

The Politics of Definition

*Progressives' and Democrats' biggest problem is the "identity gap."
Mobilization and inoculation aren't enough; but the common good is.*

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PART I: THE LAY OF THE LAND, AND PROGRESSIVE STRENGTHS

The thesis of this report is straightforward. Progressives need to fight for what they believe in—and put the common good at the center of a new progressive vision—as an essential strategy for political growth and majority building. This is no longer a wishful sentiment by out-of-power activists, but a political and electoral imperative for all concerned progressives.

After three consecutive losses at the presidential and congressional levels, progressives have been consumed with finding the strategies, tactics, messages, policies, media outlets, language and messengers to overcome their problems at the ballot box. Thinkers across the ideological spectrum battle it out over the wisdom of pursuing a hard populist approach versus a renewed focus on national security and cultural deficits with middle class voters. Philanthropists and elites focus their efforts on building new progressive “infrastructure”; grass-roots activists yearn for new organizational and media tactics and an aggressive public posture; and still others continue to long for the next incarnation of President Bill Clinton.

Unfortunately, while each of these approaches offers important insights, the totality of the advice simply misses the mark and obscures the underlying problem driving progressives' ongoing woes nationally: *a majority of Americans do not believe progressives or Democrats stand for anything.*¹ Despite difficult times for the GOP in early 2006, Republicans continue to hold double-digit advantages over Democrats on the key attribute of “know what they stand for” and fewer than four in 10 voters believe the Democratic Party has “a clear set of policies for the country.”²

This trend, one we call the “identity gap,” has been written about and discussed by others in years past. What is not understood is the extent to which this gap continues to drag down progressives and Democrats and depress their support in myriad ways. “No identity” translates into no character. No personal integrity. No vision worth fighting for. No domestic agenda. No national-security agenda. No basic understanding of the problems facing everyday citizens. No contrast with the other side. No reason to vote for progressive candidates.

This is not to regurgitate a conservative narrative but to high-

light what we believe is the core strategic challenge facing progressives over the next few years. The identity gap—justifiably or not—has allowed conservatives over the past few election cycles to capitalize on perceptions of progressives and Democrats as weak and heighten concerns about progressive leadership in the post-9/11 period.

Of course, significant erosion of support for and trust in conservative and Republican politicians—as we are witnessing in the current 2006 cycle—may yield electoral gains for progressives in the short term. Such gains, however, are likely to be only temporary. Progressives cannot build a durable majority unless they figure out a way to give voters a clear sense of who they are, what they believe, where they want to take the country, how they differ from conservatives, and how they will go about achieving their vision for society.

The identity gap cannot be attributed solely to conservative dominance in politics—it's a homegrown problem that affects voters across the spectrum. In Democracy Corps' January 2006 polling, for example, Democrats suffer from a double-digit identity gap among voters residing in supposedly strong Democratic areas such as safe-Democratic congressional districts (minus-13 percent); safe-Democratic Senate states (minus-15 percent); and more supportive “blue” counties (minus-12 percent).³ The relative advantage among partisans is staggering: Republican voters give their party an 84-point advantage on knowing what they stand for—exactly double the 42-point margin for Democrats among their own partisan identifiers. And the pattern among key targets paints an equally grim picture—an 11-point disadvantage among Hispanics on “know what they stand for”; minus-12 percent among moderates; minus-23 percent among the white working class; minus-31 percent among independents; and minus-32 percent among white married women.⁴

The identity gap in politics has serious direct and indirect ramifications. Directly, voters hold the Democrats' lack of identity against candidates and the party as a whole; indirectly, the lack of identity undermines Democrats' abilities to capitalize on their strengths and enables the GOP to capitalize easily on Democratic weaknesses.

The direct consequences of the identity gap were most evi-

dent in the 2004 presidential contest. According to 2004 post-election polling, the most commonly cited reason not to vote for Kerry among Bush voters who considered voting Democratic—in other words, the voters who turned the election to Bush—was Kerry’s “flip-flopping” on the issues.⁵ Indeed, it wasn’t even close—other issues like gay marriage, abortion, and Kerry’s anti-Vietnam war history were all cited by only around one-third the number who cited flip-flopping. Similarly, the top reason cited by white Catholics for why Kerry lost the 2004 election was that the candidate was “not clear on what he stood for” (48 percent selected this reason as one of the two top reasons Kerry lost, twice as many as selected “permissive views on issues like abortion and gay marriage” as one of the reasons).⁶

The indirect effects of the identity gap are even more pernicious than the direct effects and manifest themselves in several ways:

First, Democratic leads in some traditionally strong Democratic areas, like the economy and jobs, are smaller than they should be both overall and among key target audiences. Lack of a clear Democratic identity in these areas keeps these leads down and reduces their general political effectiveness for the Democrats.

Second, Democrats are not deriving as much political benefit as they should in areas where their leads are largest—health care, Social Security, the environment, etc. The identity problem thus prevents them from capitalizing in their strongest areas.

Third, voters are not voting on Democratic issues as much as they presumably would be if they knew what Democrats were fighting for. Consequently, the GOP issue agenda tends to crowd out the Democratic agenda in voters’ minds.

Fourth, Democrats’ ability to take on Republicans in their areas of strength like national security and moral values is hindered by the lack of any clear Democratic alternative or articulation of progressive values and policies in these areas. Perceptions of Democrats as “weak” or “indecisive” are not just about national-security positioning, but reflect a broader sense among voters that the Democratic opposition has no serious vision of how to deal with terrorism or with moral values. This is why, for example, despite voters’ profoundly negative views of the Iraq situation, and their belief that Bush and his party have no solution, voters still exhibit only a very slight preference for the Democrats on the issue.

The 2004 presidential election, again, illustrates clearly the negative consequences of the Democratic identity crisis. In an election year when a strong majority of the nation desired a significant change in the direction of the nation—and expressed deep dissatisfaction with President Bush on a range of issues including Iraq, job creation, wages, health care, and the environment—John Kerry never defined any discernible Democratic vision on the domestic front, had an incomprehensible position on Iraq, and fell victim to GOP characterizations of him as a serial vacillator.

White working-class voters, a key demographic group that Bush won by 23 points, overwhelmingly trusted Bush more than Kerry on terrorism and security (66 percent), an important Bush and GOP strength. But more surprisingly, a strong majority of these voters (55 percent) also trusted the president more on *the economy and jobs*, a traditional Democratic

strength.⁷ Without a countervailing vision of how Kerry and the Democrats planned to address the concerns and pressures of middle- and working-class families, voters turned their support for Bush on terrorism and values as a proxy for Bush’s positions on the economy and jobs.

By an 11-point margin, a majority of voters interviewed in post-election polling claimed that “Before the election, what I wanted to know from the candidates was how you’ll make the economy and health care better for people,” versus “how you’ll make us safe.”⁸ This was a case that was never made to American voters, and subsequently, millions of more voters stuck with a flawed leader who was perceived at the end of day to be decisive, strong, and principled. Coupled with the Kerry team’s failure to defend his record and accomplishments in the face of scurrilous charges against his service in Vietnam, voters were understandably left with the impression of a weak and unsure Democratic leader.

Additional 2005 qualitative research among disaffected Bush voters in “red states” revealed that despite ongoing image problems on cultural and social issues, the central challenge for Democrats is more basic: “their elected officials, and by extension their entire party, are perceived as directionless and divided, standing for nothing other than their own personal enrichment.”⁹ The following insights from these disaffected Bush voters summarize the Democrats’ challenge concisely:

I would like to believe that they [Democrats] represent the interests of working people and the middle class but they don’t. Not anymore. I don’t think they do. They’re just out for their own personal gain, the ones that are there. (Denver, older college woman)

Their leaders always seem very weak and unprepared. I am never confident in a Democrat that comes up that he can handle the political issues that come up. Especially internationally or anything. I have just not been impressed at all with their capabilities. (Appleton, younger non-college woman)

I think they’re in complete disarray and there’s just no forward momentum to the Democratic Party right now. There’s a total lack of leadership. (Louisville, older non-college educated man)

The identity problem is not a relic of poorly run campaigns of the past. The lack of discernible vision and leadership continues to plague progressives and Democrats today. Asked to identify the two negative traits that best describe the Democrats in Washington, voters in a March 2006 poll selected “no leadership” (34 percent) and “don’t know what they stand for” (24 percent) as the first and third most cited criticisms, with “too liberal” (28 percent) coming in second and “weak on security” well behind the top tier criticisms (13 percent).¹⁰

Finally, the lack of any clear vision and definition has the potential to depress partisan activism over the long term as committed Democrats grow weary with a party that fails to defend and advance a basic progressive vision. The Pew Research Center’s recent study on political typology¹¹ reveals a pattern of steadily declining morale among Democratic voters since the end of the Clinton years. From September 2000 to the end of 2004, Pew reports a 26-point increase in the percentage of Democrats saying their party does only a fair or poor job in standing up for core Democratic positions such as “protecting the interests of mi-

norities, helping the poor and needy, and representing working-class people.” A full 64 percent of Democrats at the end of 2004 believed their party was doing a poor job on acting on its historical values compared to 63 percent of Democrats who thought the party was doing a good job on these core positions at the end of Clinton’s second term.

In contrast, over the same period, there was relative stability (and some increase) in Republican Party members who believed their party was doing a good or excellent job of standing up for traditional Republican values like “reducing the size of government, cutting taxes and promoting conservative social values” (from 49 percent in September 2000 to 61 percent in July 2004 to 51 percent today).

These data underscore how much has changed since the New Democrat moment of the late 1980s and 1990s. Progressives are no longer, as they were then, a political force in dire need of reassuring the electorate that they are not too liberal in order to maintain narrow electoral margins. Now the problem from the public’s perspective is that progressives and Democrats are amorphous and irrelevant; a political movement and a party that once did some good for the country but now have no core identity and lack conviction.

Tactical shifts on cultural issues, repudiating liberal policies, or acting “tough” on national security will not solve this problem. At the same time, pure base mobilization and the prospect of turning millions of nonvoters into reliable progressive voters remains a difficult, if not impossible, task. John Kerry garnered the largest vote ever for a Democratic presidential candidate—nearly 60 million votes—yet still fell short of Bush by more than 3 million votes.

A viable approach for majority building must devise ways to both strengthen the base and reach out to a huge pool of unattached voters who have voted Republican but are not convinced by the GOP’s conservative agenda. This is not an either/or prospect for progressives at this point in time.

We need a new strategy of transformation for today’s progressive movement—one based on definition, principles, and a sincere effort to secure the common good. We must pursue an agenda that is engaging and substantively important for both the progressive base and important target audiences; an agenda built on a platform of broadly shared economic opportunity and a clear stand on the side of middle- and working-class families.

The goal of this paper is to outline that strategy of transformation. We will begin with a detailed assessment of the various voter groups and geographical areas that need to be assembled into a progressive majority and how social change is likely to reshape those groups and areas over the next decade or so. That discussion will cover both those groups and areas where progressives are relatively strong and those groups and areas where progressives are relatively weak but can make gains in the future.

As will be seen in these sections, our analysis of progressive voting blocs has considerable overlap with ones identified by William Galston and Elaine Kamarck in their recent report, “The Politics of Polarization.”¹² Working-class voters, married women, and white Catholics pose real hurdles for progressives and Democrats. Terrorism and cultural issues continue to ham-

per progressive candidates. We agree that full-throated populism, pure mobilization of the liberal base or demographic shifts alone will not solve all our problems. However, our focus on the identity gap leads us to differ with Galston and Kamarck, and others in their camp, on the strategic recommendations coming out of this electoral and attitudinal analysis.

Following the discussion of strengths and weaknesses, we assess the various progressive schools of thought for resolving the difficulties of building a progressive majority out of disparate blocs of voters. For analytical purposes, we categorize these schools as the *politics of mobilization* and the *politics of inoculation*. We believe that each approach has something to offer but, equally, that both fall short in some critical respects that are suggested by the analyses in this paper.

