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The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

The **Democratic Strategist** has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As **The Democratic Strategists'** editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO

A "COMMON SENSE POPULIST"
DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATIONS
STRATEGY FOR RE-BUILDING TRUST
IN GOVERNMENT

BY
ANDREW LEVISON

A TDS STRATEGY MEMO: A “COMMON-SENSE POPULIST” DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR RE-BUILDING PUBLIC TRUST IN GOVERNMENT.

by Andrew Levison

In a 2007 article in *The American Prospect*¹, pollster Stan Greenberg provided a particularly cogent description of the profound political problem that the decline in trust of government poses for the Democratic coalition:

There is a new reality that Democrats must deal with if they are to be successful going forward. In their breathtaking incompetence and comprehensive failure in government, Republicans have undermined Americans' confidence in the ability of government to play a role in solving America's problems. Democrats will not make sustainable gains unless they are able to restore the public's confidence in its capacity to act through government.

...“the scale of damage done to people's belief in government is enormous... 62% in a Pew study said they believe that whenever something is run by the government it is probably inefficient and wasteful. By 57% to 29% Americans believe that government makes it harder for people to get ahead in life rather than helping people. 85% say that if the government had more money it would waste it rather than spend it well.

Although people may favor government action on critical issues like health care, education and energy their lack of trust in governments capacity to spend money properly means that *their first priority is to cut wasteful spending and make government more accountable*. People are desperate to see accountability from Washington, not just in the spending of tax dollars with no discernible results but also in politicians' behavior... To have any chance of getting heard on their agenda, Democrats need to stand up and take on the government—not its size or scope, but its failure to be accountable—and deliver the results that people expect for the taxes they pay.

A more recent *strategy memo by Greenberg's Democracy Corps*² focuses on the overwhelming distrust and contempt with which Congress in particular is viewed:

Voters are disgusted with 'business as usual' in Washington. There is a deep and pervasive belief, particularly among independents, that special interests are running things and Members of Congress listen more to those that fund their campaigns than the voters that they are supposed to be representing. Three quarters believe that special interests hold too much influence over Washington today while fewer than

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¹ http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=democrats_are_back_but

² http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/files/Political-Framing-Memo-012610.FINAL_.pdf

a quarter believe that ordinary citizens can still influence what happens in politics. Similarly, nearly 80 percent say that Members of Congress are trolled by the groups that help fund their political campaigns while fewer than a fifth believe that Members listen more to the voters.

For Democrats the fundamental “take-away” from Greenberg’s analysis is simple. Until this profound distrust is overcome Democrats will be unable to pass any major new social legislation or political reform. Democrats have no alternative. They must reduce the enormous cynicism Americans now feel about government.

In political terms the most important demographic group whose opinions of government Democrats must seek to change is the white working class—people who have less than a college degree and are generally employed in “working class” rather than “middle class” jobs. Their support for Democrats plummeted by 12 percent between 2008 and 2010 in large part because of this issue. Without regaining a substantial part of this lost support in 2012, a Democratic victory will be close to impossible.

What Democrats need is a coherent strategy for addressing the complex mixture of attitudes that lies behind hostility and distrust of government—a strategy that not only addresses the problem in a meaningful way but which can also be presented in a consistent and convincing communications campaign.

Communication campaigns vs. advertising campaigns

An effective Democratic strategy and communications campaign to overcome distrust of government must be substantially more than just a Madison Avenue advertising campaign—a fact which [a current Harper’s magazine forum](#)³ with the creative directors of four major Madison Avenue advertising firms makes dramatically clear. The day after last November’s elections, the four ad men were brought together and challenged by Harper’s editors to create TV ads for last week’s Super Bowl that would build support for “Government” and diminish the lack of trust most Americans now feel.

