

Why the Middle Ground Between Left and Right Is so Elusive

"I really wish this country would come into the middle," Trump lawyer Michael van der Veen [remarked on Fox News](#) last month. "It's so polarized on the Left and on the Right."

Van der Veen is not alone in this desire, expressed shortly after Trump's second impeachment acquittal. Many commentators have noted that the country is "polarized" between left and right. This divide, it is further assumed or asserted, is not a good thing. It must be overcome by coming to "the middle."

"Middle" has a comforting feeling to it, cognate with "reasonable" and "agreeable." But is it possible? Surely if there's a left and right, a middle must be possible.

But while these terms are used casually as if everyone knows what they mean, their origin suggests something that may map onto their current usage. As political terms, left and right are a recent vintage. During the early years of the French Revolution, those favoring retaining the King sat on the right side of the Assembly in Paris, while those favoring his elimination sat on the left. A reading of this split would lead one to believe that "right" must indicate support for governmental power, while "left" stands for freedom from the same. This is how many dictionaries summarize left and right: "liberal and compassionate" on the one side, and "authoritarian" or even "dictatorial" on the other.

As with many terms, a lack of context distorts the true meaning. The assemblymen who sat on the right did indeed favor retaining the king, but for a reason that constitutes the opposite of "governmental power." King Louis XVI was known in France at that time as "The Restorer of Liberty." After the tyrannical reign of Louis "I am the State" XIV and the wishy-

washy rule of Louis XV, Louis XVI extended freedoms to French entrepreneurs to an extent never before known. His predecessor had asked French businessmen what the state could do for them, and they had famously answered, "Laissez-nous faire"—"let us make our own way"—and this, of course, is the origin of "Laissez-faire," the byword of free-market economics. But it was Louis XVI, not Louis XV, who acted on it, withdrawing regulations and lowering taxes so as to encourage the flourishing of businesses. That is why those sitting on the right wanted the king to remain connected to his head, so that he might continue to ensure the liberties of the French middle class. Freedom from government control was the desire of the right-sitters.

What did the left-sitters want? Equality.

For leftists then as for leftists now, there is no true freedom when people are divided by class and condition. Freedom as independence from state control is for them superficial freedom, freedom in name only. Until people are made equal—as the Terror made them equal under the blade of the guillotine, destroying wealthy businessmen, ordinary shop owners, landlords, servants, and priests—there can be no freedom, because the critical point is that equality is fundamental to true freedom. Neither "liberality," nor "compassion," nor any other shortcut definition of the left will do, because this is the common denominator: For the left, there can be no real freedom without equality as a starting place, while for the right, freedom is the starting place, the fundamental social condition required for a just world. Equality enters into it, but only in the sense that in a truly just society, every individual is free in a degree equal to all others; if one person has the right to pursue happiness, all people do.

By now it should be clear that a "middle ground" between left and right can no more be found than can a middle shape between a square and a circle. How could there be compromise between a

view that sees freedom as the one essential ingredient of a just society, and the view that freedom is meaningless without the prior elimination of all inequalities? There simply cannot be.

What people mean when they call for a middle ground is not really a halfway place between two incompatible modes of thought, but a peaceful reasoning between advocates of the two antagonistic positions. Those on the right can and must most urgently wish for such a thing. But if recent events are any indication, the left realized long ago that peaceful reasoning is unnecessary, since it can win political power without engaging the other side.

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