

The Centre Ground Hypothesis and the Shape of Public Opinion

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Abstract

This article takes issue with the widespread assumption that most people hold moderate political opinions on most issues. Tracing the historical conditions and theoretical assumptions that underpin that idea and testing it against polling from Britain, the author shows that—across economic, social and international affairs—the centre ground is not where most people are at.

Keywords: public opinion, centrism, moderation, democracy, Gramsci, common sense

What is the centre ground?

CALLS FOR A RETURN to the centre ground are a perennial feature of British politics. In crisis after crisis, we are presented with misty-eyed evocations of an era when consensus reigned, when leaders from different ideological backgrounds were united around a shared policy platform, when the virtues of moderation were properly respected. Sometimes this is nothing more than a grandiose defence of the status quo by a self-interested elite. At other times it represents a broader fear of change and uncertainty. But these dreams of the centre ground all depend on a more fundamental, and often unstated, assumption about the shape of public opinion: the idea that most people hold moderate political beliefs, with a few extremists at either end.¹

The implications of this claim (what I call the ‘centre ground hypothesis’) are enormous. It provides the psephological foundations for an electoral strategy of splitting the difference on every issue. It underpins contemporary liberal fears about polarisation and the disconnect between moderate citizens and partisan

politicians. It helps to explain the antipathy that binary political choices produce in certain circles. And it accounts for the profound reluctance of many commentators to take oppositional forms of politics seriously.²

But, despite its vast influence, the centre ground hypothesis has rarely been tested empirically. Instead, it has slipped into the taken-for-granted background of political discourse. And it is important to admit that this simple idea does have an intuitive appeal. Many properties of the natural and social world can be represented by the broad, symmetrical sweeps of a bell curve (what statisticians refer to as a normal distribution). And the very word ‘centre’ implies not just the middle point, but also the place where activities or people are concentrated.

But, public opinion *could* take on many other shapes. Schematically, there are at least three other possibilities (see Figure 1). In a neatly polarised world, people would cluster into two opposing camps at either end of a spectrum. If there was perfect dissensus, then attitudes would be distributed uniformly, with the same number of extremists as moderates.

¹M. Fiorina and S. Abrams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2009; S. Ansolabehere, J. Rodden and J. M. Snyder Jr., ‘Purple America’, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2006, pp. 97–118; A. Fowler, S. J. Hill, J. B. Lewis, C. Tausanovitch, L. Vavreck and C. Warshaw, ‘Moderates’, *American Political Science Review*, Online Early View, 2022.

²See, for example, R. Brownstein, *The Second Civil War: How Extreme Partisanship Has Paralyzed Washington and Polarized America*, New York, Penguin, 2008; A. Rawnsley, ‘There’s a hole in the middle. The Lib Dems won’t fill it by themselves’, *The Guardian*, 9 September 2018; A. O’Donohue and T. Carothers, *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, Washington, Brookings Institution Press, 2019.

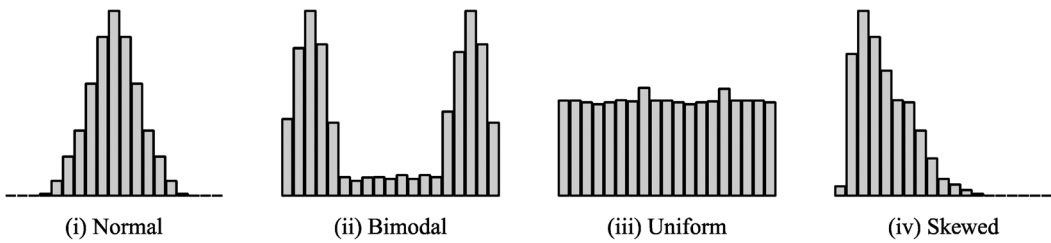


Figure 1: Four possible distributions of public opinion along a single dimension

Or opinions could be skewed, so that one ‘extreme’ becomes extremely popular.

The enduring popularity of the centre ground hypothesis demands a critical response. In what follows I approach this task from three angles. The first is that of critique, tracing the historical and conceptual developments that made the hypothesis thinkable. The second is theoretical, exploring the models of opinion formation that make it plausible. Taken together, these first two moments of criticism reveal the troubling ideological baggage bundled in with this seemingly simple empirical claim. Building on this, my third approach takes the claim seriously on its own terms and tests it against polling data from Britain. The lack of statistical support for the hypothesis suggests that it is finally time to abandon the centre ground hypothesis in favour of a richer and nonparametric theory of common sense and public opinion.

The origins of public opinion

European understandings of public opinion—public opinion as the collective voice of the people—are generally traced back to the eighteenth century.³ The rise of the urban bourgeoisie and the early development of liberal civil society (particularly around salons and coffee houses) created the social conditions in which citizens could begin to articulate political demands and to engage in a process of collective democratic reasoning separately from

³J. Peters, ‘Historical tensions in the concept of public opinion’, in T. Glasser and C. Salmon, eds., *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent*, New York, Guilford Publications, 1995, pp. 3–32; V. Price, ‘The public and public opinion in political theories’, in W. Donsbach and M. Traugott, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Public Opinion Research*, London, Sage, 2008, pp. 11–24.

the church and the state. Bound up with these social developments were technological advances in printing and the expansion of newspaper circulation, which created decentralised spaces for debate that traversed geographic boundaries. Democratic expression, therefore, no longer entailed physical co-presence in a forum or assembly, but rather participation in a shared discourse.