We conclude by offering our own thoughts for a new strategic direction, the *politics of definition*, a true third way to help grow the progressive base and appeal to those lacking ideological and partisan affinities by putting the common good at the core of a new political vision for America.

Building Blocks of a Progressive Majority: Strengths

Minority Communities

Racial and ethnic minorities are probably the single strongest element of the progressive coalition. In John Kerry’s losing 2004 effort, he still carried the minority vote by 71 percent to 27 percent. In that election, minorities were, according to the exit polls, 23 percent of the overall vote. However, the Current Population Survey (CPS) Voter Supplement data tell a somewhat different story, putting the minority vote at around 21 percent of the electorate. The CPS figure seems more realistic to us, which would still indicate that the minority vote will grow to around a quarter of presidential voters by the end of the decade. That compares to around 15 percent of voters in the early 1990’s when Bill Clinton was first elected.¹³

Clearly, maintaining these high levels of support among minority communities is crucial to progressives’ future prospects. Indeed, given the increasing weight of these voters in the electorate, it would be highly desirable to move their overall support back up to the 75 percent enjoyed by Al Gore in the 2000 election. To get a sense of the contours of this challenge, we need to break down the minority vote into its three major components: blacks, Hispanics, and Asians.

African-American voters

As frequently noted by electoral analysts, African-American voters are the most reliable progressive and Democratic constituency. In the 2004 election, Kerry had an 88 percent to 11 percent margin among blacks, down only slightly from the 90 percent to 9 percent margin for Gore in 2000. In fact, except for 2000 and Mondale’s 1984 campaign, Kerry’s margin among blacks is the highest obtained by a Democratic candidate since the exit polls started in 1976.

In the last several elections, blacks have been about 10 percent to 11 percent of the overall electorate. Population growth trends indicate that the black percentage of the overall population will change little in the next ten years, so we should not ex-

pect the black percentage of voters to change much either.¹⁴

Hispanic voters

Hispanic voters, while strong for progressives, are not nearly as strong as blacks, and have famously been more volatile in their support. In the 2004 election, it was initially reported that they gave Bush 44 percent of their vote. However, that initial exit poll figure is now widely acknowledged to have been flawed and the generally accepted estimate is that Kerry carried Hispanics 58 percent compared to Bush's 40 percent.¹⁵ Still, that represents a significant improvement of 5 percentage points in Bush's support among Hispanics over 2000 and a substantial compression of the Democratic margin among this group.

There has been much debate about the causes of this shift. Probably the best treatment of the issue was done by political scientists Marisa Abrajano, Michael Alvarez, and Jonathan Nagler¹⁶, whose thorough analysis of 2004 exit poll data indicates that the national-security and moral values pull toward the GOP outweighed the economy, health-care, and education pull toward the Democrats for an unusually large proportion of Hispanic voters. This can be illustrated by the fact that Bush had a 13-point advantage among Hispanics on being trusted to han-

The recent immigration battle has alienated Latinos from the GOP, but progressive gains may still be held back by the problem of definition.

dle terrorism, while Kerry's advantage among Hispanics on being trusted to handle the economy was a more modest 5 points.¹⁷ These figures underscore the extent to which Democrats did not establish a clear profile in these voters' minds on the critical issues of the election.

There has been even more debate about the long-term significance of Bush's 40 percent showing among Hispanics. Abrajano, Alvarez, and Nagler find no evidence that a specific cultural issue like abortion is realigning Hispanics, nor do they find evidence for the "economic advancement" hypothesis—that as Hispanics, particularly second- and third-generation Hispanics, are becoming richer as a group, this is moving them toward the GOP.

It is also worth noting that, if you compare the two Bush elections of 2000 and 2004 to the two Reagan elections of 1980 and 1984, the average level of Hispanic support for the Democrats in the Bush elections has actually been slightly higher than in the Reagan elections. And in the next election following Reagan's relatively good performances among Hispanics—1988—the Hispanic presidential vote moved sharply Democratic, to 69-to-30.

The potential for such a surge is well-illustrated by the most recent national poll of Hispanics, conducted by the Latino Coalition, a conservative group close to the GOP.¹⁸ In this poll, Democrats have a stunning 61 percent to 21 percent lead over the GOP among Hispanic registered voters, which translates into a

50-point lead (75 percent to 25 percent) among those who express a preference. By way of comparison to the last two off-year elections, 2002 and 1998, Democrats carried the congressional vote among Hispanics by 24 and 26 percentage points, respectively.

The new poll also finds Democrats with a 35-point lead (58 percent to 23 percent) in party identification among voters. Also among voters, Democrats have huge leads over Republicans as the party better able to handle a wide variety of issues: being in touch with the Hispanic community (plus 41 points); providing affordable health care (plus 40); improving the economy (plus 31); improving education (plus 30); and representing your views on immigration (plus 29). The one exception to this pattern is on "keeping America safe and fighting terrorism," where the parties are dead even. And even here, this tie is a sharp decline from Bush's 13-to-14 point lead over Kerry on this issue before and during the 2004 election.

These are promising data. And it seems likely that the recent battle over immigration has only served to alienate Latinos even further from the Republican Party. But one factor that may hold back the level of gains for progressives among Hispanics is precisely the definitional issue we raised in the first part of this paper. As we mentioned, in January—about the same time as the Latino Coalition poll was registering the huge Democratic advantages just described—Democracy Corps was finding Democrats rated 11 points lower than Republicans among Hispanics on knowing what they stand for.

Demographic trends underscore the importance for progressives of overcoming this challenge and taking advantage of Hispanics' current leanings. As is well known, the Hispanic population is growing rapidly, both in terms of absolute numbers and as a share of the U.S. population. Before 1980, the Census did not even record Hispanic origin when it surveyed the country's residents. Today, Hispanics have surpassed blacks as the nation's largest minority group, and the latest Census estimates (July 2003) indicate that there are 40 million Hispanics in the United States, 13 percent of the nation's population.

This rapid increase in demographic importance will continue for decades. Census projections indicate, in fact, that by about mid-century Hispanics will be one-quarter of the U.S. population (at which point or shortly thereafter, the United States will become a majority-minority nation).

Of course, it is true that the population strength of Hispanics is not matched by its voting strength, due to the large proportion of Hispanics who aren't citizens and therefore can't vote or are simply too young to vote. For example, of the 5.7 million Hispanics added to the U.S. population between 2000 and 2004, 1.7 million were under 18 and 1.9 million were noncitizens. As a result of these factors, only 39 percent of Hispanics overall are eligible to vote, compared to 76 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 65 percent of blacks.¹⁹

Still, the proportion of Hispanics among the voting electorate has grown steadily and will continue to grow. Only 2 percent of

voters in early 1990s, they are now somewhere in the 6 percent or 8 percent range, and within 10 years may be approaching blacks as a proportion of actual voters.²⁰

Asian voters

Asians over the last 15 years or so have become a fairly solid progressive constituency. In the 2004 election, they supported Kerry over Bush by a 56-to-44 percent margin, similar to the margin they gave Gore over Bush (55-to-41 percent) in 2000. And in the last congressional election, when much of the electorate was going in the opposite direction, Asians actually increased their support dramatically for House Democrats going from 56-to-44 percent Democratic in 1998 to 66-to-34 in 2002.²¹

If you look at rate of growth, Asians are also America's fastest-growing minority group—faster even than Hispanics (59.4 percent to 57.9 percent in the 1990s). Right now, they are 4 percent to 5 percent of the population and about 2 percent of voters.²² Both figures will increase in the next 10 years, due to this group's fast rate of growth, but because they start from a much smaller base than Hispanics, their impact on the population and voting pool will be far more limited.

Single, Working and Highly-Educated Women

As is well-known, progressives typically do better among women than men. But women voters are a vast group, and the true areas of strength for progressives are among three subgroups: single, working, and highly-educated women. In the 2004 election, Kerry carried single women by 62-to-37 percent, college-educated women by 54-to-45 (including 60-to-38 among those with a postgraduate education) and working women by 51-to-48.²³

All of these margins, however, were smaller than they were in 2000, particularly in the case of working women, where Kerry's margin among working women was no better than his margin among women as a whole. This was primarily attributable to his poor performance among *married* working women, part of the Democrats' general problem with married women voters in that election. Single working women, however, remained a very strong progressive constituency, with Democrats dominating by a 65-to-35 margin.

While the balance of women relative to men is changing little, of course, trends within the female population are quite favorable to progressives. Single women are now almost half—46 percent—of adult women, up from 38 percent in 1970.²⁴ If present trends continue, they will become a majority of women in the next couple of decades (and unmarried adults as a whole will likely become a majority of the adult population).

And there is every expectation that this burgeoning population of single women will continue to be resolutely progressive in its politics. Survey data consistently show this group to be unusually populist on economic issues and generally opposed to the conservative agenda on foreign policy and social issues.²⁵

Single working women tend to be a particularly progressive group among single women, as indicated by data cited earlier. They are also a rapidly growing group, growing from 19 percent of the adult, female population in 1970 to 29 percent today.²⁶

That is even faster than the growth among single women as a whole.

Finally, college-educated women are also a rapidly growing population group. They have grown from just 8 percent of the 25-and-older female population in 1970 to 24 percent today.²⁷

Clearly, these groups of women will be a critical part of a progressive majority coalition; equally clearly, the weakest link here is married working women who performed so poorly for the Democrats in 2004. The reasons are probably similar to those that held down Democratic margins among Hispanics: national security and moral concerns that moved many of these women toward the GOP more than economic, health care, and education concerns moved them toward the Democrats. In fact, among many of these women it apparently wasn't much of a contest: Among married working women, 54 percent said they trusted Bush to handle the economy, compared to 40 percent who said they trusted Kerry. And on handling terrorism, 63 percent said they trusted Bush, compared to 37 percent who said they trusted Kerry.²⁸ These figures show that progressives have a lot of work to do communicating clear positions to these voters and gaining their trust on key issues.

Professionals

In the last 15 to 20 years, professionals have become a very strong progressive constituency, something they decidedly were not in earlier eras. In the 1960 presidential election, for example, professionals supported Richard Nixon over John Kennedy 61 percent to 38 percent. But in the 1988 through 2000 presidential elections, professionals supported the Democratic candidate by an average of 52 percent to 40 percent. And in 2004, they just moved farther in this direction, supporting Kerry over Bush by a 63-to-37 margin.²⁹

This is especially good for progressives because professionals are a rising group in American politics and society. In the 1950s, they made up about 7 percent of the work force. But as the United States has moved away from a blue-collar, industrial economy toward a postindustrial one that produces ideas and services, the professional class has expanded. Today, it constitutes just under 17 percent of the work force. In another 10 years, it will be 18 percent to 19 percent of the work force.³⁰

Moreover, reflecting their very high turnout rates, professionals are an even larger percent of voters—and not just of employed voters, but of voters as a whole. Nationally, they account for about 21 percent of voters; in many Northeastern and far Western states, they form probably one-quarter of the electorate.³¹

Youth

Young (18- to 29-year-olds) voters today can fairly be counted as a progressive constituency. In 2004, Kerry won them 54 percent to 45 percent, compared to a narrow 48 percent to 46 percent margin for Gore in 2000.

