

Introduction: The Center Holds

THE IDEA THAT POLITICAL ideologies can be placed along a continuum that runs from left to right is a legacy of the French Revolution. Delegates to the 1789 French national assembly were seated according to the interests they represented: the conservatives, representatives of the nobility and the church, were seated to the right while the representatives of the common people—those whom we would call “liberals” and “democrats” today—were at the left. The rise of socialist and anarchist theories and movements in the nineteenth century opened up the further reaches of the spectrum to the Left, while the counterdevelopment of authoritarian and fascist ideologies in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries expanded the spectrum on the political Right to its current contours.¹ Yet there is something of a paradox underlying the idea that the Left-Right distinction tracks some particular set of political principles or criteria. While there are indeed deep and fundamental differences that distinguish the Left and Right and that place liberalism to the left of conservatism, socialism to the left of liberalism, and so on, it is also true, as Hannah Arendt and F. A. Hayek observed, that the totalitarian Left and the totalitarian Right resemble one another considerably more than either resembles the political Center.² As George Orwell put it, a left jackboot to the head feels the same as a right jackboot.

In the United States today, the mainstream political spectrum runs from left liberalism to some form of paleoconservatism. Yet about half of us reject both the “liberal” and “conservative” labels. According to recent polls, fewer than a quarter of all Americans define themselves as “liberals,” while only slightly more than a quarter call themselves “conservatives.”³ This leaves most of the rest of us, who define ourselves as politically moderate or centrist, in a kind of limbo. The political centrist’s positions are often caricatured as a halfway house between liberalism and conservatism. “The only things in the middle of the road,” claims populist author and activist Jim Hightower, “are yellow stripes and dead armadillos.” The positions of the political centrist do not fall at the center on every issue, however, even if we could be certain where the center lies on particular issues. The centrist is not merely a pragmatic difference-splitter or political Solomon who believes that the best solution to any given problem is to sever the baby in two.

Misconceptions about political centrism trade on the idea that the centrist is perpetually in search of the political center of gravity—either in terms of his general political orientation or as a way of approaching particular issues. Yet ironically this charge has been made of virtually every political creed by some proponent of a still more radical position. The author of *The Conservative Mind*, traditional conservative Russell Kirk, denounced those “middle of the road” thinkers who follow “the way of the temporizer, pluming himself on having attained the Golden

Mean when in actuality he has only split the difference.” The “middle course will lie,” he argued, “wherever one extreme or the other decides to assign it.” Kirk, however, was not writing about political centrists but about neoconservatives and other modernist conservatives whose politics he characterized as “the conservatism of mediocrity.”⁴

Others have indicted conservatives such as Kirk on exactly the same charge. Libertarian F. A. Hayek repudiated conservatives as “advocates of the Middle Way” who have been willing to follow modern liberalism, though at a safe distance, embracing bigger government, the New Deal, and social welfarist policies of the twentieth century—all things conservatives once denounced. “With no goals of their own,” Hayek insisted, “conservatives have been guided by the belief that the truth must lie somewhere between the extremes—with the result that they have shifted their position every time a more extreme movement appeared on either wing.”⁵ There is something to this charge, as we’ll see in Chapter 3. Both liberalism and conservatism have moved significantly leftward over the course of the past two centuries. Today’s conservatives are yesterday’s liberals, and today’s liberals are yesterday’s socialist democrats.

Even those on the Far Left have been charged with being unprincipled compromisers. Among U.S. intellectuals, few consistently take positions further to the left than Noam Chomsky. Chomsky considers himself a “libertarian socialist” and has routinely maintained that contemporary America is a police state.⁶ Yet Chomsky’s views have been vilified as reactionary by anarchists to *his* left. As one contemporary anarcho-primitivist, John Zerzan put it, Chomsky’s is “a severely, backward, non-radical perspective.”⁷

The point here is not simply that every political position except for the truly extreme has been subject to the charge of temporizing. Rather, it is dangerous for a whole host of reasons to think about political orientation as running along a single continuum. While there is *something* to the Left-Right spectrum, at least in theory—and I’ll suggest in Chapter 3 that this something has a great deal to do with each theory’s orientation to equality—we should be alive to the problems that arise in thinking about the centrist’s positions as falling at the center of the political spectrum. Thinking about centrism as a *modus vivendi* between liberalism and conservatism makes centrism appear to be nothing more than the politics of unprincipled compromise. It ignores the complexities of defining political orientation along a single axis. And it has the unsettling effect of making contemporary liberalism and conservatism appear to be more coherent and unified philosophies than they actually are.