By the nineteenth century, this idea that citizens could produce powerful, independent discursive forces was a vital part of political life. But, while claims about public opinion were often deployed as rhetorical tools and theoretical speculations, the concept lacked a clear sociological referent. It was only in the early twentieth century that survey research started to provide answers to James Bryce’s famous quip in *The American Commonwealth* (1888) that ‘the obvious weakness of government by opinion is the difficulty of ascertaining it’. These early experiments in polling totally transformed the meaning of public opinion. Building on an earlier tradition of utilitarian thought, surveys assumed that public opinion was the aggregation of individual beliefs and attitudes, rather than an exercise in collective reason and political participation. For some, this presupposition was part of a scientific drive to eradicate ‘fictions’ like ‘society’ and ‘the public’ from our political language.⁴ For others (including the godfather of American polling, George Gallup), it was part of a democratic project to give people a voice unmediated by institutions or political parties.⁵ In both cases, public opinion came to be seen as something best revealed in a private

⁴F. Allport, ‘Toward a science of public opinion’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1937, pp. 7–23.

⁵G. Gallup and S. Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public-Opinion Poll and How it Works*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1940.

interview with a skilled technician, rather than in the public sphere.⁶

It was only after this transformation in the meaning of public opinion that the centre ground hypothesis could emerge as a claim about the statistical distribution of individual attitudes. But, those conceptual manoeuvres also ensured that this apparently simple empirical claim would carry within it a very particular ideology. This can be seen most clearly in debates about the role of public opinion in a democracy, where both sides internalised an extremely narrow view of human nature and of politics. On one side of this debate were the optimists, who heralded the new technologies of polling as inaugurating ‘the final stage in the development of our democracy’ where individuals’ opinions could be revealed without mediation or distortion.⁷ On the other side were pessimists who used those same statistical techniques to undermine some of democracy’s basic tenets. In particular, writers like Walter Lippmann and Gabriel Almond questioned the extent to which public opinion—which surveys revealed to be a mess of uninformed, incoherent and myopic beliefs—should be allowed to influence the business of government.⁸ This translated long-standing fears of mob rule and the irrational dynamics of crowds (the *ochlocracy* disparaged by Greek writers) into a statistically grounded argument about the inadequacies of public opinion. Lippmann and Almond, therefore, advocated for the creation of elites and experts who would have the intellectual capacity and moral fortitude to make good political decisions, and for

isolating them from the unpredictable urges of the masses. Lippmann, in particular, thought this final step was vital, coining the phrase ‘the manufacture of consent’ to refer to the necessary task of managing and organising public opinion. (The echoes of recent panics around ‘populism’ are hard to ignore.)

Although fierce opponents, both sides of this debate shared a particular set of assumptions. First, both assumed that the techniques and results of public opinion surveys revealed something fixed and innate about human nature. For optimists, the success and growth of the technology of polling (revealing public opinion in private conversations) confirmed their belief that human rationality was the fixed property of independent individuals. For pessimists, the opinions that were revealed through those techniques confirmed that the mob was, in fact, innately irrational. Both sides of this debate, therefore, ignored more materialistic accounts of human nature that were emerging in the same period. Antonio Gramsci, for example, argued that our ‘fragmentary, incoherent and inconsistent’ common sense was a product of specific historical conditions.⁹ In his telling, culture is formed through the random sedimentation of ideas from previous eras and through the deliberate imposition of external ideologies. The pressure of material deprivation and intellectual subordination then makes it difficult for us to engage critically with this received wisdom. We are rendered passive and pushed to rely on the ‘immediate products of crude sensation’ instead of taking our own roles as ‘spontaneous philosophers’ seriously. The incoherent nature of public opinion is, in this account, a product of concrete conditions and, crucially, something that can be overcome through collective action.

The second point of significance is that pollsters on both sides of the debate shared a remarkably narrow conception of democracy. Rather than an exercise in collective reasoning and deliberation, democracy was understood as the aggregation of the wishes of individual, atomised citizens. The survey methodology itself then worked as a technology for representation, ensuring a clean divide between the governed (those being polled) and the

⁶The development of focus groups in the mid-twentieth century produced further changes in our understanding of ‘public opinion’, but those developments are at some remove from the hypothesis being discussed here and lie beyond the scope of this essay.

⁷G. Gallup, ‘Testing public opinion’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1938, p. 14.

⁸W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922; G. Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1950, pp. 7–8, 69–70. Another influential example of the human nature argument from the period is J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1942, pp. 256–264, although he did not use statistical evidence to support it.

⁹A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Q. Hoare and G. Smith, eds. and trans., London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p. 419.

governors (who collect, interpret and act on the polls).

These ideas about human nature and democracy came baked into the centre ground hypothesis and allowed a simple empirical claim about the shape of public opinion to provide cover for a much broader understanding of politics and opinion formation.