Kerry's showing in 2004 marked the fourth straight presidential election in which Democrats have won the youth vote. It was also, of those four elections, the one in which youth's Democratic support was most out-of-line with the rest of population. In 2000, youth were only two points more Democratic

than all voters; in 1996, they were 11 points more Democratic than all voters; and in 1992, they were four points more Democratic than all voters. But in this election, youth were 12 points more Democratic than all voters (+9 Democratic among youth versus minus-3 among all voters).³²

Even more promising news is that Kerry performed especially strongly among 18- to 24-year-old voters, the so-called “Millennial” voters, whom he carried 56-to-43. These voters also had, by far, the strongest turnout surge of any age group. Turnout among 18- to 24-year-old citizens, according to the CPS Voter Supplement data, surged 11 points, compared to only 5 points among 25- to 34-year-olds, 4 points among 35- to 44-year-olds and even less among older age groups. Note that the overall turnout increase in the CPS data is just a little over 4 points, so the measured 11-point increase among 18- to 24-year-olds is even more impressive.³³

According to the most recent large-scale survey of Gen Y voters, conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner³⁴, this progressive voting behavior has strong roots in the demographics and attitudes of this group of voters. They include the following:

1. The Millennial generation is extraordinarily diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. Only 61 percent of Generation Y adults are white, 15 percent are black, 4 percent are Asian, and 17 percent are Hispanic.

2. Millennials are more secular and less Christian. Almost a quarter (23 percent) have no religious preference or are agnostic/atheist, 4 percent are Jewish or Muslim, and another 7 percent are other non-Christian. Only 62 percent identify themselves with some Christian faith.

3. Millennials are very liberal on social issues. A majority (53 percent) flat-out supports allowing gay marriage. And 63 percent say women should have the legal right to choose an abortion.

4. Millennials are unusually liberal in an ideological sense. More Generation Y adults say they are liberal (31 percent) than say they are conservative (30 percent).

5. Millennials lean strongly Democratic. Generation Y adults give Democrats an 11-point edge on party identification (39 percent to 28 percent).

These characteristics, however, merely provide a basis for continuing progressive political behavior. They are not a guarantee. Progressives clearly have a very strong interest in consolidating this generation’s attachment to progressive politics so that it lasts out of their 20s and into their 30s and beyond. The key to that is defining the progressive profile in the minds of young voters so they have something to attach themselves to. Right now, that is not the case. In the January, 2006 Democracy Corps polling, Democrats had a 36-point disadvantage on knowing what they stand for among Millennial voters and a 37-point disadvantage among 18- to 29-year-olds as a whole.

The Secular, the Less-Observant, and the Non-Christian

It is a commonplace in American politics today that the highly observant—especially evangelical Christians—are a bedrock conservative constituency. Less well appreciated is the extent to which the secular, the less-observant, and the non-Christian are a bedrock progressive constituency.

In the 2004 election, Kerry carried those who attend religious services a few times a year by 54 percent to 45 percent and those who never attend by 62-to-36. And he carried all non-Christian groups by very wide margins: Jews (77-to-22); Muslims (74-to-25); those who profess some other religion (72-to-25); and those who profess no religion (67-to-31).³⁵

According to the exit polls, non-Christians were 20 percent of voters and the less-observant were 43 percent of voters in 2004 (the latter figure, incidentally, is exactly equal to the percent of voters who were highly observant). Both figures are likely to go up in the future. In the University of Chicago’s General Social Survey (GSS), those who attend church *only once a year or less* is now 38 percent of adults, up from 29 percent in 1972. And in CUNY’s American Religious Identification Survey, non-Christians grew by 84 percent (from 20 million to 37 million adults) between 1990 and 2001, including an astonishing increase of 106 percent (from 14 million to 29 million) among the purely secular.

Union Household Voters

Union households have been a consistently strong constituency for progressives and the 2004 election was no exception. These voters supported Kerry by 59-to-40. Moreover, they made up an impressive 24 percent of the voting pool.³⁶

A careful look at data from different sources suggests that this latter figure has remained fairly stable for the last couple of decades,³⁷ and simply keeping the proportion of union household voters at around a quarter of the electorate is a significant accomplishment.

ever, there is little potential here for growth of the union vote, since it is already so highly mobilized. Of course, if union density starts to rise again, then increases in the union vote might indeed be possible. That is one among many reasons why progressives should strongly support labor law reform and other efforts to boost union organizing.

“Blue” States and Regions

In the last four elections, the Democrats have carried 18 states, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington and the District of Columbia for a total of 248 electoral voters. Should all these states be considered areas of progressive strength, part of the progressive base?

Well, it’s certainly not trivial that each of these states has supported the Democratic candidate for president four times running—Clinton twice, then Gore, then Kerry. That shows considerable loyalty to a basically progressive vision of where the country should go. But, as is well known, some of these states have been much, much closer than others and the subjects of a very vigorous competition between the parties.

One way of quantifying this distinction is to average the Democratic margin in the last two presidential elections and assign those where the average margin has been more than 5 points to the progressive base and those under 5 points to a more contested or “purple” category. This procedure gives intuitively pleasing results: the Northeast corridor (without New Hampshire, which

is not on the above list, and Pennsylvania, which is usually thought of as more of a Midwestern state) and the West Coast (without Oregon) plus Illinois are assigned to the progressive base and four of the five Midwestern states listed above (Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin) plus Oregon are assigned to the purple category.

The leaves us with a narrower, but probably more accurate, definition of the progressive base as including 13 states (California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington) plus the District of Columbia with 183 electoral votes, and a purple-shading-blue category of five states (Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin) with 65 electoral votes.

Cities, Inner Suburbs and “Ideopolises”

By and large, progressives are strongest in the cities and inner suburbs and in the more technically advanced metro areas of the country (“ideopolises”).³⁸ Conversely, the farther away you get from the urban core—into outer (“emerging”) suburbs, true exurbs³⁹ and rural counties—and the less technically advanced the general area, the weaker progressives tend to be.

For example, we can look at the 50 largest metro areas of the country—where 53 percent of the U.S. population lives—and break down the counties by degree to which they are urban, using a classification scheme developed by Virginia Tech’s Metropolitan Institute.⁴⁰ Using this scheme, Kerry carried core counties of these areas 73-to-26, inner suburbs of these areas by 57-to-42 and “mature suburbs” (which tend to be somewhat farther out and less dense than the inner suburbs) by 52-to-47 percent.⁴¹ But Kerry lost the “emerging suburbs” and true exurbs of these areas by 56-to-43 percent and 62-to-37 percent, respectively (we shall have more to say about emerging suburbs and true exurbs in the next section of this paper, when we discuss progressive weaknesses).

Kerry also carried technically advanced ideopolis areas 55-to-44 and lost the rest of the country 56-to-43. And, if you combine the Metropolitan Institute classification with the ideopolis classification, you get results that accord exactly with the tendencies summarized above. In ideopolis core counties, Kerry led Bush 75-to-25 percent, compared to a 55-to-44 percent lead in non-ideopolis core counties. Similarly, Kerry carried ideopolis inner suburbs by 58-to-41 percent, compared to 54-to-45 percent in non-ideopolis inner suburbs, and carried ideopolis mature suburbs by 53-to-46 percent, while actually losing non-ideopolis mature suburbs by 52-to-47 percent.

The same patterns apply to the groups of states we described above—the progressive base and purple-leaning blue states. In each group of states, Democrats do best in cities, inner suburbs, mature suburbs and technologically advanced areas, and less well in emerging suburbs, true exurbs, rural counties and less technically advanced areas. For example, in progressive base states, Kerry carried core urban counties by 75-to-24 percent, inner suburbs by 60-to-39 percent and mature suburbs by 55-to-44 percent, while losing emerging suburbs 51-to-48 percent and true exurbs 58-to-41 percent.

PART II: PROGRESSIVE WEAKNESSES

The White Working Class

The key weakness of the progressive coalition can be summarized easily: very weak support among white working class voters (defined here as whites without a four-year college degree). These voters, who are overwhelmingly of moderate to low income and, by definition, of modest credentials, should see their aspirations linked tightly to the political fate of the progressive movement. But they don’t.

Data from the last two presidential elections vividly demonstrate this problem and underscore its significance for progressives. In 2000, Al Gore lost white working-class voters by 17 percentage points; in 2004, John Kerry lost them by 23 points, a swing of 6 points against the Democrats. In contrast, Gore lost college-educated whites by 9 points and Kerry lost them by 10 points—not much change.⁴²

Therefore, white working-class voters were responsible for almost all of George W. Bush’s increased margin among whites as a whole in the 2004 election (which went from 12 to 17 points). And Bush’s increased margin among whites was primarily responsible for his re-election.

Almost all of the white working-class movement toward Bush was among women rather than men. Bush won white working-class men by almost identical margins in the two elections (by 29 points in 2000 and by 30 points in 2004). But he substantially widened his margin among white working-class women, going from a 7-point edge in 2000 to an 18-point lead in 2004. That 11-point swing against the Democrats among white working-class women was arguably the most important single fact about the 2004 election.

The basic reasons for this stunningly poor Democratic performance among the white working class can also be easily summarized. Among white working-class voters, 66 percent said they trusted Bush to handle terrorism, compared to just 35 percent who said the same about Kerry. That’s very bad, but perhaps not all that surprising. What is more surprising is this: *55 percent of these voters said they trusted Bush to handle the economy, and only 39 percent said the same about Kerry.*

It’s also interesting to note that there wasn’t much of a difference in these sentiments between men and women in the white working class: 55 percent of white working-class women said they trusted Bush to handle the economy and 40 percent said they trusted Kerry, while 56 percent of white working-class men said they trusted Bush on the economy and 37 percent said they trusted Kerry.

That helps explain the big shift among white working-class women described above. Not only were these women alarmed about terrorism—which pushed them toward the GOP—but they were also, in contrast to previous elections, no more likely to find the Democratic economic message compelling than their male counterparts. In neither area—the economy or terrorism—did the Democratic program speak clearly to these voters’ concerns and earn their trust.

It is also important to stress that Democrats did especially badly among white working-class voters who weren’t poor, but

rather had moderate incomes and some hold on a middle-class lifestyle. Among working class whites with \$30,000 to \$50,000 in household income, Bush beat Kerry by 24 points (62 percent to 38 percent). And, among working-class whites with \$50,000 to \$75,000 in household income, Bush beat Kerry by a shocking 41 points (70 percent to 29 percent). Clearly, these voters do not see progressives as representing their aspirations for a prosperous, stable, middle-class life.

Progressives' difficulties here are underscored by the large size of this group. According to the 2004 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voter Supplement data, white working-class voters are a larger portion of the electorate than indicated by the exit polls—52 percent, rather than 43 percent. Based on educational attainment trends and population trends by race, a reasonable guess is that the size of the white working class in another 10 years, even though it is shrinking, will still be around 46 percent to 47 percent—a very large group among which to be doing very poorly.⁴³ In fact, a progressive majority coalition is simply not possible if that poor performance continues, despite the many ways in which demographic change and growth favor progressives, including the increasing proportion of single women within the white working-class population.

But is it really feasible for progressives to significantly improve their performance among white working-class voters? That would appear to depend on the extent to which they can clarify their views and principles to these voters and begin earning their trust again. Right now, the Democrats are 23 points down to the Republicans among these voters on knowing what they stand for.⁴⁴ Narrowing that gap is key to improving performance among this critical group.

And there is a lot of room for that improved performance. Keep in mind that Bill Clinton actually *carried* white working-class voters in both his successful presidential campaigns (by a single percentage point in both instances).⁴⁵

But Democrats need not replicate that performance. If Democrats can simply keep the Republican margin among white working-class voters to the low double digits (say 11 to 12 points), and maintain their margins from 2004 among college-educated whites and among minority groups (note that we assume no improvement from 2004 in the Democratic performance among Hispanics, though we strongly believe that is likely to happen), our estimates indicate that the Democrats would win the popular vote in the next presidential election by 3 points. That would be an exact reversal of the 2004 popular vote, which Bush won by around 3 points.

And if the Democrats can keep the Republican margin among working-class whites to single digits? Then it should be possible to start building a solid majority coalition for progressives in very short order.