The *Harper’s* forum presents the discussion among the four executives as they follow the standard procedure for developing an advertising campaign and then displays the actual storyboards and mock-ups that the four firms develop. One of the resulting ads uses the slogan “*Our government is a lot like ice cream.*” Another presents a montage of Americans talking about what the government makes possible “*Only in America.*”

The ads are clever and amusing but they also make it entirely clear that, in isolation, ads and advertising slogans by themselves cannot begin to resolve the fundamental problem. In [their contribution to the present discussion, John Halpin and Ruy Teixeira](#)⁴ clearly express the limitations of this approach:

The recommended approach...is typically a combination of reminding people of all the good things that government already does and devising different language (or “framing”) to talk about proposed new initiatives. There is, however, no evidence

³ <http://harpers.org/archive/2011/02/0083294>

⁴ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_forum_0211_Halpin_Teixeira.pdf

this approach has worked, or can work. People's views on government are not produced mostly by the way conservatives talk about government and they will not be substantially changed by the way progressives talk about government. Their views are far more solidly based, reflecting their experience with government and their assessment of government's output. In short, their views are rooted in the real world, not talk, and, even if unfair or mistaken in interpretation, cannot be dismissed as some form of false consciousness.

As a result, a meaningful Democratic strategy for addressing the profound lack of trust in government must in two important respects go beyond an advertising-based approach:

First, the strategy must be based on actual, workable reforms and solutions—solutions that people can plausibly believe will substantially improve government and its operation. A viable Democratic strategy must make it possible for people to say “Yeah, if you really do those particular things that really will change my opinion about government.”

Second, the communications campaign that presents the proposed reforms must be more than a patchwork of slogans and advertisements. It must include both a single, coherent core narrative that tells the story of why the reforms are needed and how they will be put into effect and also a clear conceptual framework into which all of the individual elements of the strategy are organized. To be successful, the strategy should be one that a Democratic candidate can explain in coffee shop and living room conversations with ordinary voters at the same time that it can formally drafted and incorporated into the platform of the Democratic Party.

In the following pages an outline is presented of a strategy and communications campaign of this kind. It is designed to communicate three core messages: (1) that Democrats have a practical, common sense set of proposals for dealing with the problems of modern government, (2) that these proposals are based on a fundamental underlying principle—relying on the common sense of ordinary Americans—and (3) that this deeply Democratic approach proposes greatly increasing citizen participation, oversight and supervision of government.

Why attitudes about government are uniquely complex

Before beginning to examine this potential communications strategy, however, it is first necessary to identify the key views that underlie today's profound and extensive distrust of government. Unlike many other, more specific topics, opinions about “government” involve a dauntingly complex variety of issues and perspectives and very diverse aspects of government function. Consider the following:

- The attitudes people express about “government” may reflect views about different levels of government—federal state or local. They may reflect views about distinct governmental functions—passing laws, issuing regulations or managing government agencies. They may refer to different branches of government—Congress, federal agencies or the courts. And they may reflect views about fiscal and economic issues like taxes, spending and deficits. Any and all of these subsidiary topics and issues may be what survey respondents are actually thinking about at the moment when they answer questions about their attitudes toward government in general.

- “Restoring trust in government” involves dozens of interconnected issues, from changes in congressional procedures (earmarks, holds, filibusters) to reform of lobbying and campaign finance to changes in the way regulations are issued or the performance of governmental departments and agencies is monitored and evaluated. Only a handful of specialists understand any of these reform proposals in any detail while most people have only vague and anecdotal notions about a small subset of these issues.
- At any given moment there are a very wide variety of legislative bills introduced in Congress to reform various aspects of government and a vastly greater number of proposals in various stages of development. Literally dozens of different organizations are currently active in pushing for various proposed government reforms.

This complexity makes the interpretation of polling questions fraught with difficulty. Even on a major issue such as illegal immigration it is usually the case that a dozen or fifteen key questions and four or five alternate question wordings can be adequate to capture the main outlines of public attitudes on the topic while additional questions and question wordings add relatively little additional information. Regarding “government” in general, on the other hand, there are easily fifty or more distinct opinion poll questions that probe important dimensions of attitudes on the subject and literally hundreds of different questions that are directly relevant to attitudes about more specific aspects and activities.

Moreover, even if one can isolate a manageable set of specific opinions that one considers key components of overall views of government and government reform, the health care debate very dramatically demonstrated that data on individual opinions about the component parts of a social reform (e.g. coverage for pre-existing conditions or allowing youths to remain on family policies) cannot be treated in an additive manner as if the sum of the favorable percentages for the specific parts will add up to the level of support for the reform as a whole. Opinions about major political and social issues are generally organized in larger conceptual frameworks whose contours are often profoundly different than simply the sum of a person’s individual opinions on the sub-issues that comprise it. None of the early opinion polling examined attitudes about “socialism” as relevant to support for health care reform.

