

BUILDING A POLITICAL MAJORITY

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Few contemporary nations seem more divided politically than the United States. Beyond the partisan rancor, however, polling data point to a broad consensus on core values and suggest that if the institutions of governmental and corporate power were accountable to the public will, the United States would be pursuing very different policies both domestically and internationally. The residual frustration runs high and represents a powerful latent political force.

There is near universal agreement among adult Americans (83 percent) that as a society the United States focuses on the wrong priorities. Specifically, polling data affirm that the substantial majority of Americans share a desire for strong families and communities, a healthy environment, and high-quality health care and education for all. They are likewise concerned about the unaccountable power of corporations and government, and they prefer to live in a world that puts people ahead of profits, spiritual values ahead of financial values, and international cooperation ahead of international domination.

These are the values of the true political center most everywhere in the world. That center is composed of people who, irrespective of party affiliation, want a politics based on principle, seek real solutions to real problems, and believe government should be accountable and serve the common good. In the United States, as in the world, the defining concerns of the center reveal a deep longing to restore the sense of human connection found in the life of healthy families and communities and reflect a natural desire to support our children in their happy and healthful development.

It is on the foundation of this shared concern for children, family, and community that a majoritarian constituency for Earth Community will be built. It is here that the political extremists of the New Right are most vulnerable, because their policies constitute nothing less than a war against children, families, and communities. Cultural politics define the core of the contemporary political struggle in the United States. Progressives hold a natural edge in this struggle, but have consistently come out on the losing end because they fail to recognize the nature and implications of cultural politics.

Cultural Politics

While the New Right focused on a relatively unified effort to win the allegiance of swing voters who play by the rules and values defined by the prevailing cultural stories, progressives fragmented into countless interest groups promoting particular policy agendas based on appeals to logic and conscience. As control of the defining cultural stories gave the New Right a growing political edge, progressives found themselves increasingly on the defensive, limited to efforts to stall or moderate the New Right's agenda.

If Earth Community is to prevail, progressives must learn to win in the arena of cultural politics. Win that struggle, and electoral and legislative victories will follow naturally.

Foundations of a Unifying Political Consensus

It is instructive to look at what Americans are telling national pollsters about their concerns and values, as it suggests that a desire to strengthen the human connections of family and community and to secure a positive future for our children may be the most politically potent issue of our time.

Strong Families and Communities

Eighty-three percent of Americans believe that we need to rebuild our neighborhoods and small communities and fear that family life is declining. Ninety-three percent agree that we are too focused on working and making money and not focused enough on family and community. Eighty-six percent agree that we are too focused on getting what we want now and not focused enough on the needs of future generations. Eighty-seven percent of adult Americans think “advertising and marketing aimed at kids today make children and teenagers too materialistic,” and 70 percent feel advertising “has a negative effect on their values and world view.” Seventy-eight percent believe “marketing and advertising put too much pressure on children to buy things that are too expensive, unhealthy, or unnecessary.”

Strong majorities of Americans also believe that education and health are community, as well as individual, issues and that they merit a community commitment in support of families and children. More than four out of five Americans consider the state of education (86 percent) and health care (82 percent) to be very important. Sixty-nine percent favor increasing federal spending for education. Seventy-nine percent believe it is more important to assure health care coverage for all than to cut taxes.

Healthy Environment

The health and future of our children depend on a healthy environment. Nearly nine out of ten U.S. adults (87 percent) believe we need to treat the planet as a living system and that we should have more respect and reverence for nature. Nearly three out of four (74 percent) are concerned that pollution may destroy farmlands, forests, and seas. More than four out of five (85 percent) believe that the possibility of global warming should be treated as a serious problem. We strongly agree on the importance of setting higher emissions and pollution standards for business and industry (81 percent), spending more government money on developing solar and wind power (79 percent), and being more vigorous in enforcing federal environmental regulations (77 percent).

International Cooperation

Seventy-six percent of Americans reject the idea that the United States should play the role of world police officer, and 80 percent feel it is playing that role more than it should be. Ninety-four percent believe that the best way to fight terrorism is to work through the

United Nations to strengthen international laws against terrorism and to make sure UN members enforce them. Substantial majorities of Americans agree that the United States should participate in the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (87 percent), the Ottawa Treaty to ban land mines (80 percent), the International Criminal Court (76 percent), and the Kyoto Protocol on climate change (71 percent).

More than two out of three (71 percent) believe that our dependence on oil leads to conflicts and wars with other countries and believe it is better to deal with our dependence on oil by conserving energy (83 percent). Only a small minority (8 percent), prefers using military power to maintain access to oil in the Middle East and other strategic regions.