Forming opinions

Many contemporary versions of the centre ground hypothesis begin with the primacy of economic interests. From that starting point, it's easy to see why our responses to questions about redistribution might fit neatly along a symmetrical bell curve. Those around the middle of the income distribution will favour a small amount of redistribution, while those at either extreme will have extreme opinions in line with their respective interests. But, many of those same authors *also* assume a normal distribution for moral or social issues.¹⁰ Indeed, it is extremely common in American political science to construct a single liberal-conservative axis which includes economic, social and sometimes even international affairs.¹¹

To explain why some scholars expected public opinion on all these different issues to follow the same pattern, it is necessary to turn back to the early twentieth century and to Stuart A. Rice's *Quantitative Methods in Politics*, published in 1928. Excited by the prospect of importing the new techniques of frequentist statistics into the study of politics, Rice set out to reformulate the discipline from a 'deterministic, inductive, and ... experimental' point of view.¹² One important element in this

project was his desire to prove that political opinions are normally distributed. Rice began in confident style, claiming that there was 'no obvious *a priori* reason to suppose that the political attitudes of individuals do not follow the normal frequency distribution which is characteristic of more easily measurable mental characteristics'. But his narrative soon ran into empirical difficulties. Confronted with a sea of contradictory evidence—including surveys about the entry of the United States into the League of Nations, attitudes towards the Ku Klux Klan and the proper role of the Supreme Court—Rice was forced into an awkward retreat. But he didn't give up, ending instead with the bold claim that 'On the whole, I am still inclined to believe that there is "something in" the hypothesis that individual attitudes are distributed normally, *apart from some distorting situation*'.¹³

This blind faith in the centre ground hypothesis is a product of Rice's underlying model of opinion formation. Drawing a loose analogy with physical properties like height, he suggested that political outcomes are determined by a variety of independent factors, each of which can push people in one direction or the other. In this case, you might think of factors such as age, friendships, class, cultural interests and education. Assuming that these factors are 'numerous, equipotent and independent', most of us will be pushed in many different directions simultaneously. This ensures that the different factors cancel each other out, leaving most people with a medium score for whatever political attitude is being measured. For Rice, it is not the innate attractiveness of moderate opinions, or the psychological appeal of compromise, that leads people to the centre ground. It is a simple (he might say 'neutral') statistical process, in which the push and pull of countless social forces offset one another.¹⁴

This is an impeccably liberal model of public opinion: each individual is an independent organism impacted by a range of external factors which lack any overarching structure or tendency. And Rice is careful to position this as the natural mode of opinion formation, dismissing anything which deviates from it as

¹⁰For example, Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder, 'Purple America', pp. 97–98; G. Evans, A. Heath and M. Lalljee, 'Measuring left-right and libertarian-authoritarian values in the British electorate', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 47, no. 1, 1996, pp. 93–112.

¹¹For example, J. Bafumi and M. Heron, 'Leapfrog representation and extremism', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 104, no. 3, 2010, pp. 519–542; Fowler, et al., 'Moderates'.

¹²S. A. Rice, *Quantitative Methods in Politics*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1928, p. 5. Those statistical techniques were developed in large part by racist eugenicists at UCL, including Francis Galton, Karl Pearson and Ronald Fisher.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 74, 89.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 91.

'some distorting situation'.¹⁵ But those distorting situations are precisely what a long line of radical thinkers have identified as being the normal way that opinions are formed under modern capitalism. One line of thought—borrowing from Marx and Engels's suggestion that 'the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production'—has focussed on the many varied cultural and ideological activities of the ruling class, including ownership of the media, elite sponsorship of the arts, or even the pomp and ceremony deployed by the British monarchy.¹⁶ Another line of thinking has focussed more narrowly on the role of the state, most notably in Althusser's famous discussion of the education system as an ideological state apparatus.¹⁷ But, in both cases, the key critique of Rice is that the external ideological pressures we all face *do* have an overarching structure: they are part of a totality, a more or less coherent system that leaves little room for cancelling out. In situations like this, there is no reason to think that public opinion would cluster towards the middle. Instead, it is likely to be heavily skewed, forming a consensus of one kind or another.

Rice's liberal model also violates the contemporary sociological assumption that most opinions are formed through interaction. Work derived from Paul Lazarsfeld's pioneering studies of 'mass communication' has emphasised the importance of opinion leaders as key nodes in the vertical transmission of attitudes and information.¹⁸ (These theories have resurfaced in recent years in liberal concerns about social media, demagogic populism and online conspiracy theories.) Other

scholars have taken a more horizontalist view, focussing, for example, on the various social-psychological processes that induce people to support already popular opinions.¹⁹ Crucially, both approaches assume the people's opinions are interdependent and therefore give us no reason to think that most people will end up with moderate opinions.

Despite these various theoretical challenges, the centre ground hypothesis has retained its taken-for-granted character over the course of the last century. A symptomatic recent article in *The American Political Science Review*, entitled 'Moderates', makes no effort to explain the model of opinion formation which lies behind the authors' version of the centre ground hypothesis or to explain why we should celebrate the presence of a 'healthy group of centrist voters'.²⁰ The normalcy and the desirability of the 'moderate middle' are simply taken for granted. Instead, it is deviations from the centre ground hypothesis—extremism, polarisation and partisanship—that require explanation and provoke fear.

