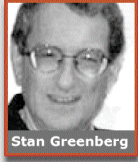


CO-EDITORS:



William Galston



Stan Greenberg



Ruy Teixeira

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.

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THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

THE NEW CENTER FOR AMERICAN
PROGRESS REPORT *THE STATE OF
AMERICAN POLITICAL IDEOLOGY 2009*¹
REVEALS THE EXISTENCE OF A SUBSTANTIAL
GROUP OF "AMBIVALENT" OR
"INCONSISTENT" VOTERS – HERE'S WHAT
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By Andrew Levison

(Andrew Levison is the author of two books and numerous articles on the social and political attitudes of blue collar workers and other ordinary Americans)

The new report from the Center for American Progress, *The State of American Political Ideology 2009*¹ provides a more finely crafted overall picture of the current balance between support for conservative and liberal-progressive principles in the American electorate than any recent study. As a result, it establishes a vital starting point for the development of progressive and Democratic strategy.

In each of four sections—the role of government, economic and domestic policy, cultural and social values and international affairs and national security—five questions express liberal-progressive principles in the most positive and affirmative way possible and five express conservative principles along similar lines. This extremely elegant methodology avoids many of the problems of inconsistent or incompatible question wording that often prevents meaningful comparison between opposing views.

The interpretation of the results is not, however, straightforward.

Looking at the 10 questions regarding attitudes toward government and the 10 covering economic and domestic policy, two conclusions are quickly apparent.

First, liberal-progressive principles do generally receive higher levels of agreement than conservative principles. The 5 liberal-progressive views regarding government garner an average level of agreement of about 69%, while the 5 conservative principles average support of about 53%. In the area of economic and domestic policy, the five progressive principles receive an average of 62% support while conservative principles receive about 53% support. Obviously questions can always be raised about particular survey questions, but the results are clearly quite striking.

Second, however, is the apparently illogical fact that both the liberal-progressive and conservative principles both receive over 50% support. A majority of the respondents to the survey expressed agreement with both major liberal-progressive principles and also major conservative principles.

One well-known explanation for this quite consistent trend—the appearance of support for both liberal and conservative views on surveys—is the notion that Americans tend to be

“ideological conservatives” but “operational liberals” and indeed, the specific liberal-progressive principles in the CAP survey could possibly be argued to be marginally more concrete or program focused than the conservative principles.

But this is not a sufficient explanation. In fact, a number of the questions are quite directly contradictory. For example 73% of the respondents agreed that *“Government regulations are necessary to keep business in check and protect workers and consumers”* but 43% simultaneously agreed that *“Government regulation of business does more harm than good.”* Thus, in this case, almost 20% of the respondents agreed with both statements.

Again, 79% of the respondents agreed that *“Government investments in education, infrastructure and science are necessary to insure America’s long term growth”* while 61% agree that *“Government spending is almost always wasteful and inefficient.”* In this case, almost 40% of the respondents agreed with both statements.

This makes absolutely no sense if one assumes that the respondents were actually answering these questions on the basis of even the most minimally coherent liberal-progressive or conservative ideology. It is inconceivable that even a single one of the kind of people who attend the annual meetings of the liberal-progressive Campaign for America’s Future or the Conservative Political Action Council would ever reply to survey questions in this inconsistent way.

Two general kinds of explanations have been put forth to explain this kind of result.

One is that a certain significant portion of the electorate is fundamentally “confused”, “ambivalent”, or “inconsistent.” As a guide to political strategy, the conclusion that is often drawn from this is that these voters’ political opinions can safely be minimized or even completely disregarded because their attitudes are basically incoherent.

The second explanation is that many Americans are “bi-conceptuals”—that they have internalized two basically distinct and incompatible conservative and liberal-progressive ideologies, either one of which can be “invoked” or “activated” by triggering the appropriate memories and mental associations. As a guide to political strategy, this analysis is frequently interpreted as implying that it is simply the first or the strongest message that determines which mental schema will be activated in a given situation.