White Catholics

There are several other important characteristics of white voters that intersect the white working-class category—either reinforcing or mitigating Democrats' basic problem with those voters—but are worth considering independently. One such characteristic is Catholicism. White Catholics have historically

been a relatively good group for progressives among white voters but have also been quite volatile. Here are the margins among white Catholic voters in the past five presidential elections:

1988: plus-14 Republican

1992: plus-5 Democratic

1996: plus-7 Democratic

2000: plus-7 Republican

2004: plus-13 Republican

As the data show, that volatility has lately sent them away from the Democrats and toward the GOP. That has been a development of real consequence, since they are most certainly a large enough group (21 percent of voters in the 2004 election) to have a serious impact on election outcomes.⁴⁶

Yet, as a March 2005 Democracy Corps survey report on white Catholics pointed out, white Catholic voters are considerably more Democratic than other white voters and more moderate on a whole range of issues, including tolerance on homosexuality and openness to stem-cell research.⁴⁷ So what explains their surge away from the Democrats? Part of the reason lies in the fact that, according to that survey, the GOP had a 33 point advantage among this group on “know what they stand for.” (In January 2006 Democracy Corps polling, the GOP advantage was still a very healthy 26 points). Moreover, the top reason cited by white Catholics on why Kerry lost the 2004 election was “not clear on what he stood for” (48 percent selected this reason as one of the two top reasons Kerry lost, twice as many as selected “permissive views on issues like abortion and gay marriage” as one of the reasons).

White Married Women

The “marriage gap”—where married voters lean toward the GOP and single voters toward the Democrats—is famously an important part of today's political landscape. A particular problem for progressives lies among a subset of married voters, white married women. Specifically, married white working-class women (62 percent of white working-class women) gave Bush a 15-point margin in 2000 and more than doubled that margin, to 31 points, in 2004. These women are responsible for most of the shift toward Bush among white working-class women, which, as mentioned above, was probably the key electoral shift against the Democrats in the 2004 election.⁴⁸

The reasons for the shift track pretty closely with the data cited above on white working-class women in general: these married women trusted Bush not only on security issues but also on handling the economy. The failure of Democrats to convince these women that their families' aspirations for economic advancement would be best served by a progressive agenda indicates a serious weakness—as does the continued failure to convince these voters progressives know what they stand for. Right now, the GOP has a whopping 32-point advantage among these voters in this area.⁴⁹

White Evangelicals

Perhaps no feature of the 2004 election received more attention than the allegedly central role of white evangelical Christians and their high turnout in Bush's victory.

But the evidence that white evangelicals were so very, very im-

portant (as opposed to merely important, which seems reasonable) is shockingly thin. Perhaps the main piece of evidence for this claim is that 23 percent of voters in the NEP exit poll were white “born-again or evangelical” Christians, who supported George Bush, 78 percent to 21 percent.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, we have no idea how that compares to 2000, since the exit polls didn’t ask the same question in 2000. Instead they asked a very different question about being part of the “religious right,” which categorized 14 percent of voters as part of the white religious right. Clearly, to conclude from these two different questions that white evangelical turnout increased from 14 percent to 23 percent from 2000 to 2004 is inappropriate.

Better purchase on the question of whether evangelical turnout increased may be obtained from the exit poll question on the frequency of religious service attendance. And this question shows that whites who said they attended services more than weekly were rock steady at 11 percent of voters in 2000 and 2004. Moreover, whites who said they attended weekly actually *declined* across the two elections from 23 percent to 21 percent. This hardly seems consistent with a wave of white evangelical turnout.

Moreover, if one looks at intensity of support, the exit polls do not indicate that more observant white voters dramatically increased their support of Bush in 2004. Indeed, Bush received a greater increase in support (a 6-point gain in margin) from less observant white voters—those who are moderately observant to completely unobservant—than he did from more observant white voters (a 3-point shift). Moreover, this unimpressive 3-point shift was driven entirely by those who attend weekly, since his support actually *dropped* slightly among the most observant white voters, those who attend more than weekly.

None of this seems consistent with the idea that surging evangelical turnout and support put Bush over the top in 2004. Neither does evidence from other surveys. For example, the leading academic survey of religion and politics, the National Survey of Religion and Politics (NSRP), conducted by the University of Akron’s Bliss Institute, found that white evangelical protestants (measured by a sophisticated series of questions on religious affiliation, beliefs and practices) were 26 percent of voters in 2004, identical to their level in 2000. The NSRP also found only a modest shift in support toward Bush among these voters; less, for example, than the shift *against* Bush among mainline Protestants. (Interestingly, the 2004 NSRP survey also identified a group of white evangelicals—“modernist evangelicals,” about 11 percent of the overall group—who are far more liberal than typical white evangelicals and who actually supported Kerry, 52-to-48.)

However, even though their turnout and support levels for the GOP do not appear to be surging, it cannot be denied that white evangelicals overall are still a very strong group for the GOP and a problem for progressives. If this group was growing over the long term, the task of building a progressive majority would be far more difficult.

But there is little evidence this is happening. The NSRP, for example, has found essentially no change in the level of white evangelicals in the population since its first survey in 1992. Recent Gallup surveys are consistent with the level of white evangelicals measured by the NSRP and also show little sign of an increase in that level.

Nor do indicators of religious observance provide indirect evidence that evangelicals’ share of the population is increasing. Gallup data show no change in the share of the population attending church weekly or almost once a week since the early 1990s.⁵¹ And in the University of Chicago’s GSS, which has asked a consistent question on frequency of church attendance since the early 1970s, there has actually been an 8-point drop over time in the share of the population who say they attend every week or nearly every week (from 41 percent to 33 percent). Note that the same survey shows a 9-point increase since the early 1970s in the share of the population attending only once a year or less (from 29 percent to 38 percent).

“Red” States and Regions

In the last four elections, the Republicans have carried 16 states (Alaska, Arkansas, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Mississippi, Ne-

Bush received a greater increase in support in 2004 from less observant white voters than more observant ones, and a slight decrease in support from the most observant white voters that year.

braska, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Wyoming) for a total of 135 electoral votes. This is far fewer than the 18 states (plus the District of Columbia) and 248 electoral votes carried by the Democrats in all four elections.

But this GOP base should be adjusted to reflect their exceptionally strong performance in some states in the last two elections. One way to do this is to add states (besides those included in the above list) that the Republicans have carried by an average of 10 points or more in 2000 and 2004. Using this procedure, we add Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Montana, making a total of 20 states with 170 electoral votes in the GOP base.

We divide the remaining states (that is, outside of the GOP base and outside of the Democratic base and purple-leaning blue categories described earlier) into three categories. First, there is a small category of three “pure purple” states that have split their support between the two parties in the last two elections: Iowa, New Hampshire and New Mexico. These states have a total of 16 electoral votes.

Next, there is a very significant group of states—Florida, Missouri, Nevada, and Ohio—where the average GOP margin in the last two elections has been 5 points or less. This purple-leaning-red category has a total of 63 electoral votes.

Finally, there is a very interesting group of five states—Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Tennessee, and West Virginia—that might be characterized as “red vulnerable.” In these states, the average GOP margin in the last two elections has been less than 10 points (though more than five). And, by definition, they are also states that have been carried by the Democrats at least once in the last four elections. They have a total of 41 electoral votes.

That these suggestions of GOP vulnerability are not completely fanciful is indicated by the latest Gallup party identification figures by state.⁵² Democrats have the party ID advantage in every state in the pure purple, purple-leaning-red, and red-vulnerable categories, save Tennessee (which is dead even) and Arizona (where they have a 5-point deficit). In the pure purple states, they lead by 6 points in Iowa, 14 points in New Hampshire and 8 points in New Mexico. In the purple-leaning-red category, they lead by 1 point in Florida, 8 points in Missouri, 12 points in Nevada, and 7 points in Ohio. And in the red-vulnerable states, they lead by 11 points in Arkansas, 3 points in Colorado, and 13 points in West Virginia.

Looked at by region, the GOP base is entirely in the South (defined here as the 11 states of the Old Confederacy plus Kentucky and Oklahoma) and in plains and mountain states. It does not include a single Midwestern (except Indiana), Northeastern, Southwestern, or Western (except Alaska) state. With the two exceptions noted, all states in those areas are either in the progressive base/purple-leaning-blue categories or in purple or red categories that suggest GOP vulnerability. In addition, there are two Southern states—Arkansas and above all Florida—that also seem vulnerable.

The argument is made, however, that population shifts over time will alter the electoral calculus profoundly in favor of the GOP. This is wildly overstated. For example, looking 10 years in the future, when the 2010 Census results will have reapportioned today’s electoral vote, the GOP base is projected to grow by only four electoral votes, according to demographer William Frey.⁵³ In addition, the highly contested states of Florida and Nevada will grow by a total of three electoral votes. Together, these changes would not appear to fundamentally alter the picture sketched above.⁵⁴

Emerging Suburbs, True Exurbs, and Rural Areas

As mentioned earlier, progressives are strongest in the cities and inner suburbs, while the GOP gets stronger the farther away from the urban core you get—into emerging suburbs, true exurbs, and rural areas. To properly analyze where GOP domination of these areas is most important and where progressives might challenge that domination, it is important to distinguish between true exurban and emerging suburban areas (which together constitute what people usually think of as “exurbia”). Today’s true exurbs contain only 2 percent of the nation’s population. Emerging suburbs on the other hand contain 13 percent of the nation’s population and, on average, are growing faster than any other type of county in the United States, including true exurbs.⁵⁵ Emerging suburbs include such well-known counties as Loudoun County, Virginia, outside Washington, D.C.; Anoka County, Minnesota, outside Minneapolis; Warren County, Ohio, outside Cincinnati; and Dou-

glas County, Colorado, outside Denver.

Virginia Tech’s Metropolitan Institute (MI) describes the true exurbs as:

[T]he most far-flung [metropolitan] counties with the lowest—essentially rural—population densities. Large-scale suburbanization is just about to take hold in these places, as they offer even better bargains, and more land (but longer commutes) than emerging counties. Exurban counties are included in metropolitan areas by the census because they share a functional relationship with neighboring counties via commuting. But by appearance, these places are barely touched by urbanization.

These true exurban counties voted for Bush over Kerry by 62 percent to 37 percent, a lop-sided result, to be sure, and a 10-point gain in GOP margin over 2000. But these counties only contributed 9 percent of Bush’s net vote gains between 2000 and 2004, mostly due to their relatively modest population sizes.

The emerging suburban counties were more consequential, though the actual numbers of exurban and emerging suburban counties are roughly equal in the MI typology. They are described as:

The new “it” county of today. They are mostly the fastest growing counties in the region, and are often found in even slow growing regions such as St. Louis (e.g., St. Charles County, Missouri) and Cincinnati (e.g., Boone County, Kentucky). Emerging suburbs are almost wholly products of the past two decades and are booming with both people and the beginnings of commerce (although they remain mostly commuter zones). Emerging suburbs are both upscale and downscale and may feature everything from McMansions to trailer parks. Residents in emerging suburbs typically see these places as bargains compared to mature suburbs. That is true for households that buy a McMansion over an older and smaller tract home in a mature suburb, or a first-time home buyer that “drives to qualify” by finding a modest attached dwelling at the edge of the region.

The Bush-Kerry split here was less lopsided (56 percent to 43 percent) and represented only a 5-point gain in margin over 2000. But since these emerging suburban counties are much larger than exurban counties, they contributed 26 percent of Bush’s net vote gains between 2000 and 2004, dwarfing the true exurban contribution.

It is important to note that the GOP does by far the best in emerging suburban counties in their solid red base states. In those states, they had a crushing 34-point margin (67-to-33 percent) in the emerging suburbs in 2004. But everywhere else, the Democrats were much closer. In the solid blue, Democratic base states, Kerry lost emerging suburban counties by only 51-to-48 percent. In purple-leaning-blue states and purple-leaning-red states, he did just a bit worse in the emerging suburbs, losing 53-to-46 percent (and there are states in these categories, of course, where the Democrats did far better than this average, like Florida, where Kerry lost the emerging suburbs by only a single point, 50-to-49).⁵⁶ And even in red-vulnerable states, Kerry was still within a 58-to-41 percent margin in these counties.