Left, right or centre?

The classic invocation of the centre ground hypothesis is in reference to the ideological divide between left and right. But any attempt to test the hypothesis in this context faces an immediate methodological dilemma, one which also reveals how much ideological baggage is concealed within these seemingly technical discussions. Political scientists measure ideological position in two ways: one is by asking people to place themselves somewhere on a scale between left and right; the other is to calculate an index based on a series of questions about their economic beliefs. Unfortunately, these two approaches produce very different empirical results. When academics calculate people's left-right score for them, the British population is heavily skewed towards left-wing economic positions—

¹⁵Ibid, pp. 89–90. He also uses this to justify a strategy of political gradualism, finding that his scientific assumptions neatly match his liberal politics.

¹⁶K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, C. J. Arthur, ed., London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1970 [1846], p. 64.

¹⁷L. Althusser, 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)', B. Brewster, trans., in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp. 127–86.

¹⁸P. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson and H. Gaudet, *The People's Choice*, New York, Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1944; E. Katz, P. Lazarsfeld and E. Roper, *Personal Influence*, New York, Free Press, 1955.

¹⁹George Gallup, one of the founding figures of public opinion research, dedicated a whole chapter of his *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public-Opinion Poll and How It Works*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1940, to the question of 'bandwagon effects'; an issue which continues to trouble pollsters to this day.

²⁰Fowler, et al., 'Moderates', p. 16.

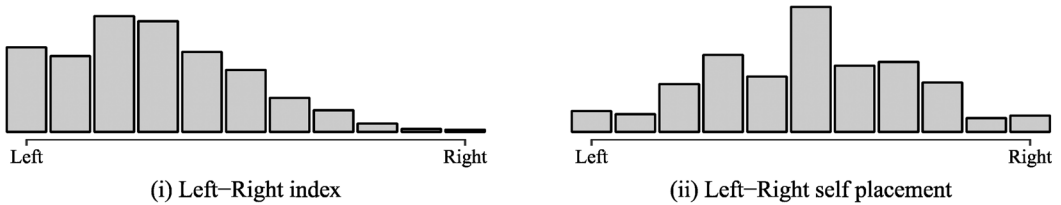


Figure 2: Left-right attitudes in Britain, British Election Studies Internet Panel (BESIP), June 2020

clearly violating the centre ground hypothesis. But, when given a scale and the freedom to place themselves on it, nearly 20 per cent of people put themselves dead centre. In fact, the graph in the right panel of Figure 2 is a clear example of the beautiful bell curve that makes the hypothesis so seductive.

How should we interpret these differences? One response is to say that the centre ground hypothesis is true and that, somewhere in the calculation of the left-right index, academics have lost touch with reality. This is certainly possible, but there are several other, equally plausible, explanations. First, people might be unsure about what 'left' and 'right' signify, and so hedge their bets by placing themselves in the centre. (The fact that 21 per cent of respondents replied to this question with 'Don't know' probably tells us something.) Second, those labels might have accreted negative connotations, meaning that people don't want to be associated with either the left or the right. Third, people might have internalised the centre ground hypothesis and, believing their own views to be widely shared, put themselves where they think everyone else is. In fact, it is difficult to read much from that second graph of left-right attitudes beyond the fact that, when given a scale, people like to put themselves at the centre of it. That is to say, it shows us how people would describe and frame their own economic beliefs, rather than anything about the content of those beliefs.

But the graph on the left, which contradicts the hypothesis with a clear skew towards left-wing political attitudes, is also harder to interpret than it might first appear. The index (which has become a standard in British political science) is calculated on the basis of how strongly respondents agree or disagree with a series of five statements about the economy, statements such as 'Big business takes advantage of ordinary people' and 'There is one

law for the rich and one for the poor' (these are listed in Table 1). These five responses are then added together and turned into an index which ranges from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). This method is designed to tap into people's underlying values—values that are supposedly deeper than any immediate policy concern and provide the ends against which all means are judged. In this instance, the value in question is equality and the index is designed to gauge how much importance people attach to it.²²

One problem with this approach is that it is incapable of distinguishing between moderate and inconsistent opinions—something which has profound implications for what the centre ground hypothesis means politically.²³ Take the two examples shown in Table 1. Both score 5 on the left-right index, making them centrists *par excellence*. But the first so-called moderate actually has very strong opinions: they are committed to redistribution, but don't believe that inequality is caused by exploitation. (This could be a sophisticated political position: a dominant strand of anglophone political philosophy bemoans inequality, not because it is produced by exploitation, but because it is the result of a 'birth lottery' where some people are born with arbitrary advantages and talents.)²⁴ But, because this position is inconsistent *according to the logic of the index*, its adherents would be placed in the centre ground. The second moderate has, by way of contrast, genuinely moderate opinions: they do not feel able totally to accept or reject any

²²Evans, Heath and Lalljee, 'Measuring left-right and libertarian-authoritarian values', pp. 95, 98.

²³D. Broockman, 'Approaches to studying policy representation', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2016, pp. 181–215.

²⁴J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971.

