

Center for American Progress



Memorandum

TO: Interested Parties

FROM: Center for American Progress

DATE: June 5, 2006

SUBJECT: Voters Deeply Concerned About Rising Materialism and Self-Interest in American Society; Desire Government Focused on the Common Good and Basic Decency and Dignity of All

A major new research study on the role of faith, values, and the common good finds that American voters are increasingly worried about rising materialism, self-interest, and unethical behavior in our society and strongly desire a government that focuses on the common good and basic decency and dignity of all Americans.

The study, sponsored by the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative of the Center for American Progress and conducted by Financial Dynamics, reveals that progressive moral themes about public life have deep resonance with large segments of the American population.

- Seventy-one percent of voters *strongly* agree that “Americans are becoming too materialistic” (92 percent total agree) including 71 percent of Democrats, 70 percent of Independents, and 72 percent of Republicans.
- Sixty-eight percent of voters *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 for government. A similar percentage of voters (68 percent) *strongly* agrees that “government should uphold the basic decency and dignity of all and take greater steps to help the poor and disadvantaged in America” (89 percent total agree).

All three of these moral themes scored well above other values themes: 54 percent of Americans *strongly* agree that “Americans have gotten too far away from God and family” (76 percent total agree) and just 41 percent *strongly* agree that “religion is on the decline in America” (62 percent total agree).

Religion and Moral Values Critical to Personal Lives of Voters

The study finds that religion, family and moral values continue to play a major role in the personal lives of Americans and shape their views of politics and government in significant ways. Fifty-one percent of American voters report attending religious services at least once a week and 72 percent say they pray at least once a day (40 percent say they pray several times a day). Half of all voters believe faith and religion plays too little a role in public life today. More than six in ten voters approve of public references to God and religion.

Fifty-five percent of voters report that religion provides “a great deal of guidance” in their day-to-day living, with 87 percent saying religion provides at least some guidance in daily living. The importance of religion cuts across party lines – 56 percent of Democrats and 60 percent of Republicans say religion provides a great deal of guidance in their lives, with Independents slightly lower at 46 percent.

Americans Pragmatic about Role of Faith and Values in Public Sphere

Voters also show deep pragmatism and tolerance in their attitudes about the role of faith and values in public discourse. More than six in 10 American voters want leaders who are motivated by deeply held moral concerns, not necessarily religious in orientation, and are willing to draw on these beliefs and principles when making public decisions. At the same time, voters overwhelmingly believe in religious freedom and strongly reject leaders who try to use the political system to translate religious or moral beliefs into law.

Sixty-seven percent of voters believe that religious freedom is a “critical” part of their image of America compared to less than three in ten who believe Judeo-Christian faith specifically is critical to this image. Only 20 percent of American voters approve of leaders using the political system to turn religious beliefs into action. Voters are split on whether the U.S. Constitution strongly reflects Judeo-Christian teachings (42 percent strongly reflective; 41 percent not strongly reflective). And a majority of American voters (51 percent) prefers that their leaders keep their religious beliefs mostly to themselves as opposed to publicly expressing these beliefs.

Progressive Moral Narrative Ascendant in Voters’ Minds

Contrary to the conventional narrative of moral decline in American life—one centered on conservative notions about abortion, gay marriage, and the erosion of traditional families—this study shows that voters are far more concerned with the moral consequences of excessively self-interested behavior, corruption and the failure to deal with collective needs and major concerns such as poverty and hunger, homelessness, the environment, just global policy, and living wages for working families.

In terms of the role that religious and moral teachings should play in public debate about key issues, American voters focus most on “poverty and hunger” (75 percent leading or major role); “homelessness” (61 percent leading or major role); “government corruption” (58 percent); “terrorism” (56 percent leading or major role); “the environment” (54 percent leading or major role); and “health care” (52 percent leading or major role). In a lower tier of issues, 44 percent of voters believe that religious and moral values should play a leading role in public discussion of abortion and only 37 percent believe similarly about gay marriage.