Note also that the GOP margin in the emerging suburbs overall in 2000 was only 52 percent to 44 percent and in 1996 a mere 45 percent to 44 percent. Together, these data make clear

that emerging suburban counties are not only far more important to Bush's coalition than true exurban counties, but also far more contestable by progressives.

This assessment is supported by results from the 2005 elections. In the 2005 Virginia gubernatorial race, Republican Jerry Kilgore, after running a bruising, culture wars-driven campaign against Democrat Timothy Kaine, lost the emerging suburban county of Loudoun—the second fastest-growing county in the entire nation since 2000—to Kaine by 3,400 votes, 51 percent to 46 percent.⁵⁷ In contrast, John Kerry lost this county in 2004 by 13,000 votes, 56 percent to 44 percent. And even Mark Warner, Kaine's Democratic predecessor, lost Loudoun by 53 percent to 46 percent in his successful 2001 gubernatorial bid.

How did this happen? After all, it was supposed to be the Republicans who really “got” voters in these kinds of areas. But it now appears that Republicans have misinterpreted their past success in these areas as evidence that these voters endorsed and wanted a stridently anti-government, socially conservative agenda. But that was never a warranted assumption, either then or now.

In reality, emerging suburban voters are tax-sensitive and concerned about government waste, but not ideologically anti-government. They tend to be religious and family-oriented, but socially moderate in comparison to rural residents. They are not anti-business, but they do hold populist attitudes toward corporate abuse and people who game the system. And they worry as much or more about public education as they do about moral values.⁵⁸

No wonder Kilgore couldn't connect in Virginia's emerging suburbs. He ran a campaign on cultural wedge issues like the death penalty and illegal immigration when emerging suburban voters were looking for solutions on education, transportation, and health care. Kaine, in contrast, spoke clearly to these voters about such solutions and famously did not hide his views on values issues, even when some of them (capital punishment) were not popular. He was open about who he was and what he truly believed in and voters rewarded his candor, since they knew who he was and what he stood for.

PART III: THE LIMITS OF MOBILIZATION AND INOCULATION

The portrait of the progressive coalition's strengths and weaknesses laid out in parts I and II is enlightening. The progressive coalition clearly has tremendous potential strength—in many ways, it is a sleeping giant, containing as it does so many large and rising political forces. These groups, even though progressives have recently been underperforming among them, are potent enough to have kept progressives knocking on the door of a governing majority and competitive in a remarkably large swath of the nation.

Progressives' weaknesses, on the other hand, tend to be among groups whose weight in the electorate is stable or declining. Conservatives and the GOP have built their current majority on creating ever-wider leads among these groups, compensating for their diminishing size. But even these very wide leads have only yielded the slimmest of majorities, leaving them vulnerable in most of the nation outside the Deep South and the most thinly-

populated mountain states.

Progressives can therefore turn the GOP's slim majority into a solid and growing progressive majority by doing two things: (1) remedying their underachievement among strong constituencies like Hispanics and single women; and (2) simply reducing—not eliminating—their wide deficits among weak constituencies like the white working class. Together, these changes would likely push most of the pure purple and purple-leaning red states into the progressive camp and put the red vulnerable states into serious play.

In spatial terms, progressive domination would likely spread outwards from the city and inner suburbs to include the mature suburbs and make emerging suburbs a real competitive battleground. The reliable conservative vote would be reduced to the solid red states and America's rural areas and most far-flung exurbs.

But all these desirable outcomes are predicated on accomplishing the twin goals of remedying progressive underachievement among core constituencies and shaving progressive deficits among weak constituencies. How can this be done?

Here again the data review is helpful, since it indicates there is little contradiction between the twin tasks. What is dampening enthusiasm for progressives among core constituencies is, by and large, what is driving voters away from progressives among weak constituencies: a sense that progressives don't know what they stand for, lack core principles, and have no clear ideas for solving the nation's problems. Therefore, articulating a “politics of definition” is potentially a way for progressives to accomplish both tasks and move forward toward a governing majority.

The Limits of Mobilization and Inoculation

Of course, this is a controversial assertion. Progressives are far from united that a politics of definition—or anything even close to it—is the road forward. Indeed, at this point, progressives are more likely to embrace strategies that, for the sake of parsimony, we categorize as falling into two camps: *the politics of mobilization* and *the politics of inoculation*. While both offer important insights and recommendations that should not be ignored, neither in totality offers what the politics of definition does: a viable strategic framework for developing a clear identity among the electorate that can appeal to both the base and more centrist voters.

Politics of Mobilization

The *politics of mobilization* can be summarized roughly as follows:

Rally the progressive troops and maximize base turnout;

Grow the base by finding nonvoters and drop-off progressives rather than appealing to the center;

Take a no-holds-barred approach to the opposition that is highly critical and contrastive; and

Fight for every progressive priority equally.

On the plus side, the politics of mobilization addresses a clear need to strengthen and respond to those core supporters who provide the blood and sweat of progressive politics. The progressive base is clearly fed up with politics as usual—particularly as the other side pursues a strategy of straight conservative mobilization. The perception of Democrats among their own faith-

ful is weak and needs to be solidified if we are to maintain high numbers and strong turnout among core supporters.

Similarly, the no-holds-barred approach to politics has been essential to keeping conservatives off balance and bringing to light the numerous transgressions, scandals, incompetent acts, and ideological chicanery of the GOP majority. The fervor of the base is not just therapeutic for activists; it is also essential to prying loose weak GOP supporters by relentlessly focusing on conservative failures and extremism.

However, as others before us have noted correctly, the politics of mobilization suffers from a severe numbers gap. Despite what activists may believe, only one-fifth of voters classify themselves as “liberal”—a pattern that has been relatively unchanged since the late 1960s. As Galston and Kamarck argue in *The Politics of Polarization*, “[I]n an electorate where conservatives outnumber liberals three to two and where ideology so closely predicts voting behavior, Democrats cannot win the game of ‘base’ ball, except in those rare circumstances in which conservatives are discouraged and demobilized.”⁵⁹

We need to look no further than the past two presidential elections to see the limits of a strategy of mobilization. In 2000, Al Gore received the highest vote count in Democratic history, win-

percent) in 2000. Weakened support among Hispanics and, especially, a bigger deficit among whites (still 77-to-79 percent of voters) was more than enough to cancel out the effect of more minority voters going to the polls.

Numbers alone are not the only problem for a strategy based principally on mobilization. There are also clear limits to anti-Bushism and hard-edged critical politics in general.

John Kerry had much to say that was very critical of Bush and certainly there was much to criticize in the areas of the economy, tax cuts, Iraq, health care, energy policy and so on. These criticisms were directed at genuine weak points in Bush’s record, and there is good evidence that most voters shared at least some of these criticisms. Bush was not, and is not, a particularly popular incumbent, so attacking his record was an inevitable and important part of Kerry’s campaign.

The problem, however, was that Kerry never managed to convince many of the same voters who shared his criticisms of the Bush administration that he could and would do a better job in the areas he criticized.

To cite just one example from the 2004 exit poll, voters were asked if they trusted Bush to handle the economy: 51 percent said no and 49 percent said yes. Not so good for an incumbent. But voters rated Kerry even worse: 53 percent said they didn’t trust him to handle the economy, compared to 45 percent who said they did.

And all through the campaign, up to the very end, there was abundant evidence that voters did not think he had a clear plan for Iraq or, for that matter, for the country in general. His campaign was notable for lack-

ing signature themes and proposals that typical voters could easily grasp and identify with. Does anyone seriously believe that many voters knew or understood Kerry’s plan for Iraq? For health care? For the economy? How many voters knew the one or two thematic phrases (if they existed) that summarized what John Kerry stood for?

The final limitation in mobilization politics lies in the mistaken assumption that all progressive values, agenda items, and policies should be treated the same in a public setting. Consequently, the mobilization approach has a tendency to elevate a set of issues and positions (e.g. a host of anti-Bush issues, abortion, the Roberts and Alito nominations, impeachment etc.) that are less relevant to target audiences than other progressive issues that have broad appeal (e.g. universal health care, efforts to reward work, checks on corporate abuses, the Iraq War and just use of military power through cooperative means). To be clear, these issues are important and critical to our basic beliefs, and we should fight hard to uphold our values. But the unfortunate reality is that many of these battles are reactive and tend to take progressives off-track when it comes to elevating an alternative governing agenda.

At a minimum, progressives should learn from the successful battle against Social Security privatization and the Abu Ghraib scandal over the past few years that some reactive fights do more to advance a long-term progressive agenda and vision than oth-

The mobilization approach has a tendency to elevate issues that are less relevant to target audiences than issues that have broader appeal.

ning the popular vote but not the Electoral College (putting aside the Florida recount and the Supreme Court intervention). By 2004, John Kerry in turn received the largest vote count for a Democratic candidate in history, yet managed to fall short of President Bush by nearly 3 million votes.

Democrats put great stock in mobilization and the ground game. And Kerry did do better in many areas where there was intensive mobilization but not enough to succeed.

For example, in Ohio, Kerry carried Franklin County (Columbus) by 41,000 votes, compared to Gore’s margin of just 4,000 in 2000, and carried Cuyahoga County (Cleveland) by 218,000 voters, compared to Gore’s margin of 166,000 in 2000. But these gains were mostly cancelled out by Republican mobilization in conservative rural and emerging suburban areas. So Ohio, in the end, was only slightly closer (2.5 percentage points) than it was in 2000 (3.5 points).

As another example, depending on which data source one uses, 21 percent to 23 percent of voters in 2004 were minorities, up from 19 percent in 2000. So Democrats were reasonably successful in getting minorities to the polls. But exit poll data indicate that Hispanics supported Kerry (58-to-40 percent) at lower levels than they did Al Gore in 2000 (62-to-35 percent).⁶⁰

And even more consequential for the election, the exit polls showed that Bush widened his margin among white voters to 17 points (58-to-41 percent), up from a 12-point margin (54-to-42

ers. In both of these cases, public opinion turned decisively against the position of Bush and conservatives and the progressive opposition produced clear statements of principle—guaranteed security for the elderly and zero tolerance for torture and prisoner abuses.

In contrast, the efforts to derail the Roberts and Alito nominations required enormous energy and resources but produced few, if any, gains in terms of the composition of the Supreme Court or perceptions about liberalism. Progressives had little opportunity to stop these nominations, short of a filibuster that was called for in the 11th hour of the Alito nomination fight rather than in the first hours after the nomination was announced. In the end, all the hard work that went into these efforts left few public doubts about the nominees and potentially reinforced an image of progressives as overly political rather than principled. NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* polling shows that support for Alito went up 12 points from November 2005 to the end of January 2006, while opposition to the nominee increased by only 5 points. A majority of Americans in January 2006 Gallup polling believed Alito's views were "mainstream" rather than "extreme." And as *The National Journal* reports, Alito's numbers prior to the nomination hearings were the same as those for Chief Justice Roberts, who was confirmed in the Senate 78 to 22.

Progressives must be cognizant of staying principled while defining what "progressive" means in ways that can bring support from the left to the center. Leading with our chin on every issue and policy is not the way to build a stable governing majority in a country that is four-fifths moderate to conservative and concerned primarily with big problems like health care and jobs.

The Politics of Inoculation

The second major strategic approach advocated today is one we label the *politics of inoculation*. The basic parameters of this approach are as follows:

- Appeal primarily to the median voter;
- Downplay or repudiate liberal policies;
- Create distance from the progressive base;
- Anticipate criticism and move to shore up perceived weaknesses, primarily on social, cultural, and national security issues; and
- Push a clear centrist agenda focused on fewer governmental and more market/individual solutions to problems; fiscal discipline; "common sense" cultural positions; and a Truman-like national security posture that puts the war against terrorism at the core of the progressive project.

The advantages of this approach are fairly obvious. Starting with Anthony Downs, political scientists and strategists have for decades taken the median voter theorem as axiomatic. In a two-party, winner-take-all system with one dimensional ideological distribution, candidates looking to win will converge on voters at the median of the voter distribution. Finding ways to win those at the center of the ideological bell curve then is essential to building majority support.

