

Erik Moberg ©:

The so-called GAL-TAN scale

It has now become fashionable among political scientists to complement the traditional left-right scale with a new “scale” usually called the GAL-TAN scale. The capital letters here indicate the endpoints of the “scale” and they stand for Green-Alternative-Libertarian and Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist respectively.

This fashion is however intellectual rubbish. First the so called scale is not a scale at all. A scale is used for measuring something. A possible and common interpretation of the traditional left-right scale is for instance that it indicates the involvement of the state in society at large. An extreme left position thus favors a very large public sector and a planned economy, whereas an extreme right position favors a pure so called night watchman state, that is extreme liberalism.

This is reasonably clear, and it is also possible to use this kind of scale for distributing citizens or voters along it according to their political opinions. But even so it has its limitations. It is for instance, as I write in the book (page 332), impossible to explain a phenomenon as common as a coalition executive within the framework of a one-dimensional spatial model such as the left-right one.

Adding the GAL-TAN ideas does however not help since they, in fact, do not indicate any scale at all. A first possible interpretation is that the labels “Green”, “Alternative” and “Libertarian” have some common property which could be considered the opposite of some common property of the labels at the other end, that is the labels “Traditional”, “Authoritarian” and “Nationalist”. This, however, is obviously not the case. And, going further and as a matter of fact, neither of the two trios has, or indicates, a common property even if taken alone.

Another possible interpretation is that each of the labels at one of the endpoints has an opposite among the labels at the other endpoint. Take for instance the label “Green” at the one endpoint. Is any of the labels “Traditional”, “Authoritarian” and “Nationalist” a clear opposite to this? No, hardly. “Traditional” perhaps, but if so it should added that traditional stands for much, much more than just not-green. Or take the label “Nationalist” at the other endpoint. Is any of the labels “Green”, “Alternative” and “Libertarian” a clear opposite to this? The only possibility seems to be “Alternative”, but this concept is so vague that it is almost meaningless.

This second interpretation thus also fails. But even if the label “Green” had had some clear opposite at the other end, and the same had also

been the case for the label “Nationalist”, and also for the other labels, the whole idea would still be nonsense. In that case we would, to be sure, have had three scales rather than one. But these three scales would also be merged or integrated into one, which again leads to absurdities. Perhaps one could compare with an effort to measure time, weight and length with one and the same scale.

The GAL-TAN ideas are thus rubbish, but to this it should be added that even if the left-right model can be complemented with more scales of a strict and clear nature to a multidimensional model that does not solve some very important problems. As I write (page 331) it is not the case that “spatial theory is the only game in town”. Or (page 334) “Theories which do not explicitly model politics as a result of human ambition can hardly become successful”. Voters and other political actors have interests and incentives of their own, and such matters cannot be described by scales at all. Other methods have to be used.