Table 1: Two hypothetical ‘moderates’

Statements	Moderate 1	Moderate 2
‘Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off’	Strongly agree	Neither agree nor disagree
‘Big business takes advantage of ordinary people’	Strongly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree
‘Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth’	Strongly agree	Neither agree nor disagree
‘There is one law for the rich and one for the poor’	Neither agree nor disagree	Neither agree nor disagree
‘Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance’	Strongly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree
<i>Left-Right index (0 - 10)</i>	5	5

of the five statements about the structure of the British economy. Clearly, these are two very different political positions. But those differences disappear in the construction of a single, linear left-right index.

That is not to say that this left-right index is a failure or some kind of scholarly fraud. It has been extensively validated and performs well on the standard statistical tests that are used to assess measurements of this kind. In the British Election Studies (BES) data analysed here, the index has high internal consistency reliability (a Cronbach’s Alpha score of 0.85) and various forms of principal component analysis show that more than 60 per cent of the variance across the five questions can be explained by one underlying dimension. That is to say, this index is up to the task for which it was designed: reducing complexity and producing a stable measure which can then be used in more technical analyses.

But, for our purposes, this conflation of inconsistency and moderation matters, because it biases us towards the centre ground hypothesis. We can quantify this risk in two ways. First, 27 per cent of BES respondents crossed the Rubicon between left and right on at least one of the questions, and their inconsistency is interpreted as moderation in this index. Second, recent analysis found that just under 30 per cent of the American population have opinions which cannot be mapped onto a single, latent dimension.²⁵ In both cases, the calculations show that there is a substantial group of people whose opinions are

inconsistent according to the logic of the index and so, by misclassifying them as moderates, we skew our analysis.

This bias towards the centre ground hypothesis is exacerbated by two other features of the modern political science literature. The first is a tendency to reclassify those who answer ‘Don’t know’ to a survey question as moderates, expanding the latter category significantly.²⁶ The second is that each of the five questions listed above requires respondents to place themselves somewhere along a five-point agree-disagree scale. Given that people are often reluctant to place themselves at the extreme ends of any scale, this again inflates the number of moderates in our data. (One alternative, which has yet to be deployed in Britain, is to give respondents a range of concretely described policy options, listed in a random order, and to ask them to select their preferred option. Studies which use this method tend to find far fewer moderates and a much smaller association between people’s overall ideological position and their concrete policy preferences.)²⁷

Insisting on this distinction between inconsistency and moderation also forces us to confront a deeper ontological and methodological question about the nature of public opinion. The assumption behind the construction of this left-right index is that our opinions about particular topics are driven by a more

²⁶For example, Evans, Heath and Lalljee, ‘Measuring left-right and libertarian-authoritarian values’, p. 109.

²⁷Broockman, ‘Approaches to studying policy representation’.

²⁵Fowler, et al., ‘Moderates’.

fundamental ideological position: they are instantiations of a deeper political conviction. But, identifying those underlying positions is a challenge, because people's actual answers to survey questions tend to be messy and contradictory. In effect, this understanding of public opinion implies that people make mistakes when answering survey questions: they misapply their own beliefs and give incorrect responses. It is only by averaging across many different questions that political scientists are able to identify the true ideologies lying behind our muddled and inconsistent opinions.²⁸

This spatial understanding of politics—the idea that each of us occupies a consistent and well-defined position in political space, that we can be mapped against one or more dimensions—has a clear appeal. But, it leaves a vital question unanswered: what does it mean for our political beliefs to be consistent or inconsistent? In his classic analysis of public opinion, Philip Converse argued that there are three sources of political consistency. The least important is logic because, as with all social matters, it is rare for two political ideas to be incompatible with one another at the level of abstract mathematics. The second is psychological, including, for example, the way that loyalty might incline you to support a new idea when it is proposed by someone you already like. The third is social, by which Converse means both the set of material interests that derive from your social position and the way political attitudes tend to diffuse as whole packages, rather than as discrete elements.²⁹

It is this final point which is at the heart of modern understandings of 'consistency' and related attempts to simplify political attitudes into a single dimension. Take the left-right index described above. Its authors say explicitly that it measures the importance attached

to equality.³⁰ But, a cursory read of the five statements reveals additional concerns with fairness and exploitation. Meanwhile, in the United States, the normal approach has been to construct a single liberal-conservative index, rather than a left-right one (and to use a completely different set of questions to do so). The notion of 'consistency' that is embodied in conventional political metrics therefore reflects, at least in part, the particular packages of policies that are on offer. They are echoes of the political cleavages in that society at that historical moment. This ties the very idea of public opinion to the status quo: the 'centre' becomes the middle of whatever options the current political system happens to provide. By wedding the centre to the political status quo, the centre ground hypothesis assumes a much broader ideological force, becoming a justification for compromise, collaboration and gradualism, as well as a vehicle for a particular understanding of politics and human nature. More importantly, it also makes it difficult to judge whether the inconsistency lies in people's beliefs or in their disconnect from establishment politics.

In the final analysis, ignoring our inconsistencies and focussing on aggregate measures raises as many questions of interpretation as the self-placement scale which I dismissed earlier. This means searching for more robust foundation on which to test the centre ground hypothesis.