There are significant partisan differences in views about what role religious and moral values should play in the public discourse on key issues. While “poverty and hunger” tops the list for both Democrats and Republicans (78 percent leading or major role for both), Democratic voters desire more religious and moral debate on “homelessness” (62 percent) and “the environment” (56 percent) while Republican voters focus more on “terrorism” (68 percent) and “abortion” (63 percent).

When asked to choose which issues should be the top priority for elected officials who have strong religious beliefs, 15 percent cite “poverty/hunger”, 13 percent “healthcare”, 10 percent “the budget”, 9 percent “terrorism”, and 7 percent “the war in Iraq”.

A broad and deep cross-section of American voters agrees with morally centered messages focused on environmental stewardship, living wages, and just global policy. Eighty-percent of voters *strongly* agree that, “It’s our moral and social responsibility to be good stewards of our land, air and water and leave the environment better than we found it,” including 88 percent of Democrats, 79 percent of Independents, and 75 percent of Republicans who *strongly* agree.

Seventy-two percent of voters *strongly* agree that, “Strengthening our economy over the long term requires helping low-income families get decent work. That means providing a living wage, affordable health care and adequate educational opportunities to help them get back on their feet and take responsibility for their lives,” (86 percent of Democrats, 66 percent of Independents, and 62 of Republicans *strongly* agree). Fifty-one percent of American voters *strongly* agree that, “We must do everything to defend our country, but our democratic and religious traditions demand that we be a force for good in the world and pursue just, peaceful and cooperative global actions,” (52 percent of Democrats, 53 percent of Independents, and 51 percent of Republicans *strongly* agree).

Messages that seek to bridge the divide over stem cells and intelligent design score lower than others, but still receive majority support. Eighty percent of voters believe that, “Faith and science can and should coexist. We can respect our belief in God and our commitment to the dignity of every human life by using our scientific knowledge to help those who are sick or vulnerable. Stem cell research can be a force for moral good rather than a moral failing.” Democrats and Independents more intensely agree with this argument on stem cells (65 percent and 59 percent *strongly* agree, respectively) than do Republicans (45 percent *strongly* agree). Sixty-seven percent of voters agree that we can respect both faith and science “by believing that God created the world and shaped its purpose without rejecting scientific evidence that humans developed over the ages through evolution,” (67 percent of Democrats, 75 percent of Independents, and 64 percent of Republicans agree, although the strength of agreement is lower than on other issues).

Morality Viewed as a Personal and Societal Ethic of Responsibility

When asked to describe what being a “moral person” means to them, 56 percent of voters say either “taking responsibility for one’s actions” (23 percent), “treating others with respect” (23 percent), or “living a just and modest life”. In contrast, only 12 percent of Americans believe that being a moral person requires “honoring religious tradition and faith” (7 percent) or “supporting traditional families” (5 percent). Similarly, when asked to choose what influences they draw on to help make choices in their own lives, most Americans say “common sense” (23 percent) or their “own sense of right and wrong” (19 percent) followed by “faith or religious beliefs” (18 percent).

Asked to name the most serious moral crisis in America today, 22 percent of Americans cite “kids not raised with the right values” as the top moral crisis followed by 18 percent saying “corruption in government”; 11 percent “too much sex and violence in the media”; 8 percent “greed and materialism”; 8 percent “people too focused on themselves”; 5 percent “corruption in business”; and only 4 percent citing “abortion and homosexuality.”

The Center for American Progress research project was conducted in three stages from October 2005 through February 2006. Part one included more than 20 in-depth interviews with religious leaders and activists in the late fall. Part two involved 10 traditional and “influence circle” focus groups in November. Part 3 was a nationally representative sample of 900 registered voters conducted in late February 2006. The margin of error for the national sample of 900 adults is +/- 3.3 percent.

The Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative of the Center for American Progress works to identify and articulate the moral, ethical and spiritual values underpinning policy issues, to shape a progressive stance in which these values are clear, and to increase public awareness and understanding of these values. The Initiative also works to safeguard the healthy separation of church and state that has allowed religion in our country to flourish. In all its efforts, the Initiative works for a society and government that strengthen the common good and respect the basic dignity of all people. The Initiative also informs the wide-ranging efforts of the Center for American Progress to promote a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is "of the people, by the people, and for the people."