person, tests created by groups of experts are not the norm, they are the exception. The problem here is obvious. When creations belong to a group of people, their biases are "normalized" by each other, to some extent. When they belong to just one person, the creations have the exact magnitude of biases as their creator. For example, if you were an American Baby Boomer, all ideologies on your map would be shifted left, and you would consider neo-liberalism to be a center-left ideology or something. Of course, neoliberalism is not a center-left ideology and your test is biased, but the unknowing test-taker could still get the wrong idea after taking your test.

Being a Baby Boomer might not be all that common among test authors, but in our assumption, you are most likely to be a U.S citizen. Indeed, most test authors are American. Coupled with

how strong exceptionalism is among Americans, this often leads to a specific type of bias: Americentrism. Americentrism occurs when you, as a political alignment test author, assume that every person taking the test is a U.S citizen. This is mostly fine, as ideologies are not country-specific in most cases but consider this: You put in a question about lowering military spending. To your American brethren, this means that your country will be bombing fewer children to death in Afghanistan. To someone in the Middle East though, it might mean their very right to live being threatened. Without knowing the military situation a person is in, you cannot very well measure how militaristic they are from a set of immutable questions. Another point is that some questions will just be lost on your non-American audience. A question about the intricacies of the jury system will not mean much to someone living under a Continental European system of laws.

Speaking of Continental Europeans, they often felt the need to paint every possible point in the world map as part of an entity they found were legitimate (read: a colonial empire). Now that you are a political alignment test author, you might be feeling the same need. If you have designed to map ideologies onto the compass, you would naturally want to fill the compass. Yet, some parts of the partition are filled less easily than the others. For example, there is no easy ideology to put in the extreme authoritarian center. This cannot stop you from putting something there, obviously, so you must choose to shoehorn ideology where it might not belong or else stretch the definitions and interpretations of the alignments.

Lastly, your questions might be asking something that is clear to you, but not to your readers. Often, the questions are references to some ideas or texts, which might be somewhat obscure and open to misinterpretation by test takers. Anecdotally, I have seen questions where there was nothing but the line: "The industrial revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race.". This is a reference to the Unabomber Manifesto, but the difference between actually getting the reference and not getting it is huge. Even if you were a primitivist you might be discouraged from agreeing with the Unabomber for obvious reasons. While someone who does not get the reference might not even understand that it is measuring your proximity to primitivism.

In conclusion, we must note that political tests, as they stand, are inaccurate, biased, structurally incorrect, and, as a culmination of these factors, not very useful. If you blindly believe one test you took and try to build your political identity on that, you will no doubt be led astray. If you are still unsure of this point, I highly encourage you to check out [r/politicalcompassmemes](#). What you will find is people (often teenagers), who have, to some capacity, accepted that there are four types of ideologies and made overreaching generalizations based on the identities of the quadrants. If you have taken the political compass test, you will notice that a lot of what the subreddit thinks of your quadrant does not apply to you. This is normal. Due to extended exposure to the political compass, the lost children of [r/politicalcompassmemes](#) are now living in a world unlike ours. In their world, there are only four ideologies, which are seemingly similar but incredibly shallow when explored. Yet, these tests do have one use: They are fun, in a nerdy, political manner. You should not shy away from consuming them in the way you consume rubbish like "Which Harry Potter Character Are You?"

or whatever useless quizzes BuzzFeed is pumping out nowadays. We advise that you take these tests for fun and maybe a bit of introspection, but never for political identification