Part I of this book dispels the myth that liberalism and conservatism are pure and monolithic ideologies in the United States today. Both are increasingly gerrymandered concepts, generic labels we give to one or another of two sets of opposed views united only by a loose family resemblance of positions and opinions—one straddling the socialist-liberal portion of the Left-Right political spectrum, the other the liberal-conservative portion. There are compelling reasons why so many Americans today see no reason to identify with either label.

SO WHAT IS POLITICAL centrism? It is three things all at once. At one level, it is a response to the breakdown of modern liberalism and conservatism. In the larger sense of the word, yes, centrists are liberals. But in this larger sense—the sense in which John Locke and Adam Smith and the classical liberals of the nineteenth century were liberals—virtually all U.S. conservatives today are liberals as well. We all believe in democracy, in individual freedoms, and in individual rights. In this sense we are all liberals. But “liberalism” obviously has a narrower, idiosyncratic meaning today. The liberal tradition has evolved from the highly individualistic, limited-state philosophy of Locke, Smith, and their followers to a more collectivist philosophy embracing big government and a much greater emphasis on equality as opposed to freedom. Centrists part ways with liberals in this narrower, modern sense on a plethora of issues. We believe that modern liberalism has strayed too far from many of the basic moral values which are essential to a good society: responsibility, merit, a commitment to the sacredness of the family, an emphasis on spiritual as opposed to material values, among others. When liberals treat even the most vicious criminal offenders as victims of society, when they refuse to grant any standing whatsoever to the interests of the fetus, when they embrace grossly disparate standards for people of different races to be admitted to a law school or to be hired for a job, when they advocate domestic policies which encourage further illegal immigration, and when they promulgate paternalistic dietary laws in the name of ensuring our health, liberalism begins to look like a very unliberal philosophy.

Yet centrists are not conservatives either. U.S. conservatism is an uneasy alloy of nineteenth-century classical liberalism and the true conservatism of antiquity, as with such thinkers as Aristotle, Cicero, and Thomas Aquinas. In some cases modern conservatism suffers from its liberal influences, while at other points it is precisely its conservatism that is to blame. The conservatives’ version of materialism is seen in their permissive attitudes to corporate greed, their insouciance to rising levels of economic inequality in the United States, their blindness to the destruction of the environment (including a persistent unwillingness still to acknowledge global warming), and their support for reckless foreign wars, to name a few examples. In some of these matters, conservatives run too far in the direction of the individualism of the classical liberal. In other ways, however, they suffer from a blinkered conservatism that stunts their capacity to appreciate the opportunities for change. Fifty years ago most conservatives resisted racial equality; today they resist the full social inclusion of gays and lesbians.

The tension between the socialistic and liberal elements of modern liberalism and the classical liberal and conservative elements of modern conservatism runs deep on both sides. Liberals and conservatives are frequently inconsistent in their internal philosophy, and they often adopt positions on the opposite sides of the same inconsistency. Take, for example, liberals’ and conservatives’ schizophrenic attitudes about the need to regulate certain spheres of human activity. Conservatives embrace a philosophy of nonregulation in the economic sphere while advocating the need for stricter government control in the personal domain—in matters involving sexual morality, marijuana use, or divorce laws, for example. Why do conservatives believe that state regulation is so essential in the one sphere and so coun-

terproductive in the other? Why did many conservatives once, relatively recently, believe that government had no legitimate right to try to change cultural attitudes when these attitudes reinforce bigotry and segregation, while simultaneously insisting that government must intervene to check what those opposed to abortion and assisted suicide now call the “culture of death”? Because modern conservatives have one foot in the classical liberal tradition that saw little role for government to engage in character shaping and the other foot in the older conservative tradition that taught that “statecraft is soulcraft,” modern conservatives are ambivalent to the core on the question of the role of the state in shaping the values of its citizens.⁸

