

# Spectrum

Political colours were originally based on blood. Adding chlorophyll changes things.



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**B**Y LONG tradition, the political spectrum follows the optical one. If the wavelength colours of visible light are arranged with reds on the left and blues on the right, they match the conventional distribution of political leanings. Or they once did. Roughly.

Like so many simple ideas, the political colour spectrum has been resilient but deeply problematic. Most obviously, the red-to-blue range neglects indigo and violet at the right end, leading us to forget that green is in the middle, at least where light is involved.

The conventional spectrum also neglects key political considerations. Contrasting positions on the distribution of wealth (the leveling red left versus the stratifying blue right) are represented better than views about the distribution of power (authoritarian versus democratic, corporate versus public), rights (individual versus collective), or change (unrestricted versus cautious). And the spectrum separates positions along a line when our pressing needs are to draw together scattered light from wherever it shines through the cracks.

The old spectrum suffers in part because it has relied more on blood than on enlightenment.

Red was assigned to the left's more radical elements in the mid-1800s because revolutionary socialists pushed for social justice in a profoundly unequal world, bringing upheaval and conflict. Red in traditional politics was the colour of spilled blood.

For even longer, conservatives were associated with blue, the symbolic colour of constancy. For them, civilization was a thin veneer over potential chaos, best illustrated by the descent of the French Revolution into the Terror. Change was dangerous.

Like the old reds, the blues fought the individualist economic ambition and industrial mayhem of rapacious market liberals. But the conservatives defended the old order of received faith, respect for authority and classes of inherited role and position. Theirs was the blue blood of the hereditary elite whose skin, protected from the rigours of outdoor labour, was pale enough to reveal veins.

Today, the old reds and blues are mostly gone. The authoritarian reds fell with the Soviet collapse and the Chinese embrace of markets. Democratic reds slid towards

and prudence may come from different political wavelengths, but they combine to illuminate.

Any serious green programme requires political and economic equity, and institutional changes as profound as those envisioned by the old reds. Indeed, some pundits claim that greens are watermelons – green on the outside but red on the inside, with the black seeds of anarchism sprinkled throughout.

At the same time, greens are politically as well as optically adjacent to blue. Conserving (ecosystems, social capital

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the centre. Traditional conservatives were gradually lured into the old liberal world of individual competition, market *laissez-faire* and the disruptive pursuit of wealth. "Conservatives" became neo-liberals, disinclined to conserve anything other than elite advantage and residual bigotries.

The political middle is still occupied by different mixes and emphases of ideas from the old contestants, but with one exception. The greens – in organized parties and in the progressive flanks of other movements – bring a fundamentally new core concept to politics: that well-being and progress depend ultimately and utterly on the integrity of the biosphere.

This idea is fundamental and in retrospect should always have been obvious. But it is also inoperable except as part of an agenda that also draws heavily, if selectively, from various red and blue traditions and from the multi-hued middle. Stewardship and equity, community and diversity, innovation

and other foundations for sustainability) is clearly part of a green agenda that is well positioned to take over the conservative role abandoned by the successors of the old blues.

The greens take their colour from chlorophyll rather than blood. Chlorophyll *looks* green because it does not reflect the other wavelengths of visible light. But chlorophyll *works* by absorbing non-reflected red and blue light and using that energy for photosynthesis. Green life depends on the rest of the spectrum.

The significance, metaphorically, is that the greens have replaced the old political spectrum with a much brighter insight. Ecologically, and politically, what matters is not the colour but the light. 

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