

At the Ballot Box: Are You a Political Extremist?

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Election Day 2014 arrives at a time of extreme political division in the U.S., and moderates of both parties are worried about the fringe. It's always the case, and especially in mid-term elections, that extremists in their zeal will vote and canvas and rally their troops, while moderates will disengage and stay home.

But who are these extremists really? Some dismiss citizens with extremely strong political opinions as rigid and dogmatic, intolerant of ambiguity and fearful of uncertainty and change. And it's certainly not hard to find examples of such overzealous—even loony—extremism on the political stage today. Yet others claim that those on the extremes are actually savvy political consumers, engaged and well-informed. Their apparent arrogance is merely confidence, based on deep immersion in the issues. In this view, moderates are the ones who are disconnected from political life, lacking energy and conviction.

So which is it? Unthinking follower, or thoughtful and engaged citizen? Both stereotypes cannot be true. What actually goes on in the mind of a political zealot?

Three psychological scientists have been studying these important questions, trying to plumb the minds of both moderates and extremists. Mark Brandt and Anthony Evans of Tilburg University, in the Netherlands, and Jarret Crawford of the College of New Jersey came up with a way to measure irrational thinking—one unrelated to politics or values. Their goal was to compare citizens across the political spectrum, to see who was more deliberative and analytic, and who was more prone to rapid, mindless judgments.

They used an idea known as cognitive anchoring. Anchors are mental shortcuts that help with numerical judgments and decision making, but can be misleading if followed mindlessly. So, for example, if you hear that Chicago's population is more than 200,000 and are then asked to guess Chicago's population, you will guess on the low side. The actual population of Chicago is 2.7 million, but the cognitive anchor of 200,000 will most likely skew your judgment. Likewise, if you hear beforehand that Chicago's population is less than 5 million, you will almost always guess high. What's interesting about anchors is that they can be completely arbitrary, and still influence our judgments.

Unless you are very independent-minded. Some people, whether by effort or personality and whatever, resist the tug of mental anchors and make reasoned decisions. The scientists chose to study this particular cognitive bias because the two extremist stereotypes—unthinking extremist and methodical, confident extremist—should theoretically perform differently on anchoring tests. That is, citizens who are less likely to think things through—who lack nuance and have a greater need for closure—should be more influenced by irrational anchors. By contrast, thoughtful and confident extremists should be more likely to reject arbitrary anchors and come to their own independent decisions. Their extremist conviction should extend even to politically irrelevant judgments.

Here's how they tested this idea. They used a large existing data pool from many laboratories to study almost 5000 Americans. These volunteers were assessed for political extremism—both ideological extremity and attitude extremity. They also completed a variety of anchoring tests, in which the anchor was supplied by the experimenter—much like the Chicago example above. Others included the distance from San Francisco to New York City, the height of Mt. Everest, and so forth—facts the volunteers were unlikely to know with certainty. Some of the anchors were high, others low, and the scientists measured how far the volunteers diverged from the prescribed anchor.

They found that the more extreme people were, the more their guesses diverged from the prescribed anchor. The self-described extremists did not simply accept the mental anchor as meaningful. They instead reasoned out a best guess of Chicago's population, Everest's height and so forth, on their own.

So this suggests that citizens on the extremes, instead of being unthinking followers, are more independent-minded. Indeed, moderates in the study were more likely to make guesses that hewed closely to the authorized anchor.

Why would this be? The scientists thought of one possibility. Extremists often see their own opinions as superior, and the scientists wondered if this belief superiority might explain their rejection of prescribed anchors. That is, extremists (but not moderates) might believe that their own estimates are superior to the experimenter's, and therefore reject the experimenter's. To test this, the scientists had some of the volunteers generate their own anchors, based on their own knowledge and experience. This allowed them to see if the extremists' seemingly independent judgments are really a result of simply overvaluing their own views.

They expected that extremists—if extremists are thoughtful—would stick closer to anchors they themselves had come up with—and trusted more—compared to experimenters' anchors. And that's what they found. As reported in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, people with extreme ideology and more extreme attitudes diverged significantly from prescribed anchors, but not self-generated anchors. So it appears that extremists are deliberate and thoughtful in their judgments, but swayed by a belief in their intellectual superiority.

The results taken together are consistent with a view of the political extremist as thoughtful and confident, not unthinking. This does not mean of course that extreme political positions are necessarily sound or that they are not biased in other ways, but it does raise doubts about the mindless ideologue stereotype. In short, political extremity does not necessarily beget irrationality.

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