The true shape of public opinion

The cleanest and most rigorous way of testing the centre ground hypothesis is to examine people's attitudes to individual political issues. Looking first at economic and fiscal policy, evidence for the centre ground hypothesis is hard to find (see Figure 3). As above, these questions are posed as a scale, with respondents placing themselves somewhere on a range of possible answers in response to a particular prompt. But even so, when asked if they want to increase taxes in order to increase spending on health and social services, responses are heavily skewed towards left-wing positions. So too are the three

²⁸S. Ansolabehere, J. Rodden and J. Snyder, 'The strength of issues: using multiple measures to gauge preference stability, ideological constraint, and issue voting', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 102, no. 2, 2008, p. 215; Bafumi and Heron, 'Leapfrog representation and extremism', pp. 521–522; Evans, Heath and Lalljee, 'Measuring left-right and libertarian-authoritarian values'.

²⁹P. Converse, 'The nature of belief systems in mass publics', *Critical Review*, vol. 18, no. 1–3, 2006 [1964], pp. 5–10.

³⁰Evans, Heath and Lalljee, 'Measuring left-right and libertarian-authoritarian values', p. 95.

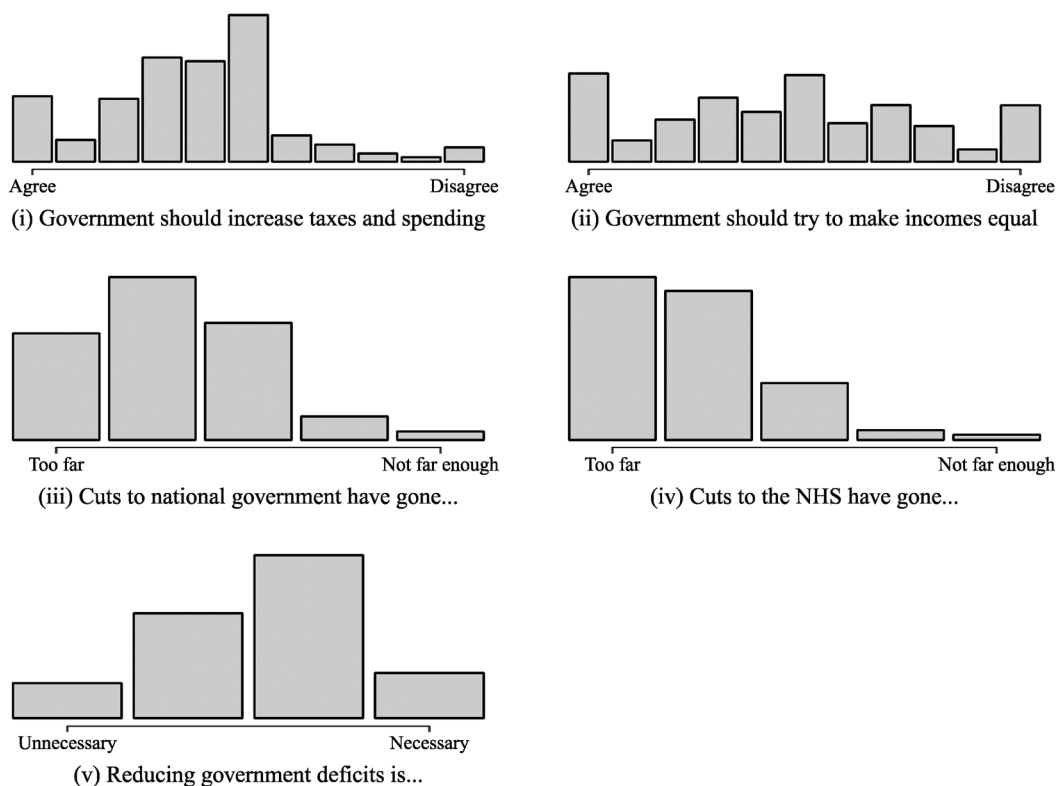


Figure 3: Attitudes to fiscal policy (BESIP, June 2020)

separate peaks seen in the second panel, where people were asked whether the government should try to make incomes equal. Here, as many people agree very strongly as put themselves in the middle; while an almost as large group put themselves at the opposite end, saying that the government should not worry about equalising incomes at all.

The remaining panels also diverge from the centre ground hypothesis, showing widespread agreement that austerity has gone too far and, simultaneously, that tackling the government deficit is a necessary task. At first glance, this might appear contradictory. It is certainly true that classical Keynesian social democracy would have wanted to increase taxes and spending, equalise incomes, eliminate austerity *and* been relatively unconcerned with the size of the deficit. But, this has not always been the case. European social democracy in the interwar period, for example, was decidedly *pre-Keynesian*, sticking to an establishment orthodoxy of balanced budgets and the gold standard.

Looking next at social attitudes, we find that they too deviate from the centre ground hypothesis. Take, for example, the five questions which are used to construct the libertarian-authoritarian index (analogous to the left-right index described above). Figure 4 shows that on questions of tradition and respect for authority, the British public skews towards fairly conservative responses. But the related question of the death penalty is clearly polarised, with opinions clustered towards each end of the scale. Again, neither pattern offers much evidence for the popularity of the centre ground.

