

The Two Kinds of Moderate

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There are two distinct ways to be politically moderate: on purpose and by accident. Intentional moderates are trimmers, deliberately choosing a position mid-way between the extremes of right and left. Accidental moderates end up in the middle, on average, because they make up their own minds about each question, and the far right and far left are roughly equally wrong.

You can distinguish intentional from accidental moderates by the distribution of their opinions. If the far left opinion on some matter is 0 and the far right opinion 100, an intentional moderate's opinion on every question will be near 50. Whereas an accidental moderate's opinions will be scattered over a broad range, but will, like those of the intentional moderate, average to about 50.

Intentional moderates are similar to those on the far left and the far right in that their opinions are, in a sense, not their own. The defining quality of an ideologue, whether on the left or the right, is to acquire one's opinions in bulk. You don't get to pick and choose. Your opinions about taxation can be predicted from your opinions about sex. And although intentional moderates might seem to be the opposite of ideologues, their beliefs (though in their case the word "positions" might be more accurate) are also acquired in bulk. If the median opinion shifts to the right or left, the intentional moderate must shift with it. Otherwise they stop being moderate.

Accidental moderates, on the other hand, not only choose their own answers, but choose their own questions. They may not care at all about questions that the left and right both think are terribly important. So you can only even measure the politics of an accidental moderate from the intersection of the questions they care about and

those the left and right care about, and this can sometimes be vanishingly small.

It is not merely a manipulative rhetorical trick to say "if you're not with us, you're against us," but often simply false.

Moderates are sometimes derided as cowards, particularly by the extreme left. But while it may be accurate to call intentional moderates cowards, openly being an accidental moderate requires the most courage of all, because you get attacked from both right and left, and you don't have the comfort of being an orthodox member of a large group to sustain you.

Nearly all the most impressive people I know are accidental moderates. If I knew a lot of professional athletes, or people in the entertainment business, that might be different. Being on the far left or far right doesn't affect how fast you run or how well you sing. But someone who works with ideas has to be independent-minded to do it well.

Or more precisely, you have to be independent-minded about the ideas you work with. You could be mindlessly doctrinaire in your politics and still be a good mathematician. In the 20th century, a lot of very smart people were Marxists just no one who was smart about the subjects Marxism involves. But if the ideas you use in your work intersect with the politics of your time, you have two choices: be an accidental moderate, or be mediocre.

[1] It's possible in theory for one side to be entirely right and the other to be entirely wrong. Indeed, ideologues must always believe this is the case. But historically it rarely has been.

[2] For some reason the far right tend to ignore moderates rather than despise them as backsliders. I'm not sure why. Perhaps it means that the far right is less ideological than the far left. Or perhaps that they are more confident, or more resigned, or simply more disorganized. I just don't know.

[3] Having heretical opinions doesn't mean you have to express them openly. It may be easier to have them if you don't.

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