In the particular case of opinions about government in general there is no generally accepted theory in political psychology about whether (and if so, how) individual opinions about specific fields of government activity are cognitively synthesized in some way to create the broader general attitudes about government. It’s possible that general “attitudes about government” are instead contained in a distinct “stand-alone” cognitive schema that has its own independent internal structure.

The way to cut this methodological Gordian knot is to look at ethnographic field data—to examine how working class Americans conceptualize the issue when they talk about it spontaneously in their homes and communities rather than when they are responding to surveys. Since John Zaller’s 1992 analysis *“The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion”* it has been accepted that people responding to survey questions on social and political issues will in many cases essentially “construct” or “compute” entirely original opinions based on the information contained the question and the way it is framed rather than by retrieving a set

“opinion” from memory. These “opinions” are, however, very often not what these same individuals actually use in spontaneous conversation, in their community activities or when they make serious political choices such as voting on Election Day.

In fact, the attitudes of working class Americans toward government that are reflected in much of the ethnographic field literature closely parallel the kinds of general anti-government attitudes that Democrats are now deeply concerned with altering—attitudes reflected in the extremely common, “bumper sticker” expressions like: “*government is the problem, not the solution*” or “*I love my country but I don’t trust my government*” or “*big government is ruining this country.*”

(Note: for a partial bibliography of ethnographic field studies see the 2008 TDS Strategy Memo⁵ “*How Ethnographic Field Studies can Contribute to the Development of Democratic Political Strategy.*” Additional field studies will be reviewed in a forthcoming TDS Strategy Memo)

Three interlocking attitudes about government that foster distrust

The ethnographic literature suggests that there are three major attitude clusters that underlie white working class distrust of government:

1. **“Government is bureaucratic and inefficient.”** This is a perennial complaint continually refreshed by personal experiences. During the 1930s there were widespread criticisms of “men leaning on shovels” in the WPA and every subsequent generation has had negative views of government work and workers reinforced by grumpy or rude clerks at the Department of Motor Vehicles, long lines at the post office, clusters of municipal sewer workers standing around an open manhole apparently doing nothing and so on. In the common view, these characteristics of government employees are consequences of the lack of competition and the civil service protection they enjoy. This perception is particularly deep-rooted because individual examples that disconfirm the stereotypes—for example, dedicated public health specialists heroically preventing epidemics or diligent inspectors preventing the sale of contaminated meat—are cognitively categorized as something other than government employees—as “doctors” or “health inspectors”—while every negative personal experience with government workers is mentally classified as an example of “typical government inefficiency”
2. **“Government is corrupt and dominated by special interests.”** This perception, like the first, has always been present, but a profound change occurred in the 1970s and 1980s when political campaigns became primarily waged through TV commercials rather than through face-to-face voter canvassing by block and precinct level party organizations. In their 1993 book “Congress as Public Enemy” John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theis-Morse coined the term “the Washington system” to describe the resulting perception of politics as having become a “rich man’s sport” dominated by big money and special interests rather than average voters.
3. **“Government is dominated by liberal elites who channel government benefits to undeserving groups and attempt to impose alien values.”** This third perception of government was not widespread until the “white backlash” against welfare, school bussing and quotas occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It grew during the 1970s as the range of issues widened with the 1973 Supreme Court

⁵ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/levison_whtpaper.pdf

decision on abortion and an increasing flow of environmental and occupational health regulations were issued by the EPA, OSHA and other agencies. In the late 1970s the focus widened once again with the emergence of various “tax revolts” and demands for general reductions in the size and scope of government that became common during the Reagan era. Because of the police power of the state, this view also necessarily implies that government presents a major, constant threat to freedom.

One important reason for the unique depth and intensity of popular distrust of government is the fact that vast numbers of working class and other Americans hold all three of these conceptions simultaneously to some degree. Challenges to or disconfirming evidence against any one of the three does not significantly weaken the interlocking and reinforcing effect of the three in combination. For many Americans these are not seen as three alternative perspectives, one of which can overshadow or dominate the others, but rather as a single overlapping and interlocking set of schemas. Progressive proposals—which generally focus only on the second element—generally do not induce broad attitude change because they do not attempt to provide any solutions to the problems expressed in the first and third components of the view.

