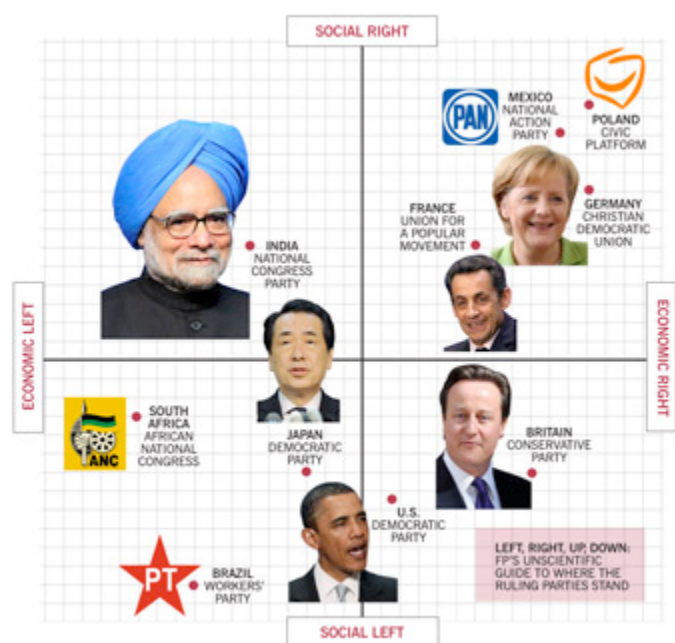




Where Left Means Right

What happens when political parties trend in the other direction?

BY JOSHUA E. KEATING | JULY/AUGUST 2010



Ever since rival factions arranged themselves on opposite sides of a meeting hall during the French Revolution, the political meanings of the terms "left" and "right" have been pretty constant. Left-wingers everywhere like high taxes, big government, and social change. Right-wingers prefer low taxes, small government, and free markets.

Except when they don't.

Margit Tavits of Washington University and Natalia Letki of the University of Warsaw studied political parties in post-communist Eastern Europe for a [recent article](#) in the *American Political Science Review* and discovered a peculiar reversal. They argue that, across 13 of these countries, leftists have gone right, establishing their democratic and capitalist bona fides by pursuing pro-market policies, while right-wing parties have done the opposite, bulking up spending to win over swing

voters.

For instance, Hungary's first post-communist government increased government spending. It fell to the Socialists to implement austerity measures and revive the country's economy in the early 1990s. In Poland, Social Democrats were firm supporters of controversial "shock therapy" privatization policies that fast-tracked economic liberalization. In both cases, voters didn't seem to feel betrayed by the change in direction, reelecting the flip-flopping parties multiple times over the following years.

Is this just an Eastern European thing? It's unclear, but the research certainly suggests that left and right may simply no longer be useful. Do Arkansas evangelical Mike Huckabee and Berlin eurocrat Angela Merkel really represent the same strain of political thought? Are Nepal's Maoists just further along the ideological spectrum from Britain's New Labour? Perhaps we need to start looking in more than two directions.

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*Joshua E. Keating is associate editor at **Foreign Policy**.*

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