The difference between attitudes to the death penalty and the other four issues is worth reflecting on, not least because it echoes an early criticism of Rice's *Quantitative Methods in Politics*. This criticism revolved around a distinction between opinions on issues that are the subject of extensive political debate (like the death penalty) and opinions on issues that have no public profile. While the former might have some of the psychological heft of a fully-

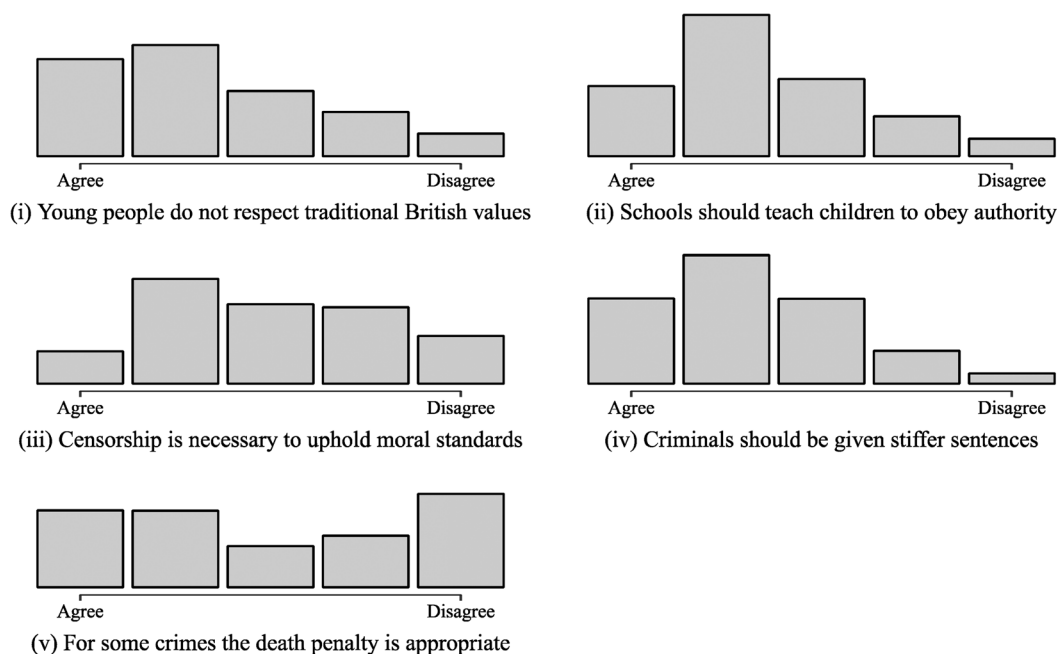


Figure 4: Libertarian-Authoritarian attitudes (BESIP, June 2020)²¹

fledged opinion, the latter could just as easily be spur of the moment responses to a question that the interviewee has never really considered before. It is, therefore, an open question whether these five opinions deserve to be given the same ontological weight.

Turning to attitudes towards immigration—that all-consuming totem of twenty-first century British politics—helps to address those ontological worries. But again, the results don't hold much promise for the centre ground hypothesis. As Figure 5 shows, there is little evidence of a swell of people holding moderate opinions, with a few extremists at each end. Instead, and perhaps surprisingly, they reveal widespread agreement with the claim that immigration enriches British culture and the British economy. And, when asked directly whether immigration should be increased or reduced, the distribution of opinions is strongly bimodal: almost as many people chose the extreme anti-immigration position, as put themselves in the centre.

The area of public opinion which most clearly and decisively violates the centre ground hypothesis is foreign policy. Here, there is an overwhelming consensus, with precious few moderates (see Figure 6 and 7). In many ways, this unanimous support for

NATO and total clarity about who Britain's national 'enemies' are, is not particularly surprising. Foreign policy is an area of life which is far removed from the ordinary experiences of many people and so is even more heavily mediated than social or economic issues. In contexts like this, the weight of the intellectual means of production is heavily felt, creating the near total consensus that Marx and Engels predicted in their early writings on ideology.

This brief survey shows that—across social, economic, and international affairs—the shape of public opinion varies dramatically. There are opposing groups and strong consensuses, but little evidence to support the centre ground hypothesis. If most people really are moderates, they're doing a good job of hiding it.

Common sense

Although evidence in support of the centre ground hypothesis is hard to come by, assumptions about the virtuous middle have proved equally hard to shake. In large part this is because, as in the case of Rice, many people still hold fast to a particular model of opinion formation. As I said earlier, critiques of these naïve liberal models are commonplace,