A significant fact about both explanations noted above is that they are drawn from only two of the social sciences—political science and cognitive linguistics. In contrast, analyses based on sociological and anthropological perspectives receive virtually no attention in the discussion of inconsistent voters and their implications for Democratic strategy.

The reason is that there is today a desperate—indeed absolutely appalling—lack of ethnographic field studies of “average Americans”—of working class people, of the inhabitants of small towns and red state voters. In fact, as a previous TDS Strategy White Paper—*How Ethnographic Field Studies can contribute to the Development of Democratic Strategy*²—has documented, since 1985 serious ethnographic field studies have declined so drastically that in this area liberal-progressive and Democratic strategists are quite literally “flying blind.” There is simply no intellectually serious body of empirical research today that documents how the opinions that are collected over the phone in opinion polls are actually expressed in real-world settings, on the job or at home, with friends or neighbors and how such opinions change and evolve over extended periods of time.

This lack severely hampers the interpretation of the data in the CAP study. There are, in fact, two very important sociological insights that can substantially help to better understand the results and apply them to Democratic political strategy.

I. Conservatism and Progressivism are Value Systems and Value Systems are Rooted in Social Institutions

In the classic study, *The Nature and Origin of Mass Opinion*,³ John Zaller quoted two social psychologists who described the traditional view of attitudes as being essentially a “file cabinet” model...

“When people are asked how they feel about something, such as legalized abortion, their uncle Harry or anchovies or pizza, presumably they consult a mental file containing their evaluation. They look for the file marked “abortion” or “Uncle Harry” or “anchovies” and report the evaluation it contains.”

Since Zaller’s 1992 book, political scientists, social psychologists and cognitive scientists have all proposed a wide range of alternatives to the simplistic “file cabinet” model, trying to map the larger conceptual schemas into which specific individual opinions are organized and to gauge the relative importance one opinion may have in relation to another.

But in the ordinary political discussion of opinion polls, the “file cabinet” model still appears as an implicit assumption. When the latest Gallup poll appears, commentators naturally default back to an implicit view of each individual opinion as an essentially independent, “stand-alone” proposition, presumably extracted from some neat little mental cubbyhole where it was stored side by side with thousands of others.

The “file cabinet” model is particularly misleading in the case of opinion statements about values or principles—such as the 40 questions used in the American Political Ideology study. From a sociological and anthropological perspective there are two unique facts about values or principles (1) that they are arranged into higher-order cognitive frameworks called “value systems” and (2) that the conservative and liberal-progressive value systems have quite different social and cultural structures that underlie and support them.

Let us look first at the conservative value system.

At the highest level, the conservative value system is rooted in the institutional value systems of three of American society’s dominant social institutions—the business community, the church and the military—institutions whose message is then reinforced by the K-12 educational system, the legal and criminal justice system and the mass media. Each of these major social institutions provides both extensive written expositions of its institutional value system and also vast numbers of individuals—local small businessmen, Chamber of Commerce members, clergymen and women, members of the military—in every small town and city neighborhood—who serve as teachers, role models and local cultural transmission mechanisms.

The value systems of these major social institutions are imparted to almost every individual American citizen through a lifelong process of socialization conducted both within specific institutions (at church on Sunday morning, in the workplace from 9 to 5 and from the moment basic training begins to mustering out in the armed forces) and more generally through school, the legal system, the media, etc.

The value systems of the three major social institutions (along with a fourth major value system supporting “The American System of Government”) are highly integrated. Although frictions between the value systems of dominant social institutions have at times appeared in American history (such as the conflict between the “social gospel” of progressive Christianity and the business community’s “Social Darwinism” at the turn of the century) for the last half century the four major American institutional value systems have been overwhelmingly harmonious.

One result of this has been the well-known perception in recent years that Conservatives and Republicans always seemed to have a more consistent message than Democrats—the easily recited triumvirate of “low taxes and small government” [aka free enterprise], “strong national defense” and “Christian faith.”

One important consequence of this tight integration is that, to most ordinary Americans, the dominant value system does not seem like a conscious political ideology at all but rather like an entirely natural and obvious expression of “the way things are” or “common sense.” Many people who have only been exposed to the dominant value system literally cannot conceive of how anyone could possibly think differently. People who believe in alternative value systems (e.g. Islam, communism) can only be conceptualized as being literally “crazy” or “irrational”.

