

Does the Center Want to Hold?

Author : W.A. Edmundson

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David Adler, *The Centrist Paradox: Political Correlates of the Democratic Disconnect* (May 01, 2018), available at [SSRN](#).

The very idea of a meaningful left-center-right political spectrum always seemed suspect to me. Many commentators have warned against conflating cultural and economic “wings.” The cultural left wants to get the state out of the bedroom (so to speak). The economic left wants to get the state into the boardroom. The cultural right wants to inject the state into the bedroom, to regulate sexual and procreative matters. The economic right wants the state out of the boardroom, sweeping away pesky regulations of the workplace and the market.

Plainly, one might be on the economic right but on the cultural left, or vice versa. It would be a mistake to try to cram these different dimensions into one. Would someone who happened to fall simultaneously on the economic left and the cultural right count as...a centrist? An outlier? (Gene Debs called socialism “[Christianity in action](#)”—where does that put him?)

Set this worry aside, and assume that correlations with, say, attitudes about immigration serve to validate the use of a one-dimensional spectrum. Extensive surveys have been conducted that ask respondents where they place themselves. Some of these surveys go on to ask about attitudes toward democracy and elections and the importance of having a strong, decisive leader unfettered by a congress or parliament. [David Adler](#), a young researcher who recently moved from London to Athens, has looked at this data and has uncovered what he calls the “Centrist Paradox.” Anyone who is concerned about the direction democracies are taking ought to take a careful look, too.

I had always assumed that if social science places a representative person on a left-center-right political spectrum, and independently measures that person’s attachment to democratic ideals, that social science would find that people toward the extremes tend to have a lesser attachment to the norms of democracy, while people in the middle are more attached. As Adler puts it, “there is an intuition that there is an elective affinity between extreme political views and support for strongman politics to implement them.” (P. 2.) (Lenin for the left/ Franco for the Right, as it were.) No research, he finds, has bothered to test this assumption. And—shockingly—it turns out that the reverse is likelier to be true. People in the center appear to be (for the most part) the *least* attached to democracy.

Adler reports his analysis of data representing the U.S., the U.K., and a number of E.U. countries from 2008 and 2010-16. He says his results are robust when controlling for variables such as income, education, and age (which have been suggested as factors tending toward “populism”). He is careful to distinguish support for democratic principles from satisfaction with democratic outcomes. (P. 7.) While the left and right wings may be less happy with outcomes, it is the center—paradoxically—that is the least happy with the process itself.¹

The U.S. results are especially striking, and the heaviest gob-smacker of all is that “less than half of the political centrists in the United States view free elections as essential to democracy—over thirty percent less than their center-left neighbors.” (P. 4.) Free elections! This is far more disturbing than polls that indicate the Bill of Rights lacks majority support. Those amendments are *meant* to constrain majority

power, so the majority can be expected to chafe. A Bill of Rights, like a separation of powers, is essential to liberal democracy, but not to democracy *per se*. But if free elections are not essential to democracy, what is? Even Hungarian Premier Viktor Orbán’s “[illiberal democracy](#)”—not to mention a host of sham democracies—is wedded to free elections. Yet, Adler’s analysis finds that a majority of self-identified U.S. centrists rejects the almost tautological proposition that free elections are the essence of democracy.

Trying to wrap my head around what Adler seems to have uncovered, I ask myself what other commonsense assurances have to be called in for re-examination if he is right. Many assume that, in “our” democracy, the center will tend to check the excesses of any extreme candidate. The landslide losses of “far-right” Barry Goldwater to “centrist” Lyndon Johnson in 1964, and “far-left” George McGovern to “centrist” Richard Nixon in 1972, are the cautionary tales directed at “fringe” insurgencies. A polarizing candidate is supposed to frighten and activate the center, and thus lose. That’s how the system works.

But is there an as-yet untried method by which a polarizing candidate might win over the American center? Perhaps by posturing as uncommonly strong and decisive, even if— especially if!—unfashionably and unapologetically “undemocratic”? If the strong, decisive figure also has an energized base on one extreme, so much the better. (I mean, so much the worse...for our received wisdom.) A strongman with an unshakable base might find polarization to be an effective tactic for exploiting the center’s relative indifference to democratic values.

1. Cf. [Man In Center of Political Spectrum Under Impression He Less Obnoxious](#), **The Onion** (Aug. 18, 2017).

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