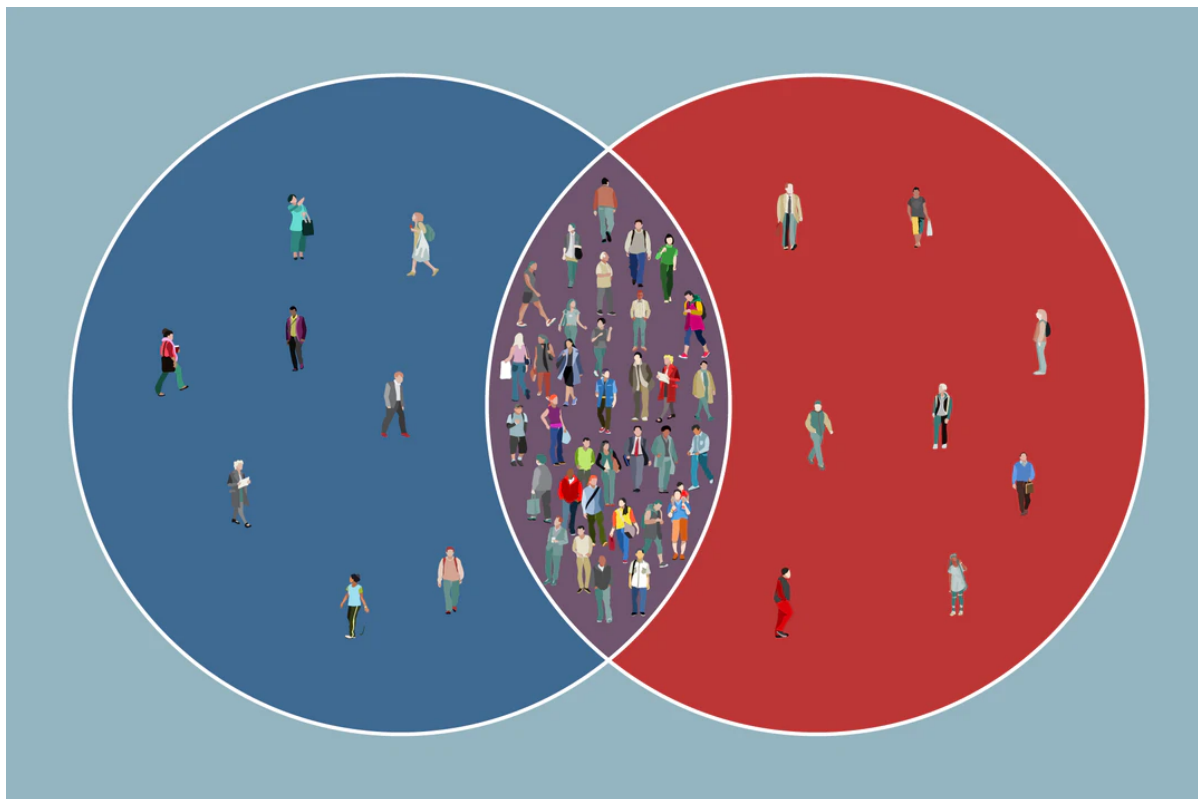


University of Chicago's Dr. Anthony Fowler on 'Genuine Moderates' and their Electoral Impact



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Self-described moderate voters are poised to play a decisive role in next week's presidential election. They make up around a third of all voters and are supporting Joe Biden over Donald Trump by a two-to-one margin in public polls.

But who are these moderate voters? The academic literature to this point has been inconclusive, with theories ranging from moderates being secretly partisan to ideologically unsophisticated.

Dr. Anthony Fowler from the University of Chicago and colleagues have released new research on how to identify *genuine moderates* using survey research, as opposed to individuals who are often incorrectly described as moderates, like those who do not fit neatly on a left-right ideological spectrum. Fowler and colleagues find that though genuine moderates are less active in politics than strong partisans, they have a major impact on who wins elections because of their large numbers and willingness to swing between candidates of the two

parties. They conclude with a call for a renewed academic focus on those in the middle of American politics.

What follows is a brief interview with Dr. Fowler, conducted over email, on this new research. To read the full research findings, see the authors' paper, "[Moderates](#)."

Thanks so much for joining us for this crucial conversation. Before jumping into your new research, could you tell me a little about yourself and your academic focus?

I am a Professor in the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago. I primarily conduct quantitative research on American politics, and I am especially interested in elections and representation. I have 5 fantastic coauthors on this particular project. All of them are political scientists with expertise in campaigns, voter behavior, and quantitative methodology.

As you note in your paper, there has been much focus on the left and right poles in American politics in recent years. Why did you and your colleagues choose this moment to study those moderates in the middle of the electorate?

We had seen the data, and we thought the current academic literature and media coverage was missing something. We had also spent time talking to regular Americans who didn't seem to be well-described by the popular narrative.

If I can share a silly personal anecdote, I went to a large gathering in a suburb of Chicago the night before the midterm elections in 2018. On the way there, I heard a radio story on NPR featuring research from political scientists claiming that America was divided between hyper-Democrats and hyper-Republicans who hate each other. When I arrived at this gathering with a mix of Democrats and Republicans, nobody was strangling each other, and few were even discussing the upcoming election. When the election did come up in conversation, the comments were largely moderate (e.g., "I normally vote for Democrats but I think this Republican candidate would do a good job because of X, Y, and Z" or "I wish we had more people in Washington between Schumer and McConnell"). The narrative in the media and in academia couldn't have been more different from my actual experiences. If you spend all your time on college campuses, among political activists, or on Capitol Hill, you might reasonably believe everyone is a hyper-partisan, but elsewhere, it's pretty easy to see that this is not the case.