What this correctly suggests is that what is needed is a basically new approach—one that addresses all three elements of today’s anti-government perspective in a coherent and consistent way.

The key to a strategy for reform: genuinely trusting the common sense of ordinary Americans

Such an approach can be based on one very fundamental democratic and indeed “populist” notion—the view that reforms must be based on trusting the essential common sense of ordinary Americans.

This is a very deeply embedded part of the American ethos and one that has an overwhelmingly dramatic application in our national life—the essentially universal support that exists for the American jury system. Americans trust their most important personal rights and freedoms—the control over their life, death, liberty and imprisonment—to twelve entirely average and ordinary people like themselves rather than to some panel of experts or specialists. Why? Because Americans share a very deeply held core democratic value and belief that twelve ordinary people when given full information and the time to carefully reflect will usually make the right decisions—better decisions, in fact, than any experts or specialists. Experts and specialists may have their own distinct agendas and perspectives but most Americans believe that a randomly selected group of ordinary citizens will generally do what is reasonable and just.

This basic populist foundation leads to three guiding principles for reform.

- Let the people participate in writing the laws
- Get big money out of politics
- Let ordinary citizens supervise the bureaucrats.

Let us examine each one in turn:

1. Let the people participate in writing the laws.

The common sense core idea: Americans still deeply believe in the traditional ideals of citizen participation and direct democracy—the vision of the old-fashioned town meeting. In that vision ordinary citizens have the chance to hear debates, compare proposals and make their voices heard. That small town world may no longer be available in modern society but the ideal of public participation and town meeting democracy remains profoundly sound.

In modern society it is no longer possible for every American to participate in the equivalent of a town meeting. But, based on the same faith that Americans share in delegating twelve ordinary citizens to serve on a jury, it is still entirely possible to select a randomly chosen group of Americans to participate in a modern equivalent of a town meeting. There are many different ways such “deliberative democracy” town meetings can be structured but they all have in common the idea of allowing ordinary Americans to hear debates between advocates and opponents of new proposals, to question and demand facts and data, to examine and discuss the issues among themselves and with others and to reach conclusions that meaningfully influence the final decisions.

As [Peter Levine notes in his contribution to this Forum](#)⁶: “Elinor Ostrom won the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for a career of work showing that laypeople can do an excellent job of managing public institutions. She has also found that decentralized, participatory bodies can produce better outcomes than either centralized, expert-led bureaucracies or markets, even though participatory bodies often overlap, duplicate efforts, and reinvent one another’s wheels.”

One recent example of deliberative democracy is [the California system of redistricting](#)⁷, in which a lottery was deployed to choose 14 citizens (balanced by partisan self-identification) who will actually draw the lines for the decennial remapping of state legislative and congressional districts. The partisan impact of this system is unclear, but it is enormously popular in a state where protect-the-incumbent redistricting in the last decennial cycle all but eliminated competitive general elections, and it survived two separate ballot initiative challenges (one to kill it, another to keep it from being extended to congressional redistricting) in 2010.

There are a very large number of other examples and well-developed models for conducting democratic deliberations on issues that have included immigration, renewable energy, social security reform and the redevelopment of lower Manhattan after 9/11. Many of these efforts have included several thousand participants. James Fishkin of Stanford University was one of the early advocates and developers of this approach but there are now dozens of specialists who work in this area. Three major

⁶ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_forum_0211_Levine.pdf

⁷ <http://www.laweekly.com/2010-11-11/news/the-weirdest-lottery-of-all/>

organizations that work in the field and organize deliberative democracy exercises are [The Center for Deliberative Democracy](http://cdd.stanford.edu/)⁸, the [Deliberative Democracy Consortium](http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/)⁹ and [America Speaks](http://americaspeaks.org/)¹⁰.

There are several indispensable criteria that are required to make deliberative democracy genuine and meaningful rather than superficial “window dressing:” (1) the deliberations must involve genuinely random groups of ordinary citizens, as random as the groups of citizens who serve on juries; (2) the process must include a “bottom up” hierarchy of meetings, beginning with sessions held in local areas the size of towns or counties and then proceeding to state-level and national level meetings to consolidate and synthesize the decisions from the lower levels; (3) the process must involve a minimum of several thousand people in order to convince all observers that the results genuinely reflect the views of a representative sample of ordinary Americans (4) the process must allow for wide observation and discussion of the deliberations over the internet so that ordinary citizens can follow the proceedings in as much detail as they desire (5) the results of the deliberations must have a significant, clearly discernable influence on the shaping and final form of the law or other proposal that is under consideration.