Liberals, of course, embrace the same inconsistencies from the other side. How can liberals believe that powerful cultural forces that shape our society—rap music, the sexualization of the Internet, rising out-of-wedlock births, and the continued high rate of divorce—should remain matters of personal choice beyond the reach of government, while insisting on the most rigorous intervention in the sphere of economic activity? Even within the narrower realm of personal morality, liberals are often torn between their libertarian and their paternalistic instincts, as when the debate turns to censoring pornography, legalizing drugs or prostitution, or imposing hate-speech codes. In fact, perhaps the deepest dilemma of modern liberalism is that it seeks to free people from every manner of constraint, a residue of its classical liberal inheritance, by using the potentially all-pervading influence of government.

One final incoherence in both philosophies is worth mentioning: liberals and conservatives today are all profoundly conflicted about the reasonableness of human choices and the significance of personal autonomy. Liberals lionize the value of personal autonomy and defend the sanctity of choice until the individual signs a subprime mortgage contract, or wants to ride without a motorcycle helmet, or opts to eat foods cooked in trans fat, at which point they frequently revert to an almost instinctive paternalism. This is because liberals are torn between two radically contradictory philosophies of human nature—the first rooted in the romantic idea that one’s spontaneous choices are the deepest reflections of one’s authentic self and the second grounded on modern sociological ideas that assume that human preferences are largely social constructions. So liberals tend to lean in favor of the authentic self when the individual’s choices reflect the kinds of values they endorse, and to lean to the sociological view that holds that our choices are the products of false consciousness when they disapprove of the particular preference. Why, for example, do liberals insist that more information is an unmixed blessing when the issue is whether to discuss the proper use of condoms in a seventh-grade class, yet reject as coercive laws which require that a woman seeking an abortion be given information about fetal development or adoption alternatives? Conservatives, too, vacillate between the more conservative message that culture is all-important in shaping the mores and outlook of individuals and their classical liberal faith in the power of the individual to step outside the cultural framework to construct himself or herself *ex nihilo*.

These deep and glaring contradictions at the level of political philosophy—on

both sides—give the rest of us pause. They make us see that the world is complicated and that the truth frequently lies somewhere between the caricatured poses of liberals and conservatives. So at the first level, centrists are responding to what we take to be the intellectual bankruptcy of modern liberalism and conservatism. But at a second level, centrists are reacting to the increased polarization of U.S. politics itself—a polarization generated by the liberal-conservative duopoly in political thought.

THOUGH LIBERALISM AND CONSERVATISM are far from coherent and monolithic theories of politics, we treat them as if they cogently define and divide the American political universe into two airtight and mutually opposed views of political reality. Yet their opposition is frequently a function of politics, not philosophy. What explains the polarizing tendency in contemporary political thought? Why so often do the media or ordinary Americans engaged in political debate fail to distinguish finer gradations of political thought within each of the two traditions, even as we also insist that these two traditions are distinct and inevitably opposed philosophies? Why *two* opposed political ideologies—no more and no less?

Political scientists refer to Duverger's law, which explains the tendency of majoritarian political systems—democracies that award 100 percent of political control to the group with as little as 51 percent of the vote—to evolve two parties and no more.⁹ Any group that seeks to capture a majority of the vote must, if it does not already represent a majority, form majority coalitions with other, broadly ideologically aligned groups. Two opposed groups form as each tries to capture the middle—which is nothing more than capturing a majority of voters. It might seem that Duverger's law bodes well for a centrist politics, but quite the opposite is true. One side captures the middle not by triangulation, but by polarization. One always has to choose sides, and there are generally only two sides from which to choose. Consider the helter-skelter diversity of politics in the modern Democratic or Republican parties, the notorious schisms and fault lines between progressives and populists on the Left, and libertarians and traditional conservatives on the Right. The internal tensions on each side are covered over by a false, unified persona.