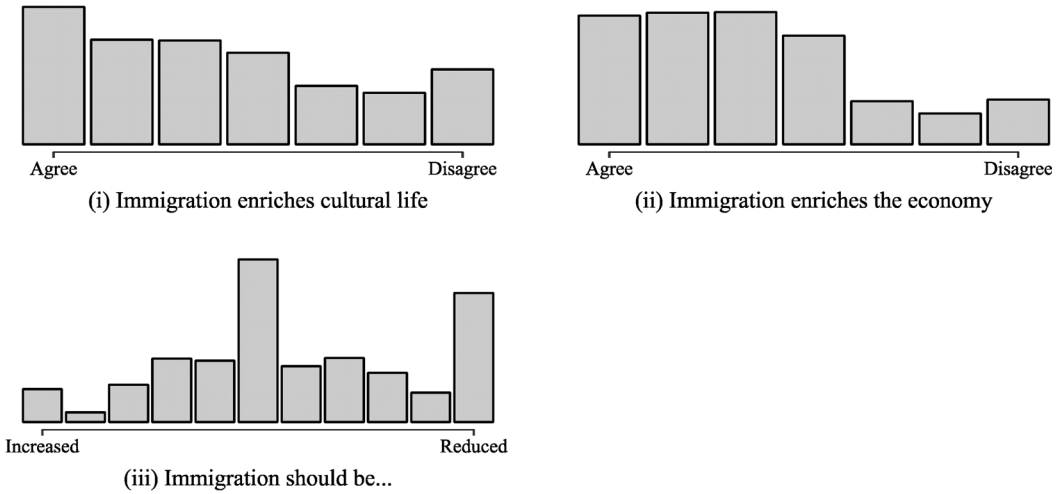


Figure 5: Attitudes to immigration (BESIP, June 2020)

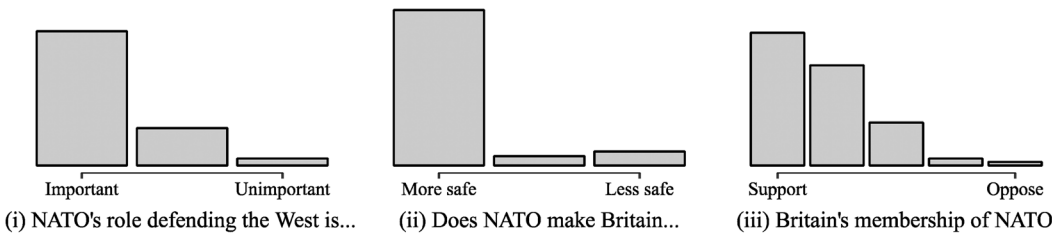


Figure 6: Attitudes to NATO (YouGov, December 2019)

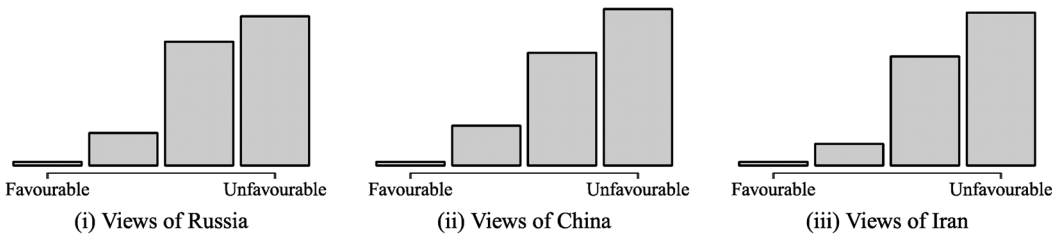


Figure 7: Overall, do you have a favourable or unfavourable view of the following countries? (YouGov, May 2021)

particularly in mainstream debates about the impact of new digital technologies. But, there is a real danger that the centre ground hypothesis survives by bracketing any contradictory examples as the product of Rice's *'distorting situations'*. It is important to recognise that this is a normative defence. It implies that opinions which deviate from the centre ground hypothesis must have been formed in suspicious

ways: the result of propaganda, manipulation or distortion. The assumption that there *ought* to be a broad moderate consensus on all political questions is a manifestation of the more general liberal dream of a political system free from conflict and a status quo that commands widespread consent. But, presenting that dream as a normative standard works to justify the conspiratorial thinking that fuels liberalism's most egregious

excesses. People would agree with us, if only they weren't misled by populists. They would all be moderates, if it weren't for internet trolls and fake news. There would be no conflict, if people just stopped challenging the current political order.

But there are other ways of conceiving of public opinion. To return to Gramsci one last time, his *Prison Notebooks* provide a famous sketch of how culture shapes our beliefs, a sketch which focusses on the role of the church and other institutions, societies and clubs, alongside newspapers, journals and publishing houses ('the quantitatively biggest and most dynamic part' of the dominant class's ideological front).³¹ Gramsci is clear that this model is specific to the early twentieth century. Instead of relying on biological analogies or liberal assumptions about how different interest groups necessarily cancel each other out, he provides a concrete and historically grounded framework for thinking about the different institutions shaping public opinion. This realism is a vital antidote to the hidden ideological implications and myths that make up the centre ground hypothesis.

Abandoning the simple curves of the normal distribution for a grounded, nonparametric approach to public opinion means admitting our own ignorance more explicitly. There's no reason to presume that common sense in a particular area will take on a particular shape. No reason to assume that the great silent majority is made up of moderates. Instead, we are left with the call to examine the complex, but concrete, patterns of common sense as they evolve from one moment to the next. This may not provide us with immediate strategic guidance. But it will force us to recognise the true shapes of public opinion and to start addressing the many gaps in its theorisation.

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³¹Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 325–343; *Further Selections from The Prison Notebooks*, D. Boothman, ed. and trans., London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1995, pp. 152–155; 'I giornali e gli operai', *Avanti!*, 22 December 1916.