Appealing to the center requires a level-headed understanding of your strengths and weaknesses among these audiences. The

politics of inoculation rightly recognizes that voters in the center tend to be culturally traditional, concerned about terrorism and national security, and skeptical of ideologues of all stripes.

In practice, this approach has produced some important results. President Bill Clinton's choices on the economy in the 1990s produced widely shared gains for Americans, restored fiscal responsibility to governing, and helped to reposition Democrats in the public's mind as effective fiscal managers and stewards of the economy. Clinton's embrace of new technology, international trade, and market solutions to problems modernized the Democratic Party in significant ways that should not be ignored. Clinton also managed to connect deeply with voters on a personal level, through his upbringing, faith, and straightforward communications style that reflected his background as the man from Hope.

In purely electoral terms, the importance of moderate voters continues to grow, particularly as conservatives pursue their strategy of straight mobilization. Al Gore and John Kerry both lost to George W. Bush despite winning a majority of ideological moderates in both the 2000 and 2004 elections (52-to-44 percent and 54-to-45 percent, respectively). Barring significant shifts in underlying coalitions, Democrats in the future will need to win even greater percentages of moderates if they are to remain viable.

The politics of inoculation suffers from three serious failures, however, that limit its usefulness in the current political context. First, proponents of this approach are far too caught up in combating the progressive base and fail to recognize the importance of a strong and active core of voters in carrying out political change. For many disciples of the inoculation camp, the progressive base is viewed with deep antipathy and aversion. Among many of these political elites and strategists, the base is viewed as nothing more than a collection of activists that need to get fired up every election cycle for phone calls and turnout efforts. The most flattering thing Galston and Kamarck have to say about the base in their new report is that "the new activists are an enormous financial boon to Democrats."⁶¹ This is, to put it mildly, a counterproductive stance.

Had a politics of inoculation been the guiding principle in past eras, a host of 20th-century reforms that are commonplace progressive victories today would have been viewed skeptically: the fight for better working conditions and increased unionization; efforts to provide cleaner air and water and more protected lands; expanded voting rights; the creation of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid; and the embrace of the civil rights movement. None of these reforms would have been possible without support from the base of progressive activists. Even in a polarized political world with only 20 percent of the electorate identifying as liberal, the notion that we should ignore or jettison deeply held progressive beliefs in search of a transformed, mainstream public persona is politically obtuse. Politics is about far more than national positioning.

Second, the politics of inoculation elevates issues like national security to the top of the progressive agenda but then offers solutions that make progressives indistinguishable from the other side. Thus, the strategic recommendations coming out of

this camp end up reinforcing our core vulnerability as a party and movement with no known identity, conviction, or vision.

For example, Galston and Kamarck implore progressives to “stop hiding behind domestic policy and honestly confront the biggest issue of our time: national security and especially the use of military force.”⁶² This is neither an unreasonable nor misguided request. However, after calling for a strong internationalist positioning that accepts the premise that U.S. military force can be used for good in the world—a sensible and historically consistent position for progressives to hold—the authors then proceed to chastise critics of the Iraq War as failing to “be coherent on this issue in a time of war.” But how coherent are they, themselves, when it comes to the front-rank issue of Iraq? The authors offer no clear recommendation on how to address this ongoing debacle, leaving one to conclude that they believe the right position on Iraq is to embrace the war in some capacity.

This avoids the real issue at stake. Even though plenty of thoughtful internationalists (who are not “Michael Moore Democrats”) believe the war in Iraq is a strategic and tactical blunder of the first order—one that has left the United States less safe and, in fact, heightened the possibility of terrorist attacks on its people and land—the leading proponents of the politics of inoculation can’t bring themselves to say so, apparently wanting progressives to embrace what they know to be wrong and strategically dangerous as a means of showing “patriotism, strength, and resolve.”⁶³

Third, even with the governing successes of Bill Clinton, the political track record and long-term political impact of this approach has been poor to abysmal. The politics of inoculation has arguably been the guiding mantra of Democratic politics for the last 15 years, yet progressives today find themselves in a worse position nationally than they were in 1989, the time of Galston and Kamarck’s important piece, *The Politics of Evasion*.⁶⁴

You can chalk this up to bad candidates, the failure to embrace Clintonism, 9/11, or a masterful right-wing noise machine, but it is clear that the politics of inoculation has played a substantial role in the failure of progressives and Democrats to present a common set of beliefs that are responsive to the needs and desires of average voters today. More of the same is not the solution. The politics of inoculation had its uses and its day in the sun. But that day is past.

PART IV: COMMON-GOOD PROGRESSIVISM

If mobilization and inoculation on their own are insufficient strategies for building majority power, what is a better answer? We offer a framework called the *politics of definition*. Our guiding strategic goal is to erase the “identity gap” as the first step to shoring up significant weaknesses among the electorate and starting the process of advancing a clear, concise agenda that appeals to voters across the spectrum. This approach is designed to simultaneously strengthen the progressive base and make improvements among key targets such as white working-class voters, Catholics, married women, and emerging suburban voters.

The *politics of definition* rests on the empirical and social reality that both passion and pragmatism must be employed to string together a coalition out of the fractious political dynam-

ics of America today. We must find ways to harness both forces to build and sustain a progressive coalition out of a disjointed, nonideological political culture where many groups do not share common traits, beliefs or desires.

As stated earlier, the goal of the *politics of definition* is to build a sustainable progressive majority over time rather than scoring short-term electoral gains alone (although such gains are welcome and certainly possible at the present time). GOP corruption and incompetence, combined with basic voter fatigue with conservatives and President Bush, could produce significant gains for progressives and Democrats in 2006 and 2008 without the need for big contrasts and large-scale statements of principle. Empirical data strongly suggest that the Reagan coalition has reached or passed its peak and that a substantial progressive and Democratic majority is waiting to be put together through the right political agenda and leadership. The so-called “Bush coalition” is tenuous at best and it remains to be seen what staying power the conservative/GOP coalition has going forward without Bush’s leadership and a mounting number of internal political and governing problems.

Even with possible short-term gains, progressives face a long uphill battle to put together a governing coalition capable of dealing with major social and economic challenges facing the nation: ongoing security problems in Iraq and rising instability throughout the greater Middle East; al-Qaeda and other terrorists spreading across the globe; an overextended military; rising nuclear threats in Iran and North Korea; a divided government racked with partisan bitterness; unsustainable budget and trade deficits; the coming retirement of the baby boomers; millions of Americans without basic health insurance; wage and job pressures; and rising poverty and economic inequality.

We do not intend for the *politics of definition* to answer to all of these pressing needs—we simply aim to provide a strategic framework that can get progressives out of the debilitating left-center fights and help craft more effective and politically viable issue and campaign agendas backed by energized activists and committed citizens. We believe this approach is one that politicians, activists, elites, and average citizens alike can use to find a common agenda and vision with broad appeal over time.

The politics of definition is grounded on five postulates that we believe can serve as the basis for making sound decisions about how best to organize progressive campaigns and present a coherent identity to voters. We then provide an overview of core progressive values and beliefs that can serve as the organizing principles of long-term campaigns and then sketch out how a politics of definition approach would like in terms of economic, social, and national security policy.

The five postulates for the *politics of definition*—the guideposts, questions, and “lines in the sand,” so to speak, that need to be drawn out in order to craft better politics—are as follows:

- (1) The starting point for all political organizing and campaigns should be: “What are my core beliefs and principles and how do I best explain them to supporters and skeptics alike?”
- (2) Every political battle, both proactive and defensive, should represent a basic statement of progressive character and present a clear, concise contrast with conservatives. Do not blur lines.

(3) All issue campaigns and agenda items are not equal. Progressives should focus their efforts on issues that can simultaneously strengthen the base and appeal to centrist voters. Progressives must be willing to make sacrifices and tradeoffs—in terms of coalition building and budgetary concerns—to achieve their most important agenda items.

(4) Escalate battles that expose the extremism of the right or splinter their coalition. [Follow-up: When confronted with the right's social, cultural, or national security agenda, the absolute worst response is to fail to combat these caricatures or to explain one's position directly to voters, regardless of the popularity of the position.]

(5) Every political action should highlight three essential progressive attributes: a clear stand on the side of those who lack power, wealth or influence; a deep commitment to the common good; and a strong belief in fairness and opportunity for all.

These recommendations are based on harnessing the best aspects of mobilization (primarily the need to speak with conviction, clarity of vision and, deeply held principles, and to fight hard against conservative tactics) with the best aspects of inoculation (recognizing the importance of more independent, centrist voters and the cultural, social, and security issues that drive them) in order to produce a political framework that is decisively progressive in orientation but with broad appeal.

What are progressives' core beliefs?

Common good progressivism

From our perspective, the basic philosophical argument that should guide our strategic process and inform our politics is clear: progressives seek to secure the common good. Securing the common good means putting the public interest above narrow self-interest and group demands; working to achieve social and economic conditions that benefit everyone; promoting a personal, governmental and corporate ethic of responsibility and service to others; creating a more open and honest governmental structure that relies upon an engaged and participatory citizenry; and doing more to meet our common responsibilities to aid the disadvantaged, protect our natural resources, and provide opportunities rather than burdens for future generations.

After years of conservative dominance defined by rampant individualism, corruption and greed in American life, the public is ready for a higher national purpose and a greater sense of service and duty to something beyond self-interest alone. The common good represents a clear break with the conservative vision of America as an aggregation of individuals pursuing their own needs with little concern for what unites us a people or for the impacts of our actions on the whole of society. It marks the end of a politics that leaves people to rise and fall on their own without considering the consequences of such actions on peoples' everyday lives. The common good approach recognizes that government is an essential tool for helping people to pursue their dreams while providing a solid safety net for those left behind. A focus on the common good requires citizens and their leaders to pursue policies and programs that benefit everyone, not just a select few with disproportionate access to the levers of power and influence over decision making.

Common-good progressivism has both personal and governmental requirements. People must assume responsibility for their actions, treat others with respect and decency, and serve their families and communities. Businesses need to assume responsibilities beyond securing the bottom line. They need to take into consideration their communities, workers, and surrounding environments as well as their shareholders when making decisions. Government needs to pursue policies that benefit all and require sacrifices from all. Government should not serve as the defender of narrow group or corporate agendas and should instead seek to protect public goods that promote the national interest.

A primary goal of government in this approach is to ensure basic fairness and opportunity: the civil, legal, and economic arrangements necessary to ensure every American has a real shot at his or her dreams. Common-good progressivism does not guarantee that everybody will be the same, think the same, or get the same material benefits in life; it simply means that people should start from a level playing field and have a reasonable chance at achieving success.

Internationally, common-good progressivism focuses on new and revitalized global leadership grounded in the integrated use of military, economic, and diplomatic power; the just use of force; global engagement; new institutions and networks to deal with intractable problems; and global equity. As in past battles against fascism and totalitarianism, common-good progressives today seek to fight global extremism by using a comprehensive national-security strategy that employs all our strengths for strategic and moral advantage. This requires true leadership and global cooperation rather than the dominant "my-way-or-the-highway" mentality of the conservative majority today.

Progressives should not forget that the common good is a powerful theme in the social teachings of many major faith traditions—Catholicism and mainline Protestantism, in particular, but in moderate evangelical denominations as well. The principle of the common good is drawn upon in these faiths to guide people towards more thoughtful consideration of their own actions in light of others; to compel political leaders and policymakers to consider the needs of the entire society; and to check unrestrained individualism that frequently erodes community sensibilities and values.

The goal of the common good in both the secular and faith traditions is a more balanced and considerate populace that seeks to provide the social and economic conditions necessary for all people to lead meaningful and dignified lives.