One consequence of this process is that positions on particular political issues in the United States today tend to travel in clusters. The exigencies of political combat often force those holding vaguely compatible positions on various political issues to pull together under the banner of a common label, even though there are deep tensions and inconsistencies between these allied positions. Why must people who favor antidiscrimination laws protecting minorities (traditionally a liberal position), for example, have to oppose any official public acknowledgment of religion—placing a crèche in a public park or the Ten Commandments on a courthouse wall (a conservative position)? Why must those who hold progressive environmental policies oppose any legal protection for the fetus, even in the latter phases of pregnancy? Why can't we prefer a more restrained judiciary, a position associated with conservatism in the last fifty years, while holding more liberal positions politically? Why is it inconsistent, for example, to believe that abortion

should remain a legal option up until a certain phase of pregnancy while insisting that the Constitution does not mandate this (or any) position?

This tendency toward issue clustering has blunted the way we reason today, politically, socially, and morally. Rather than feeling free to embrace a set of positions which sometimes take the liberal side and sometimes appear conservative, moderates sometimes feel compelled to choose their poison, to conform their position to the cluster of positions associated with the Left or the Right. The problem with this is that it often forces them to embrace principles they do not hold. For example, most moderates in the United States have long concluded that laws criminalizing private consensual acts among homosexuals are outdated. Liberals have famously attacked these laws as a form of morals legislation, arguing that the state should have no authority whatsoever regulating behavior which is private. Conservatives respond by arguing that the state can regulate any behavior a majority of citizens believes to be immoral, even if conducted in private. The standard liberal position seems to commit us to the view that the state cannot regulate prostitution, incest, polygamy, drug use, and other arguably private activities, while the standard conservative position implies that we must support any view taken by the moral majority. Yet each of these positions is equally extreme and untenable, as I contend in Chapter 8.

H. L. Mencken once said that every difficult problem has a simple solution—and it's wrong. We centrists agree. In some cases, centrists are open to a pragmatic form of value balancing, not because we don't have a consistent set of principles but because the world is a complicated place in which values conflict. Consider the litmus test par excellence in contemporary politics—abortion. Liberals permit their pro-choice commitments to become a moral absolute—so much so that they are blinded to the barbarity of partial-birth abortion, a procedure routinely performed on a late-term fetus, who apparently consciously experiences the procedure for what it is—a horrific way to die. Liberals are afraid to draw sensible lines in the abortion debate for two reasons. Philosophically, they mistakenly believe that a commitment to reproductive freedom is an absolute while politically, they fear the slippery slope effects of conceding any limitation on abortion rights. Of course, pro-life conservatives do the same thing from the other side, taking a position that requires that they equate a pregnancy ended in the first or second month with the first-degree murder of an adult human being. Again, both positions are extreme and untenable. Both, in their own way, fail to recognize the moral importance of the development of the fetus through pregnancy—the liberal by not recognizing the late-term fetus as indistinguishable from a baby and the conservative by not recognizing the difference between a baby and a blastocyst.

Centrists find room for a sensitive weighing of incommensurable values. We believe compromise positions are not simply politically expedient, they are—as a matter of substantive morality—often better justified than the extreme positions on either side. On abortion (Chapter 9), capital punishment (Chapter 11), illegal immigration (Chapter 12), and various other issues, a compromise position frequently advances the values of both sides significantly on the basis of sound principles which make powerful sense in each particular context. To this extent, this book is a

call to reject the polarizing effects of the liberal-conservative duopoly of thought. It is an invitation to think through our political positions anew, from the perspective of a humane, sensitive, and above all commonsense political philosophy.

