

Moderation Is in Short Supply -- and Much Needed

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Commentary

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Moderation—the tendency to avoid the extremes and strike sensible balances—does not appear to be President Trump’s strong suit. That so much of the opposition to him is bereft of this much-disparaged but essential virtue poses an even more alarming threat to the long-term public interest.

Trump’s decades-long up-and-down career as a real estate mogul, reality TV star, and brander of all manner of merchandise and property; his outlandish but victorious 2016 presidential campaign; and his rocky first 100 days in the White House are of a piece. He has consistently lived large, boasted wildly of his achievements and perspicacity, promiscuously flung insults and accusations, all while espousing controversial opinions with uncompromising certitude, dubious logic, and questionable evidence.

His inflammatory rhetoric in support of hard-line stances on immigration, trade, and America’s role in the world reinforced the perception that compromise and conciliation were low on his list of priorities. Since January, however, Trump has tacked toward conventional GOP positions on a variety of issues. These range from Middle East intervention, NATO’s relevance, and the futility of friendly cooperation with Russia to the need to reform domestic entitlement programs.

Perhaps this is a tacit admission that the over-the-top excess that served Trump well in business, on the small screen, and on the campaign trail is poorly suited to governing a diverse and continental republic. Despite his idle boasts about Electoral College landslides, Trump’s slender electoral-vote victory reflects the lack of a popular mandate for sweeping change. There are signs that he is learning on the job – discovering that he faces immense challenges because the nation’s constitutional system requires cooperation among branches to discharge the public interest, his party is divided, the country is polarized, large chunks of the federal bureaucracy as well as the national media loathe him and his agenda, and foreign threats that require immediate American attention abound.

Trump, however, is a symptom not a cause. Immoderation flourishes today across the political spectrum.

Plenty of conservative House Freedom Caucus members and firebrand conservative talk-radio hosts epitomize Barry Goldwater's admonition, uttered upon accepting the Republican Party's 1964 presidential nomination, that "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice" and "moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." The connection between Goldwater's repudiation of moderation and his crushing loss a few months later to Lyndon B. Johnson appears to be lost on contemporary conservatives who scorn moderation as a rationalization of spinelessness.

Meanwhile, on the left, the same progressive elites against whom Trump ran so effectively are busy normalizing historical illiteracy by likening the president to "fascists" and dubbing themselves the "resistance," as if their country has been conquered by a marauding foreign power. Progressives' distraught overreaction, coupled with their leftward lurch in a country in which, according to a recent Gallup [poll](#), conservatives and moderates together outnumber liberals by almost three to one, has performed a remarkable feat. It has made Trump—who has filled Cabinet positions with men and women of substantial accomplishments, and is tempering his language and revamping his campaign promises to fit the realities of governing—look relatively moderate.

The loudest voices in American public life today do not see the moderation deficit in U.S. politics as a principal cause of our political dysfunction, nor do they regard the cultivation of the virtue as a remedy. They should read the most recent book by Aurelian Craiutu, a professor of political science at Indiana University.

"Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes" provides a spirited and learned defense of moderation as a virtue indispensable to the proper functioning of liberal democracy. Growing up in communist Romania, Craiutu discovered firsthand that the reality of communism's utopian hopes was dictatorship. Political moderation, he came to understand, furnished "an antidote to zealotry and fanaticism" of every sort.

A variety of philosophical schools, ancient and modern, have taught that wisdom counsels a middle course between extremes, and moderation has been cherished by Western and non-Western religious faiths, Craiutu observes. He also appreciates that moderation has always been a tough sell to the young and the ardent, the passionately committed and those yearning for justice. In an era of freedom and democracy that encourages individuals to challenge authority, test limits, and make their own rules, the case for moderation has become all the more "elusive" and "neglected."

Contrary to the common tendency to view moderation as the opposite of courage and conviction, Craiutu stresses that it is grounded in both. Moderation is inseparable from courage because it stands firmly against all camps' powerful propensity to radicalize their governing principles. And it is tightly bound up with the conviction, central to the founding spirit of liberal democracy, that no one party has a monopoly on the whole truth about moral and political life.

Craiutu illustrates moderation's many faces through finely etched intellectual portraits of five of the 20th century's most eloquent defenders of freedom. Four were professors—Raymond Aron in France, Isaiah Berlin and Michael Oakeshott in Britain, and Norberto Bobbio in Italy. One, Adam Michnik, was a heroic dissident in communist Poland and a prominent journalist before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The moderation they shared, Craiutu shows, is a disposition that embraces civility, self-control, and prudence. It is rooted in an awareness that the political sphere, particularly in liberal democracies, is constituted by “structural tensions” and “permanent antinomies” that can be eased but cannot be resolved or eliminated. But character and knowledge are not enough. To be politically effective, moderation must also be embodied in institutions such as representation, separation of powers, and federalism, which are designed to diffuse power, cool deliberations, and promote compromise.

Moderation fosters and is fostered by “a panoramic view of politics.” Combining political engagement with a certain detachment or skepticism, moderation encourages dialogue with fellow citizens across the political spectrum. It disciplines the fervor that blinds us to our own side's weaknesses and to the truth in the other side's complaints and demands.

The moderate person knows that moderation can be a mask for indifference and fecklessness, and can be invoked to protect arbitrary and oppressive laws. He or she grasps that in emergency situations moderation may legitimate emergency measures. And he or she understands that an invaluable means for cultivating the virtue is an education that culminates with study of the splendor, comedy, and tragedy of human history.

Because avoiding extremes and striking sensible balances are rare and difficult achievements, moderation itself turns out to be a kind of extreme. And it's just the kind of extreme we need most to cultivate in the era of the immoderate Donald Trump and his immoderate opposition.

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