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In your mind, what was missing in the research and academic literature when it comes to moderates? Put another way, what were you trying to better understand through this research?

There was also a technical, academic motivation for writing the paper. Even though previous researchers had shown that most Americans appear moderate, political behavior researchers typically dismissed that evidence on the grounds that these apparent moderates were either "ideologically innocent," uninformed, not paying attention to the survey, or "conflicted extremists." We wanted to find a way to figure out how many of these apparent moderates were genuinely moderate.

You touch on the point that moderates can be confused with people who are inattentive in survey research and those with “off-dimensional” preferences. First, could you explain these categories? And second, how did you distinguish between these groups and why was it important to do so?

One way you might try to measure the ideology of Americans is by averaging together a bunch of their issue positions in a survey. There are fancy ways of doing this, but you won't miss anything if you just think about computing the share of liberal versus conservative positions each survey respondent reports. So you might say that someone appears moderate if they have a fairly even mix of liberal and conservative positions on different issues. But there are different ways that a survey respondent could end up with a mix of liberal and conservative positions. You could be genuinely moderate on each issue, and you'll pick the liberal or conservative side depending on how the question is asked. You could not be paying attention to the survey and just picking responses at random. Or you could have real views that aren't well summarized by a single ideological dimension (e.g., maybe you're an extreme conservative on immigration, an extreme liberal on gun rights, and a moderate on taxes). Our goal was to figure out which of the apparent moderates are genuinely moderate, inattentive (from the perspective of the survey), or have these "off-dimensional" preferences (i.e., they aren't well summarized by a single ideological dimension).

The method is somewhat technical, but we try to distinguish between these possibilities by examining the particular pattern of responses for each individual and inferring which

underlying model is more likely, given their pattern of responses. If someone is more likely to pick the liberal/conservative position as that position is generally more popular in the public (e.g., they say they're not willing to raise the minimum wage to \$12/hr, but they say they're willing to raise the minimum wage to \$10/hr), they are more likely to be a genuine moderate. If it's virtually impossible to predict their responses, then they're more likely to be in the inattentive category. And if their responses are somewhat predictable but don't correspond with a single ideological dimension, then they're more likely to be in the off-dimensional category.

We wanted to distinguish between these groups in order to understand the nature of ideology in the public. If there are lots of inattentives, then perhaps we shouldn't put much faith in survey research altogether and there's not much to learn about ideology (or perhaps people have no meaningful political ideology). If there are lots of off-dimensional people, this would mean that people have real positions, but there isn't a natural connection between different issues. If there are a lot of people who are well-described by an ideological dimension, that would mean that we can understand a lot of political behavior by thinking about and studying that ideological dimension and the share of people with different positions on that dimension.

So, after devising this way of better identifying genuine moderates from other groups of individuals, what did you find? Just how many genuine moderates are there in the American public?

What it means to be moderate is probably in the eye of the beholder, but here's what we can say. About 70% of survey respondents are well-described by a single ideological dimension. That is, you can pretty accurately predict their positions across a range of issues by knowing a single, estimated ideological position. And among that 70%, you get a unimodal distribution of ideological positions with about 70% of those people within one standard deviation of the mean. So, [from this research], you could say that about half of Americans are genuinely moderate. And there are not large groups of extreme liberals and extreme conservatives diametrically opposed to one another.

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What about moderates' political behavior? What stood out or was distinctive about them?

Genuine moderates are less politically engaged than liberals or conservatives (e.g., they're less likely to vote, donate, consume political news, etc.), but they're more politically engaged than the apparent moderates, especially the inattentive respondents. Although they participate at lower rates than the extremists, moderates are much more likely to change the party they support in elections, so they're an electorally important group.

After isolating this discrete group of genuine moderates from others in the American public, what did you learn about their electoral impact in recent elections?

We examined recent U.S. House elections, and we measured how different groups of voters change their voting behavior in response to the ideologies and experiences of the candidates. It turns out that moderates are much more likely to change their votes in response to experience and ideology relative to liberals and conservatives. That is, they're more willing to vote for whichever candidate is more experienced or holds positions closer to the middle. This means that moderates are especially important for electoral selection and accountability. They largely explain why seats flip from red to blue or vice versa, and incumbents need to please this group if they want to stay in office.

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In your mind, what's the risk of eschewing this more nuanced look at moderates and continuing to apply a less sophisticated approach to ideology in American politics?

Candidates and campaigns run the risk of losing elections if they don't understand the ideological distribution of the electorate. There are almost no Americans to the left of Elizabeth Warren or to the right of Ted Cruz. If you spend all your time at rallies of extremists, you might think that the best electoral strategy is to appeal to your extreme base, but it essentially doesn't exist outside the rallies. There are many more moderates who prefer moderate policy proposals and sensible, competent solutions to our nation's challenges. And these moderates do vote.

There are many more risks to consider as well. If we think of politics as us-against-them, two teams battling it out, we'll fail to look for common ground. If we assume that voters are just supporting their team without thinking, we'd be underestimating the health of democracy,

the extent to which voters care about issues, and the demand for sensible policies in the middle.

Finally, at the risk asking you to play pundit, what impact do you see moderates having in the upcoming election this year?

Moderates play a crucial role in every election. Trump and Biden may have near-unwavering support among their respective bases, but those bases only comprise a small share of the electorate. Many, many moderates will vote in November, and when they do, they'll be thinking about the policy positions and abilities of Biden and Trump.

CLOSE:

Dr. Anthony Fowler, thank you so much for sharing insights on your recently released research on moderate voters and the role they play in American politics.

Read more from Dr. Fowler and his colleagues on this research in their recently released paper, "[Moderates](#)."

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