Building on these common-good values, progressives in the 20th century sought to improve conditions for Americans by harnessing the power of the national government to assist the disadvantaged; to regulate and balance a rapidly developing capitalist economy; and to challenge totalitarian forces across the globe who threatened to undermine democracy and freedom. Progressives relied on strong intermediary forces like labor unions and civil-rights groups to press for reforms. The American business community was pressed by progressive reformers to accept economic regulation and intervention as part of the grand bargain that would ensure profits and provide for a solid middle class with a steadily rising standard of living.

A common-good vision today must be properly updated to meet emerging challenges and institutional arrangements. Common-good progressives understand that the private sector in today's economy is far better positioned than government to ensure strong growth and job creation. The primary role of government should therefore be to provide the legal, regulatory, and financial incentives to stimulate growth and protect workers and citizens from corruption and abuse. At the same time, many of the issues that led early progressives toward stronger government action in the past remain areas of concern for government today in securing the common good: increasing access to quality health care, improving public education, providing a safe and sound retirement for the elderly, dealing with the effects of stagnant middle-class wages, and protecting the environment.

Common-good progressives also recognize that government alone will not solve the nation's problems. Strong moral values, personal responsibility, and entrepreneurship are critical assets that help individuals and local communities address many of the societal problems government should not or cannot get involved with. Securing the common good is as much about altering peoples' internal moral compasses as it is about shifting the overall political discourse in society. Above all, common-good progressivism seeks to restore a common American purpose as a means to ensure shared prosperity and a more peaceful, stable global order.

The common good is not only a concise and clear organizing principle for progressives but also a potentially potent political theme for appealing to voters across the partisan and ideological spectrum. March 2006 research by the Center for American Progress reveals that 68 percent of Americans *strongly* agree that the "government should be committed to the common good and put the public's interest above the privileges of the few" (85 percent total agree). Seventy-three percent of Democrats, 62 percent of Independents, and 67 percent of Republicans strongly agree with a common-good focus. A common good progressive theme scored well above typical conservative values themes: for example only 54 percent of Americans strongly agree that "Americans have gotten too far away from God and family," and just 41 percent strongly agree that "religion is on the decline in America." Importantly, the study reveals that liberals/progressives hold a 22-point advantage over conservatives on which ideological approach most represents "the common good."⁶⁵

Economic common good

In less abstract terms, a common-good progressive approach would primarily focus on broadly shared economic opportunity and universal programs as the core means for appealing to two blocs of voters that are culturally and socially divergent. Part of the problem with the politics of mobilization and the politics of inoculation is that both approaches tend to elevate the cultural and social conditions of their respective targets without giving proper consideration to what divides each group and what could potentially unite them.

The progressive base is more secular, younger, more urban, less traditional, either highly educated and affluent or less-educated and poor, and much more diverse. In contrast, the cen-

trist targets are more religious and traditional, older, more rural and exurban, more middle and working class and white. There is relatively little in common with these audiences from a social and cultural perspective, a condition that is not likely to change any time soon.

From our point of view, the strongest things that bring these groups together are class-based issues involving economic opportunity, fairness, and the American Dream. We believe that focusing proactively on class-based issues and the state of the global economy—wrapped in the language and themes of the common good—is the best way to bring these two blocs together into a functional majority coalition.

Common-good progressivism must therefore speak directly to the typical American's view of today's economic challenges and opportunities. As argued in a forthcoming paper by Jacob Hacker and Ruy Teixeira⁶⁶, that will require at least two things: first, a combination of backward-looking alarm and forward-looking optimism, and, second, a set of simple, easily conveyed policy ideas for addressing economic insecurity that add up, piece by piece, to a relatively coherent whole with universal appeal. And this in turn requires—and this may be the biggest challenge—that Americans come to see politics and government as ultimately on their side.

Perhaps the most important reason growing economic insecurity hasn't shaken American politics to its foundation is that Americans think that they are on their own in the new world of work and family. And when you think you're on your own, you are much less likely to trust politicians offering to help—and much more likely to support those who tell you that fighting economic insecurity is just a matter of increasing personal responsibility and lavishing more tax breaks on IRA-style accounts that people can use to try to deal with economic risks on their own.

"Backward-looking alarm" may sound like a reactionary credo, but it means simply this: People across the board feel that security is slipping away, and nothing motivates voters like the prospect of losing something they already have (behavioral economists call this "loss aversion"). At the same time, Americans do not want to be told that they or their nation is struggling. They want a forward-looking vision that accommodates the changes in the economy and society that they value, one that combines the goal of security and the ideal of opportunity.

While voters generally agree the American Dream is becoming harder to attain for most, and that the economy is not working well for middle-class Americans, they still overwhelmingly believe that they themselves will succeed despite these difficulties. For example, in a 2005 New York Times poll on class in America, 70 percent said they had already attained the American Dream or would attain it in their lifetimes. And, when asked to rate themselves on a 10-point scale from extremely poor (1) to extremely rich (10), both for today and in 10 years, 62 percent rated themselves between 1 and 5 now, but 60 percent said they would be between 6 and 10 in ten years.⁶⁷

As a 1996 study of non-college workers by Stan Greenberg put it:

While non-college workers take for granted that their wages are stagnant, they nonetheless believe their overall economic

position is improving and taking them just above the average American. That is the apparent paradox of living standards. Still, people are gaining—not because the economy is growing and not because their jobs offer advancement and certainly not because anybody is helping them. They are gaining because of their own personal efforts and the choices and sacrifices that their own families are making. They see themselves clawing their way up above the average to a better place—and God help those who make it a harder climb.⁶⁸

Progressives' goal, therefore, should be to make that climb easier and provide more security to people while they are climbing.

Yet progressives do not want to be seen as simply trying to provide more security to folks who are stuck in place. That is not how most Americans see themselves, and to the extent progressives convey that impression, they will be unable to transform economic discontent into a significant, long-lasting advantage on the economy.

But is there evidence that messages combining backward-looking alarm and forward-looking optimism—linking the need for security to the opportunity to do better—resonate with voters? What survey data there are support this proposition. Pollsters like Lake Snell Perry Mermin (LSPM) and Democracy Corps regularly report 10 to 15 percentage point advantages for security-opportunity messages over various versions of Bush's low-tax ownership society. Polls also suggest a consistent preference among voters for a role for government that promotes security in the context of expanded opportunity, as opposed to a government role that keeps taxes low to promote self-reliance.

Moreover, these data indicate that the security-opportunity message strikes an especially responsive chord with one of the voter groups—married women—the Democrats have recently had the most trouble with. In the June, 2005 LSPM survey, married women by a substantial 24-point margin (59-to-35) embraced a security-opportunity message over an ownership society message. And this in the same survey where married women gave Republicans the edge on keeping America prosperous (3 points) and on providing economic opportunities (1 point) and gave Democrats a mere 2 point advantage on creating economic security for “families like yours.”⁶⁹

How can progressives combine backward-looking alarm with forward-looking optimism into a common-good program they can bring to voters?

We believe the following would be a good start:

Promote robust universal programs that expand opportunity and provide a true safety net in times of need. The key to these universal programs is to make crystal clear that everyone gets access to them and everyone helps to pay for them. No handouts or giveaways, but real investments in a decent platform for people to carry out their lives. One obvious example is affordable health care for every American. Another might be universal risk insurance as proposed by Jacob Hacker. Still another would be affordable broadband access and expanded computer training for every American. Incremental reforms will not do the

trick. As recent polling on health care has shown, Americans are ready to think seriously about universal health care and part of the politics is connecting to that desire. Americans are also ready for big ideas in education—from universal pre-K to expanded public school choice to universal access to college. Americans recognize education is central to opportunity in today's society and progressives must speak to this core part of the American Dream.

Put fairness at the center of the progressive economic agenda. The progressive notion of fairness is essential to a revitalized common-good movement. No one will be guaranteed material success but we certainly make sure that the rules aren't stacked against anyone. Common-good progressives should promote a tax system that rewards work; enhanced labor laws to protect workers and increase their collective bargaining power; and a global trade system that helps those who are economically displaced and protects labor and environmental standards in addition to increasing overall growth.

Create 21st-century public infrastructure. Americans want their government to provide the critical infrastructure necessary to carry out economic and social life. Beyond government staples like roads and bridges, today's infrastructure must be technologically advanced and sustainable. Progressives should own

The key to universal programs is to make crystal clear that everyone gets access to them and everyone helps to pay for them. No giveaways.

the transition to alternative and renewable energy and provide strong public support for a faster and more affordable and open source Internet infrastructure that can serve the economy from individual entrepreneurs and small businesses to large industrial companies and multinational corporations.

Promote a targeted populism that recognizes the ways in which corporate and power elites are unfairly enriching themselves, abusing the system, and undermining the common good. This is solely about creating a level playing field where everyone plays by the rules and not about a frontal assault on capitalist values. Common good progressives should go after specific abuses like predatory credit card debt, excessive fees for services, pension raids, corporate pollution, and lobbying corruption. Talk about the need for corporations and workers alike to take responsibility for their business practices and impact on communities. Progressives should also find ways to reward and support responsible businesses and corporate practices in addition to decrying unethical behavior.

Promote greater democratic control over globalization. Progressives must take the lead in showing Americans that we can do more to harness the good forces of globalization and stem the bad forces. It starts by simply acknowledging that globalization is not a “natural” process. It is a process created and managed by decisions of individuals, corporations, and nations and can therefore be transformed by these actors. To start, progressives

must insist that all efforts to expand global trade be conditioned upon genuine efforts to improve labor, environmental and political standards abroad and greater economic security, job preparedness, education, and investment at home.

Show a willingness to adjust fiscal policy to meet our most pressing needs. An agenda that can't be paid for is no agenda at all and voters know that. A renewed focus on the common good requires progressives to make hard choices about what is ultimately most important to overall American competitiveness and opportunity. This means progressives must be willing to cut unnecessary spending, raise new revenue, and keep the deficit under control.

Go beyond the defense of traditional progressive programs to embrace and expand opportunities for average families to save and build wealth. Progressives must also be willing to go beyond traditional safety net programs like Social Security to promote programs like the universal 401(K) and other types of wealth-creation ideas that can provide all Americans with a reasonable level of retirement security and help middle- and working-class families meet the American Dream.

Finally, progressives must take seriously the need to expand access to good jobs—those with reasonably high pay and decent benefits. Americans are willing to work hard to advance themselves, but good jobs are key to their plans for upward mobility and essential to the overall common good of the nation. The health and retirement reforms just mentioned obviously further that goal, but government needs to help even more by providing universal access to skills training, professional education, and good new jobs through future-oriented initiatives grounded in new technology and big initiatives like energy independence.

Personal and societal common good

Politics must be about more than just economics and policy programs. A new common good progressivism will therefore focus on the failures and promises of modern society as much as it focuses on the economic conditions facing Americans today.

The starting point for this discussion—and the primary challenge that drives most of the public's displeasure with its government, major institutions, and leaders—should be the rampant materialism and self-interested personal behavior that threatens our families, companies, governments, and society as a whole. Individual greed and lax social norms have left Americans with a growing sense that things are out of control and in conflict with their own ideas about what a good and decent society should look like.

Strikingly, research conducted by Westhill Partners for the Center for American Progress in the fall of 2003 found that Americans view the 1950s as the most idyllic decade in our nation's history (this was true even among African-Americans). Despite clear problems in addressing the status of racial minorities and women during the 1950s, Americans give three primary reasons for honoring this time period: "(1) a strong belief that community spirit—'we're all in this together'—is fundamentally American; (2) nostalgia for the real or perceived 'close-knit' community of the past; and (3) a conviction that decline in community is the primary cause of crime and the erosion of public

safety." 70 Americans also believe in this period as a time when neighbors looked out for one another, parents taught their children right and wrong, and kids understood their place in the world and respected their elders. The 1950s also represented for these participants a time not only of informal commitment and service to their communities, but also a more formal commitment to uphold their duties as citizens.

