

The Left must quit its zero-sum thinking

By Rainer Zitelmann

January 2, 2026 1:22 pm

In recent years, researchers have increasingly focused on zero-sum thinking, namely the widespread belief that [economic](#), social, or political gains for one group can only be achieved at the expense of other groups. Shai Davidai and Martino Ongis of [Columbia University](#) in [New York](#) are among those to have investigated the relationship between zero-sum thinking and political ideologies.

The two researchers conducted six studies involving 3,223 participants to ascertain whether, and on which political issues, conservatives or leftists are more likely to adopt a zero-sum mindset. Their conclusion: "We find that both liberals and conservatives view life as zero sum when it benefits them to do so. Whereas conservatives exhibit zero-sum thinking when the status quo is challenged, liberals do so when the status quo is being upheld."

RECOMMENDED STORIES

- [Electricity grid reliability at risk from bad government policies](#)
- [How Hegseth can reinforce military chaplains](#)
- [A classical education revival hits the capital region](#)

The researchers point out that conservatives were significantly less inclined than liberals toward zero-sum thinking on the issue of redistribution, while they were more inclined to zero-sum thinking on the subject of [affirmative action](#). Affirmative action refers to government or institutional measures aimed at promoting certain groups, such as women or black people, through preferential treatment in hiring or college admissions.

Liberals, for instance, were more likely to agree with the statement, "People can only get rich at the expense of others," while conservatives were more likely to agree with statements such as, "The easier it is for black students to gain admission to college, the more difficult it becomes for white students to get admitted."

However, these findings can also lead to conclusions other than those drawn by Davidai and Ongis. The crucial difference lies in whether viewing a situation as zero-sum actually corresponds to reality. In terms of economics, zero-sum thinking is mistaken. The above statement, that the rich can only become rich at the expense of the

poor, is simply not true. How else can anyone explain developments over recent decades, which have seen a massive reduction in global poverty while the number of billionaires has drastically increased?

The situation is different, however, in relation to the statement, "The easier it is for black students to gain admission to college, the more difficult it becomes for white students to get admitted." If a college admits only 1,000 applicants and lowers barriers for black students by introducing quotas or reducing entrance exam requirements, it is indeed the case that fewer white students will be able to get admitted to this college. While zero-sum thinking is not valid in economics due to the nonzero-sum nature of economic growth, it does apply to college admissions because this is objectively a zero-sum situation.

Another major study on "Zero-Sum Thinking and the Roots of U.S. Political Differences" was published in August 2025 by Sahil Chinoy, Nathan Nunn, Sandra Sequeira, and Stefanie Stantcheva of Harvard University, the University of British Columbia, and the London School of Economics. This study was based on surveys of 20,400 U.S. citizens. Among their findings, the researchers concluded that zero-sum thinking correlates with support for redistribution and more restrictive immigration policies. This finding has been confirmed in other countries as well, with the statistical correlation between zero-sum thinking and support for redistribution significantly stronger than the correlation between zero-sum thinking and support for restrictive immigration policies.

Here again, the following applies: While the statement "If one group becomes wealthier, it is usually the case that this comes at the expense of other groups" is objectively false, the issue of migration is more complex. Migration into social welfare systems, which plays a major role in many European countries and also exists in the United States, must be evaluated differently with regard to the zero-sum question than migration into the labor market.

BORDER PATROL'S MONTHS-LONG DEPLOYMENT TO CHICAGO EXPECTED TO LAST FOR 'YEARS'

It makes a difference whether someone immigrates from a poor country and then lives on welfare or whether, for example, a highly qualified specialist is hired by a U.S. company. In the first scenario, it is objectively a zero-sum situation if the immigrant does not contribute productively to the U.S. economy but lives primarily on welfare, as the economic "pie" does not grow as a result. Conversely, in the second scenario, it is not a zero-sum game because the immigrant increases the overall economic value added, and the "pie" gets bigger.

Zero-sum thinking, as a false perception of reality, can be found across the political spectrum on both the Left and the Right. For instance, both President Donald Trump and Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) believe trade is a zero-sum game, a view repeatedly rejected by economists. However, zero-sum thinking in relation to affirmative action, unlike in economics, is not a false perception of reality. And in relation to immigration, the validity of zero-sum thinking hinges on the type of immigration involved. Zero-sum thinking is only false when a nonzero-sum situation, such as trade or the relationship between poverty and wealth, is mistakenly perceived as zero-sum.

Rainer Zitelmann is the author of How Nations Escape Poverty, nominated for the Hayek Book Prize 2025.