Assault on Family Viability

The New Right's propagandists would have us believe that family stress and breakdown are the fault of gay marriage, abortion, feminists, immigrants, and the liberals who support them. They are prepared to blame most anyone or anything except their own economic and social policies. In the pursuit of their personal power and profits, New Right leaders work tirelessly to:

- roll back health and safety standards for the environment, consumers, and workers, including workplace safety standards, a meaningful minimum wage, and the right to form unions to bargain collectively for improved wages and working conditions;
- drive down wages and benefits for working people through international job outsourcing;
- shift the tax burden from the investor class to the working class;
- eliminate public services and safety nets, including public education and Social Security;
- generate military contracts for crony corporations.
- secure intellectual property to facilitate monopoly control and pricing of access to information and technology, including essential seeds and medicines; and
- increase tax breaks and subsidies for large corporations to give them a competitive advantage over local businesses.

Each of these policies transfers wealth and power from ordinary people to the ruling elite and leaves families and communities without the means to provide their children with the essentials for healthful physical and mental development.

- High unemployment undermines family formation, and punitive welfare policies force single mothers into jobs paying less than a living wage without affordable, regulated, high-quality childcare options. Even two parent households are forced to piece together multiple jobs allowing no time or energy for childcare or for a normal family and community life. Parents are thus forced to abandon their children to television and an unregulated entertainment and gaming industry that finds it profitable to fill their minds with images of sex and violence and to actively undermine parental authority and values.
- Corporations spend billions on direct marketing to children to create lifetime addictions to junk food, alcohol, and cigarettes, and a childhood obesity epidemic is poised to become the leading cause of premature death.

- Declining healthcare coverage and skyrocketing healthcare costs place essential health care beyond the reach of most families.
- A deteriorating public education system is unable to deal with the special needs of children physically and mentally handicapped by the consequences of growing up in physically and socially toxic environments, let alone deal with normal individual differences in learning styles and talents.
- Lax environmental regulations allow corporations to discharge into the air, soil, and water massive quantities of tens of thousands of toxins destructive of children's physical, neurological, and endocrinological development.

Intended or not, these conditions are all a direct result of the neoliberal economic policies that are the real priority of the corporate plutocracy. They leave families with few or no good options, and they lead to mental stress, family breakdown, divorce, the destruction of community life, and a coarsening of moral values. The New Right argues that it is the responsibility of parents, not the state, to provide proper care for their children. Ideally, that would be the case; but the policies the New Right advances virtually guarantee that the substantial majority of parents are unable to fulfill this responsibility.

A Conservative-Liberal Alliance

The New Right presents itself as conservative, but that is part of its deception. Its actual policy agenda is far from conservative, at least so far as the term *conservative* is understood by most Americans. There is a culture war in America, but it is not between liberals and conservatives, who in fact share a great many core values—including a commitment to children, family, community, personal responsibility, and democracy. It is between the culture of Empire and the culture of Earth Community. It is between the lower and higher orders of our human nature. It is between an imperial politics of individual greed and power and a democratic politics based on principle and the common good.

Call those of us on the side of Earth Community progressives—progressive conservatives and progressive liberals. Although we have our differences, we share a commitment to creating a society governed by ordinary people and dedicated to the ideals of liberty, justice, and opportunity for all. We are driven by principle rather than ideology, and we deal in reality rather than delusion. We have no more in common with the ideological extremists of the Far Left who seek violent revolution and state control of every aspect of life than we do with the ideological extremists of the Far Right who pursue imperial wars abroad, a theocratic state at home, and freedom for themselves to oppress the rest.

A politics of mature citizenship properly honors both the conservative values of freedom and individual responsibility and the liberal values of equity and justice for all. It brings together a conservative concern for community and heritage with a liberal concern for inclusiveness and the creation of a world that works for the whole of life and children yet to come. It recognizes the importance of local roots combined with a global consciousness. In the mature human mind, these are complementary values that call us to a path of spiritual health and maturity.

Progressives of all stripes act from deeply shared values that resonate with the most basic of Christian values—do not kill, do not steal, love thy neighbor as thyself, and do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Yet just as these are not exclusively liberal or conservative values, neither are they exclusively Christian values. They are universal human values shared by believers in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Native spirituality, among others. From this foundation, we can pull back from the extremes to find common ground even on those issues that presently are the focus of intense political acrimony, including abortion, gay rights, gun control, and the teaching of evolution. For too long we have allowed extremists on both sides to define these debates in all-or-nothing terms that drive out the search for common ground based on shared moral principles.

It is within our human means to create a world in which families and communities are strong, parents have the time to love and care for their children, high-quality health care and education are available to all, schools and homes are commercial free, the natural environment is healthy and toxin free, and nations cooperate for the common good. It is about renewing the democratic experiment, liberating the creative potential of the species, and coming home to life. It is an idea whose time has come and the foundation of a true political majority.