

Explain Your Extremists

No matter how controversial your political views are, there are always people on “your side” who hold a more extreme position than you do. How do you account for such people?

Top scenarios:

1. The extremists are actually right, but their proposals are “politically impossible.” It’s better to ask for half a loaf and get it than demand a totally unattainable whole loaf.
2. The extremists are actually right, but their proposals are politically *unstable*. Even if the extremists prevailed in the short-run, the long-run effect would be a mighty **backlash**, leading to a crushing defeat for your side. It’s better to ask for half a loaf that you can actually keep than demand a whole loaf that will soon be confiscated.
3. The extremists would be right, except that foolish and/or knavish resistance to their proposals would be *extremely* costly. As a result, it’s better to pursue your more moderate approach, which is inferior in principle but elicits less strident opposition. It’s better to peacefully obtain half a loaf than to fight a bloody battle for a whole loaf.
4. The extremists are wrong because they take a good idea too far. A moderate move in your preferred direction makes the world better; an extreme move, however, makes it worse. It’s better to eat half a loaf and remain at a healthy body weight than to eat a whole loaf and become morbidly obese.
5. The extremists are wrong because they take your side’s rhetoric too literally. Yes, moderates like you often exaggerate and oversimplify, but you *know* you’re doing it. Your extremists, in contrast, naively believe your side’s exaggerations and oversimplifications, leading them to advocate ineffective or even dangerous policies. Just because your slogan loudly proclaims that “Bread is the staff of life” doesn’t mean you should follow an all-bread diet.
6. The extremists are wrong because they fail to grasp the intellectually sophisticated position held by moderates such as yourself. If they would just patiently listen, they’d discover the intricacies of your worldview. Alas, they rarely bother. Thus, you derive the value of a half a loaf of bread from a detailed examination of human nutritional requirements – and the extremists childishly fixate on getting “all the bread.”

The meta-point, naturally, is that there are also always people on your side more *moderate* than yourself. So when you dismiss your extremists, you really should wonder: How confident am I that people more moderate than myself couldn’t rightfully dismiss *me*?

All of which leads to three questions for discussion:

1. Where do *your* extremists go wrong?
2. Where would your moderates say that *you* go wrong?
3. What makes you think you've discovered your side's "Golden Mean"?