This is not to argue for a June and Ward Cleaver progressive vision. But, this research and other work shows us that the critical missing link in American life and politics today is a strong notion of sacrifice and duty in service to a greater good. Americans of all stripes want to serve their families, their communities, and their country. They want to be asked to sacrifice for something beyond themselves. Yet, everywhere they turn, their political, business and cultural leaders implore them to do whatever they want, to pursue their own interests, and ignore others since the greater good will magically arise out of individual action. This was most apparent after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Instead of instilling a sense of the common good and sacrifice, President Bush encouraged Americans to shop. Majority Leader Tom DeLay proclaimed, "Nothing is more important in the face of a war than cutting taxes."

Progressives should roundly chastise the implicit greed and insular viewpoints built into modern laissez-faire conservatism, the predominant ideology of the right today. The public views the excessively self-interested focus of modern life as a moral calling, one that ultimately shapes who we are as a people.

2004 post-election polling conducted by Zogby International, and co-sponsored by the Center for American Progress, Res Publica and Pax Christi, found that nearly two-thirds of American voters believe "greed and materialism" or "poverty and economic justice" are the most urgent moral problems facing America, compared to only 27 percent of voters who said "abortion" and "same-sex marriage."⁷¹ Similarly, in the March 2006 research by CAP, Americans were asked to rate a series of 12 statements about modern American life. Seventy-one percent strongly agreed with the notion that "Americans are becoming too materialistic"—well above conservative assertions such as "religion is on the decline in America" (41 percent strongly agree).⁷²

Progressives are uniquely positioned to speak to Americans' concern for the state of modern life by reclaiming the personal role of duty, sacrifice and the common good in public life. Almost all of the great reform movements in American history—during times of peace and war—were based on some notion of securing the overall welfare of the nation. Here are a few ideas on ways to promote a personal and societal notion of the common good:

Expand and promote national service as part of the common good. Progressives should be willing to tie expanded governmental support and backing (on things like education or job training) to reciprocal notions of public, military or community service of some sort. Nothing should be free in life and progressives should stand proudly for efforts to promote a sense of sacrifice and duty in all Americans. This need not be coercive, but should be encouraged through incentives as a means of per-

sonal and national fulfillment.

Attack the culture of commercialism in American life. Conservatives love to talk about cultural decline, yet do nothing to go challenge the commercial forces that contribute to rampant greed and self-interested behavior in society. Progressives should implore both individuals and corporations to do more for those around them and to consider the needs of society as well as their desire for personal gain and a strong bottom line. This includes taking a stand against the increasing coarseness and hypersexualization of popular culture, which serves the corporate bottom line, but hurts the broader American community.

Promote the role of faith-based organizations and other community focused groups in ameliorating the cultural tide of greed and materialism in America. This not a call to turn churches and synagogues into political organs, but rather a recognition that faith leaders are uniquely positioned to bring people to a higher sense of self and commitment to others. Faith and other community leaders should be supported given their unique positions and authority in helping people make wiser and more ethical decisions in life.

Make responsible parenthood the cornerstone of a new common good social agenda. Progressives should take a strong stand in favor of deep personal responsibility as a means to personal, familial, and societal advancement. This could include a renewed focus on responsible fatherhood and the promotion of stable families (of all kinds) as proven ways to improve people's lives at all levels.

Global common good

Progressives should refuse to accept the narrowly defined security box of the right as the only means for protecting the nation. As current events clearly show, an overly militaristic and aggressively unilateral approach to American power and security has produced serious adverse consequences. Progressives do themselves, and other Americans, no favor by trying to out "tough" the conservative majority in a debate that is solely on its terms.

Common-good progressivism seeks to expand the overall discussion of national security by offering a more compelling and sustainable vision of how best to secure our nation and build a more stable international order.

As the opposition force, progressives must start by mounting an aggressive challenge to the national-security credentials of the conservative majority. In order to continue reducing the impact of the conservative/GOP appeal on national security, and present a coherent alternative national security vision, progressives must first come to grips with the fact that conservatives use national security not as a policy card but a political hammer.

Progressives need to realize that they will never beat or outsmart conservatives on national security by capitulating to their policy demands. The policies of the right have been abysmal and have worsened conditions worldwide. Progressives should not try to answer right-wing charges against them as "unpatriotic" or "weak" by accepting these premises, agreeing with their policies or taking efforts to show how similar we are to conservatives.

Despite all the intellectual posturing of neoconservatives and neo-realists, there is no consistent ideological core among con-

servatives on national security. Their own actions prove they are neither strong nor decisive in their understanding of the real threat of terrorism, and progressives should say that repeatedly.

The war in Iraq and the larger battle against terrorism provide ample opportunities for progressives to confront conservatives head-on over security issues and present a more comprehensive vision of global security grounded on the common good.

First, progressives must constantly remind Americans of conservatives' inability to produce a safer world environment: 9/11 happened on their watch; they have failed to stop al-Qaeda and capture Osama bin Laden; they created a total debacle in Iraq; global terrorist acts have tripled under their leadership; the intelligence community remains deeply splintered; they failed to anticipate and address rising problems in Iran, North Korea and on homeland security; they have alienated a huge segment of the world and turned strong allies into skeptics of U.S. motives and actions.

Recent efforts to focus on conservative failures appear to be working. In an April 2006 poll by Associated Press/Ipsos, Democrats are in a tie with Republicans (41-to-41 percent) on "Who do you trust to do a better job of protecting the country."⁷³ And in an April 2006 Washington Post/ABC News poll, Democrats actually have a 1 point advantage over the GOP (46-to-45 percent) on handling the "U.S. campaign against terrorism"—a huge improvement over the 36-point deficit Democrats faced in December 2002 (61-to-25 percent).⁷⁴

Second, progressives should repeatedly remind Americans that the Iraq War equals conservative failure and dishonesty. The narrative of the ever-shifting conservative rationales for the war is a case in point. Conservatives and the Bush administration first argued for pre-emptive action to stop the imminent threat of weapons of mass destruction (a rationale that itself was grafted on to a predetermined stance to invade Iraq). They talked up "mushroom clouds" and the nonexistent link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda. Then, when no WMDs were found, they shifted the rationale to spreading democracy and freedom—concepts explicitly ridiculed by then-candidate Bush in the 2000 election. Despite these clear failures and inconsistencies, the Bush team turned the 2004 election into a referendum on his handling of 9/11 and John Kerry's inability to explain himself or hold a consistent position on Iraq. The other Axis of Evil countries—Iran and North Korea—were ignored and now the Bush team is paying the price for its ineptitude and disjointed foreign policy.

The public has steadily soured on the war and is looking for progressives and Democrats to give them a viable alternative on Iraq and a renewed focus on global terrorism. Progressives must take a strong stand against an open-ended war in Iraq that is depleting our military, draining resources, testing our global authority, and exposing us to greater terrorist dangers across the globe. Progressives should argue for a clear exit strategy, with measurable markers of progress, and a timeframe that brings home all but the most essential troops in Iraq—those necessary to protect our embassies, conduct critical counterterrorism measures, and continue ongoing military training—as quickly as possible. This redeployment of troops should allow the U.S. to focus on real terrorist threats and get the targets off the backs of our troops.

Progressives should state clearly that there will be no long-term military bases in Iraq and that our stay in Iraq will be temporary to help ensure stability during the democratic transition. We should demand full accountability for the misuse of pre-war intelligence and the absence of weapons of mass destruction; the billions of dollars in taxpayer money squandered in Iraq or lost through corruption; torture and abusive treatment of detainees; and failure to provide adequate plans for the war by military and civilian officials alike.

We should remind voters that had progressives been in charge on 9/11, we would not have taken our eye off of al-Qaeda and bin Laden by diverting critical military and intelligence assets to Iraq. Similarly, we would not have allowed the Iraqi diversion to stop our focus on North Korea and Iran as emerging new threats. And we most certainly would not have alienated three-quarters of the world population in pursuit of a failed vision for fighting terrorism.

Step two in the overall security project is for progressives to articulate a modern vision of internationalism that employs all tools in our arsenal—hard and soft—to advance American interests and security, improve world living conditions, and promote global peace and stability. Progressives should advocate for new and revitalized global leadership in pursuit of a global common good—leadership that is grounded in a just use of force, global engagement, expanded economic opportunity, and new institutions and networks to deal with intractable problems.

Beyond a safe and orderly redeployment from Iraq and refocused efforts on terrorist networks, additional tenets of a global common good approach might include:

Pursue integrated power as a core national security strategy. Common-good progressives should argue for the use of integrated American power and cooperative global efforts to fight global terrorism and stop the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. Neither militarism nor diplomacy alone will solve these problems.

Promote a new global equity agenda that challenges corruption and encourages institutional reform. A true global common good requires that social and economic conditions across nations adequately provide all people a decent chance to live a dignified and fulfilling life. It also requires transnational institutions and governments that are forthright and effective in their support for others. Progressives should champion a new global equity agenda, much as U.K. Chancellor Gordon Brown has done with Britain's support for education in Africa and Asia, and recognize that improving living and working conditions in other parts of the world is critical to fixing problems at home.

Transform existing global institutions to better control the downsides of globalization. Similar to the discussion of our domestic economy, a commitment to a global common good requires engagement and commitment to shape globalization in ways that benefit all. Rather than debating the merits of globalization and trade—a process that has produced both empirical gains and losses for people—progressives should argue for more oversight of globalization based on a sincere commitment to shared prosperity and effective and fair economic interactions. This will require enhanced democratic authority and new

mandates and enforcement mechanisms for major transnational institutions like the United Nations, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.

Remake America into a guiding force for global democracy and economic opportunity. Progressives should continue to take the lead—through our vision and policies—to secure freedom, democracy, human rights, and economic opportunities across the globe. Despite the hollow “freedom” vision of the White House, these are noble and useful goals that progressives have historically supported and should continue to promote today.

Create the political will and leadership to finally address global warming. The threat posed by global warming to our nation's security and the well-being of people across the world can no longer be denied. Nothing is more critical to establishing a true global common good than addressing the staggering accumulation of pollution from things like power plants and automobiles that contribute to increased global temperatures. The United States must take the lead in transforming its own economy through sustainable energy production and consumption and spearhead global efforts to reduce heat-trapping gases.

Conservatives after 9/11 liked to talk of the generational commitment to fighting global terrorism but then asked for nothing in return—beyond our military commitments, conservatives asked for no physical or financial sacrifices to help uphold American values and protect our nation. They claimed American power alone would secure our nation and bring regional stability. They were wrong on all counts and progressives should aggressively challenge conservatives on their failures and lack of vision. We must seek to expand the discussion of national security beyond the truncated conception of the right. Along with speaking truthfully about our global policy, progressives should in turn strive to generate in Americans and others a higher sense of national and global purpose—grounded in common action and shared principles—that can truly fight extremist forces of all stripes and better protect America and the international community.

Conclusion

This report was designed to help progressives find a new strategy for long-term power building, one that brings together divergent blocs of voters with a clear and concise definition of what progressives stand for and how these principles translate into a new governing agenda focused on securing the common good. Previous strategies for political transformation are insufficient in today's political context. Progressives need a much clearer public identity that can convince a broad cross-section of Americans that they have both the passion and common sense to address major social and economic problems facing our nation. Neither pure ideological or base mobilization nor more centrist inoculation alone can provide a path out of our current political predicament.

We believe that a politics of definition approach, grounded on strong statements of principle and a pragmatic governing agenda that benefits all and requires sacrifices from all, is a better way to bring together core progressive voters and less-partisan and ideologically attached moderate voters into a powerful force for change.

The common good serves as the overarching philosophical principle, helping to define a clear and optimistic progressive vision for the future. We believe that this common-good coalition—a socially and culturally diverse group unified by a commitment to a higher national purpose and widely shared economic opportunity—can become as important a force for progressive change in the 21st century as was the broad based coalition of Americans who came together to usher in the original Progressive Era in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. **TAP**

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