THERE IS, FINALLY, A THIRD LEVEL which draws moderates to the political center, and it is the most difficult to describe, though we will take this up all too briefly in Chapter 5. Underlying the surface politics of liberalism and conservatism lies a more trenchant divide between the secular and traditional views of the world. Each of these two conflicting paradigms for the human condition presents contrasting answers to the truly big questions in life: Does God exist? Is there a real morality, an objective foundation for right and wrong, or do humans construct their morality? Do human beings possess free will or are we ultimately causally determined to behave as we do? As I make clear in Chapter 5, we have to be careful not to overdraw these connections. Certainly some liberals are religiously more traditional, while some conservatives are downright postmodern in their view of the world, as I argue in Part I. But it would be a mistake to overlook the ways in which modern liberalism is shaped by a more secular view of the world, or the extent to which conservatism today reflects a natural-law, God-centered conception of the world. We see these differences most potently in public debates concerning the relationship of religion and politics, yet the influences operate in more subtle though equally powerful ways in other areas. Why do liberals and conservatives have such contrasting attitudes concerning the causes of crime or the purpose of punishment? To some extent, it is because liberals tend to view human beings as shaped by their environment, whereas conservatives place greater stock in free will and personal responsibility. Why are liberals more optimistic than conservatives about the prospect of engineering social conditions to eliminate war, poverty, violence, and other social evils? The answer lies in part, again, in the conservatives' tendency to think that there is a certain incorrigible aspect to the human condition that we will never be able to eradicate. Whether this pessimism is cast in the paleoconservative's assumption that we are fallen or in the neoconservative observation that collective action always has unintended consequences, the result will be the same. These same big-picture differences at the level of these two contrasting paradigms of the human condition also explain why liberals find progress where conservatives see only moral decay.

In some ways, then, the secular-traditionalist split is mirrored in the contemporary liberal-conservative divide. Yet, strangely, in other ways, liberalism and conservatism are themselves torn between these competing paradigms. Both groups hover peripatetically between the modern subjectivist ethic that holds that we humans construct our own morality and the more traditional belief that there are objective sources of morality such that morality is discovered, not constructed. Liberals are most likely to sound like the old natural lawyers, invoking absolute rights that exist independently of human laws, when opposing capital punishment or the torture of political dissidents. On other issues they appear happy to embrace the modern ethic of relativism. And conservatives sound most like natural lawyers when defending the fetus's right to life and opposing further government incursions into

property rights. On other issues they, too, frequently defend a subjectivist ethic, as they often tend to do in matters involving economic choices. This takes us back to the incoherence of contemporary liberalism and conservatism.

For our part, many centrists embrace a more liberal version of the traditional paradigm. We believe in an objective morality but we don't believe, for example, that homosexuality is morally wrong. Many of us believe strongly in a personal God but we don't follow the line of the old natural-law thinkers who believed that they could discern God's will in every matter that touches the human condition. We believe in free will and are alive to the all-too-pervasive human tendency to excuse making and self-deception, but we also understand that social and economic conditions do shape and limit people's options in ways that sometimes have to be taken into consideration, morally and legally.

So, on this third and deepest level, we often side with conservatives on principle, and liberals on the application of these principles.

Part I of this book (Chapters 1–4) traces the history and philosophy of modern liberalism and conservatism and attempts to show how these labels have each become freighted with such conflicting and overlapping meanings and positions that there is little of coherent unity in either position.

In Chapters 1 and 2 I trace these two respective traditions, picking out particular exemplars—Locke, Mill, John Dewey, and John Rawls on the liberal side; Joseph de Maistre, Edmund Burke, David Hume, and Andrew Sullivan among the conservatives—to show the variety and development of each tradition. In Chapter 3 I examine the paradoxes of liberalism and conservatism today, while in Chapter 4 I discuss in somewhat greater detail why centrists reject libertarianism, left liberalism, and the varieties of modern conservatism. Part I also sets up many of the theoretical debates underlying issues I discuss in Part II: Why does libertarianism commit its adherents to an open-border policy? How do liberals' and conservatives' conceptions of social order frame their views of the criminal justice system or the role of government in restructuring the economy? How do different sides think about freedom and equality? And what is the centrist's position in each case? Again and again we'll return to these foundational issues in Part II.

An initial cautionary remark is in order: I offer here an *approach*—what I think is a sound centrist approach—to thinking about the political and social issues of our day. But one need not agree with every position I take to consider oneself a centrist. What follows is hardly a litmus test or laundry list for political centrists. Nothing could be further from my deepest hope, which is to show that there are good sound principles for uniting around a core of centrist assumptions on the issues addressed. What I offer here is in part descriptive (i.e., this is what it means to be a centrist) and in part prescriptive (i.e., this is what I believe to be the better position on a particular issue). Certainly some who are drawn to the centrist persuasion will disagree with me on various issues, insisting that I am too liberal on gay marriage or too conservative on affirmative action. But centrists, like everyone else, are free to disagree with each other on the interpretation we give to our principles.