2. Get big money out of politics

The common sense core idea: American politics has become the business of selling votes and influence in return for either campaign contributions, a high-paying job or “under the table” bribes. To stop this, the fundamental solution is a political process that is entirely funded by small donations from ordinary citizens rather than large contributions from corporations and other special interests. The basic rule of thumb is simple—a politician should not be allowed to accept any sum of money that is large enough to influence his vote. He or she should be financed by hundreds or thousands of small contributors, none of whom can or will expect any special favors in return for their support.

There is a tremendous range and variety of proposals for increasing the role of small donations and reducing the influence of large campaign contributions in American politics—so many that it is far beyond the scope of this analysis to list, much less compare them. One of the best known proposals for reform is the Fair Elections Now Act advocated by Lawrence Lessig and the organization *Change Congress* but there are also many alternative schemes which include proposals with varying combinations of public finance and dollar limits on donations. Many organizations that work in this area have emerged relatively recently while others, such as Common Cause and Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, have been in existence for many years.

Progressives frequently tend to view public financing itself as a desirable objective, but it is important to note that it is really just one particular method for increasing the role of small donor financing of political life—the donations in public financing being arranged

⁸ <http://cdd.stanford.edu/>

⁹ <http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/>

¹⁰ <http://americaspeaks.org/>

by the government rather than obtained from voluntary contributions. In either case the objective is a politics funded by small donations from ordinary voters rather than by large contributions.

To support this change there must also be a revived ethic of “public service” rather than personal enrichment as the goal of public office. In [his contribution to this forum David Callahan](#)¹¹ presents a powerful argument for the absolute necessity of a strong and honest progressive and Democratic commitment to attacking corruption as an absolute precondition for any restoration of trust in government.

3. Let ordinary citizens supervise the bureaucrats

The common sense core idea: With sufficient information ordinary citizens can apply effective “common sense” oversight to government programs and operations. Ordinary citizens are capable of clearly distinguishing between things that genuinely “just don’t make sense” (e.g. a bridge to nowhere) and things that can be superficially ridiculed as frivolous (like “designing artificial hearts for pigs and monkeys”) but which actually make perfect sense (this line of research led to the development of the device that is now keeping Dick Cheney alive).

There are literally hundreds of proposals for increasing citizen oversight of government agencies and operations. Many recent ideas for increasing citizen oversight involve the use of the internet to make widely available detailed “inside” information about government operations including data and even video. The Sunlight Foundation is one well-known organization that works in this area.

One of the simplest and most straightforward methods for increasing citizen involvement in supervising and reviewing bureaucracies can actually be found in state government agencies in many parts of the country, where officially constituted boards with required citizen membership exercise (in theory at least) genuine power over agency decisions. In Iowa, for example, citizens are encouraged to apply for [board appointments that actually control most agency activities, while enjoying complete access to agency records and data](#).¹² A more open version of this type of structure, with randomly selected pools of citizen decision-makers, could be adopted for federal agencies as well. A combination of greater transparency, allowing all citizens to more closely examine the operations of government agencies, and greater direct citizen oversight and control could not only substantially improve public confidence in government but actually improve the operation of government as well.

This perspective is clearly evident in the [Doing What Works project of the Center for American Progress](#).¹³ As the report summary states:

New information technologies provide government the opportunity to engage and interact with the public as never before. Thousands of extra eyes can be employed to spot problems, offer solutions, and bring fresh perspective. The public is ready

¹¹ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_forum_0211_Callahan.pdf

¹² <https://openup.iowa.gov/>

¹³ http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/02/pdf/dww_framing_exec_sum.pdf

for this role, but there must be tools to enlist them in evaluating performance and providing input to the decision-making process... such a government makeover would deliver more than policy results; it also promises to restore public confidence in government's basic competence.

These three ideas—*Let the people participate in writing the laws*, *Get big money out of politics* and *Let ordinary citizens supervise the bureaucrats*—can provide the basis for an effective set of programs and a Democratic communications strategy to reduce anti-government attitudes.

This strategy offers Democrats several key advantages:

First, the three basic principles above are easily presented as simple common sense. Unlike many Democratic proposals that are expressed as support for particular bills (e.g. “pass HR 1786”) with which ordinary people are completely unfamiliar or for particular proposals (“support public financing for political campaigns”) whose meaning and purpose are not immediately clear, this approach presents three principles that are essentially self-evident and self-explanatory. Even someone with absolutely no knowledge of the issues involved in government reform can examine these three principles and immediately feel that “Yeah, that makes sense” or “Yeah, I agree with that.”

Second, this approach redefines the basic media “framing” of the issue. At present Republicans and conservatives are described in the media as being “*opponents of big government*” because they wish to shrink it while Democrats are described as government’s “*defenders*.” This framing automatically defines Democrats as supporters of everything that is wrong with the current system while Republicans appear as those who criticize the system’s flaws. By shifting the axis of debate to, on the one hand, “*dramatically increasing citizen participation and control of politics*” versus “*keeping the current system (of unresponsive bureaucracy and special interest money) but making it smaller*” on the other, Democrats become the critics and advocates for change while Republicans and conservatives become the defenders of the deeply unpopular status quo. Obviously there are many individual Democratic officeholders who will be just as opposed to change as many Republicans. But for the parties as a whole, Republicans will in general be far more committed to defending the existing “Washington System” of back room deals and special interest money than will Democrats.

Third, this approach “scales” well at every level of political communication. Because the basic ideas are simple and self-evident, it can be applied at the door-to-door or “coffee shop” level of personal campaigning. It can also provide a consistent message for political advertisements, debates and interviews. It can be used both during specific campaigns and in ongoing, between-elections outreach. Once fully elaborated with specific goals and proposals it can be incorporated into state and national platforms and into general Democratic Party messaging by the DNC and other Democratic Party campaign committees.

Finally, this approach dovetails well with the broad Obama agenda. It provides a way for Democrats to propose and defend new programs while at the same time promising that such new efforts will incorporate vastly more citizen involvement and participation than in the past and therefore avoid many of the problems that have plagued previous government programs.

It is important to note that the “common sense” based presentation of this approach also makes it possible to partially separate the discussion of basic principles of government reform from the details of exactly which methods of deliberative democracy, small donor campaign finance and citizen oversight will be employed. It thus makes it possible to clearly distinguish the basic philosophic approach of the Democrats—increasing citizen involvement and oversight—from the Republicans’ program of cutting government services, programs and spending across the board. This will make it possible for Democrats to argue for the basic principles they are proposing without having to immediately defend every detail of complex proposals.

Before this communications strategy can be applied on a broad scale, however, the exact mechanisms for democratic deliberation, small donor campaign finance and citizen oversight will indeed need to be clearly specified and explained. In this regard, however, it is important that this process of specification incorporate two rules of thumb:

First, Democrats must resist the tendency to formulate their specific promises as simply the titles of particular pieces of legislation or formal proposals. On the contrary, what Dems need to present voters is a list of specific goals or objectives, specified as concretely as possible (e.g. “all major new programs will be reviewed by citizen assemblies;” “stockholders will be given the right to approve all corporate advertising;” “all federal agencies will establish citizen oversight panels”). These objectives should wherever possible include specific numerical targets and deadlines for completion.

Second, Democrats must convincingly demonstrate the seriousness with which they take these reforms by directly tying their fate as candidates to the achievement of these objectives. The 1994 Republican “Contract with America” ended with the catchy phrase “*If we break this contract, throw us out. We mean it.*” If Democrats wish to convince the American people that the proposed reforms will genuinely produce better government, they must demonstrate a similar degree of personal commitment to making sure the new approaches are actually enacted and put into operation.

Republicans will, of course, point to the way in which the health care reform act was passed as proof that Democrats are entirely hypocritical in their endorsement of this new proposed approach and argue that Dems are really still committed to the status quo. Dems must reply by making a clear and forceful promise – that in the future all major new programs and initiatives proposed by Democrats will include meaningful citizen involvement and oversight or they will not be proposed at all. This is the only way that Democrats can rebuild the level of trust that will be necessary to win popular support for new social legislation or political reform.