The liberal-progressive value system differs in almost every key respect.

First, the liberal-progressive value system, as it emerged after World War II, is not exclusively rooted in the dominant American social institutions. Rather, its social foundations are spread between four different sub-cultures that evolved at different times during the post-war period.

1. The trade union/New Deal sub-culture that emerged in the major northern industrial cities after World War II and was institutionalized in a vast network of neighborhood-level union halls and local Democratic clubs. From the New Deal it drew such values as a Keynesian commitment to full employment and to social programs like social security. From the unions it drew such social values as job security, democratic representation at work and solidarity.
2. The distinctly “liberal” post-war upper-echelon academic university sub-culture, which reflected enlightenment values of scholarship, reason and debate, faith in science and a global and multicultural outlook. While based in the universities, it became part of the Democratic value system during the Kennedy administration when President John Kennedy surrounded himself with figures like John Kenneth Galbraith, Walter Heller, Theodore Sorenson and other Ivy League intellectuals.
3. The sub-culture of the Civil Rights Movement and other grass-roots movements of minorities that arose during in the 1960’s. Among the chief values these movements championed were equality, social justice and nonviolence.
4. The sub-culture of the university-based social movements—peace, the environment and women’s liberation among others. These movements adopted many values drawn from the earlier civil rights struggles but also developed new principles including opposition to US military intervention and an ecological world view

Even at first glance, it is clear that this fragmented social base of the liberal progressive value system makes it differ substantially from the conservative value system.

First, the different value systems in this cluster of sub-cultures are not integrated. There are substantial areas of overlap but also substantial areas of difference. As a result, the

liberal-progressive value system does not appear even to its adherents as an entirely “natural” or “obvious” expression of ordinary “common sense.”

Second, unlike the dominant value system, these values systems are not by themselves self sufficient or self-contained. In cognitive terms they can be visualized as gradually “layered” on top of the dominant value systems during the course of a person’s growth and maturation. In some cases they explicitly modify the dominant values, in other cases they simply co-exist with them despite inconsistencies.

Third, by the 1980’s the major social and cultural foundations that supported these liberal-progressive value systems were in decline. The union halls and local democratic clubs of the northern industrial cities gradually shrank and no longer socialized new generations of manual workers, grass-roots organizations in Black and other minority communities contracted drastically and the social organizations that had institutionalized and supported the liberal-progressive counterculture in universities (campus organizations, communes, food co-ops, independent bookstores) declined as well.

As a result the liberal-progressive value system rests on a significantly weaker and narrower social foundation than the conservative value system. New liberal-progressive organizations and institutions did emerge in the 1990’s and 2000’s but in significant measure they arose online and not rooted in day to day personal and social interaction in local neighborhoods, jobsites or communities. In certain respects the liberal-progressive value system therefore rests on a more sociologically tenuous and fragile base than does the conservative value system.

This has significant implications for political strategy.

For one thing, when opinion polls indicate that 60 or 70 percent of the public supports some particular policy or view and some smaller number oppose it, such simple numeric comparisons may actually conceal major differences in the underlying organizational strength and social and cultural support structure behind the opposing ideas.

Moreover, the complex way in which different individuals internalize both the dominant value system and elements of other sub-cultural value systems in ordinary day to day life gives rise to a range of perspectives that do not fit neatly into formal and consistent conservative or liberal-progressive political ideologies.

II. Americans who endorse a seemingly incompatible combination of conservative and liberal-progressive ideas are not simply “confused”, “ambivalent”, or “inconsistent.” Many are expressing a coherent social ideology that Democrats need to better understand.

For most ordinary Americans, opinions about business, government and economic issues are not learned and mentally organized into the kinds of coherent ideological frameworks taught in freshman economics or political science classes. On the contrary, for most Americans many of their opinions about economic life are gradually built up out of daily experiences in the world of small and medium sized businesses and during real world interactions with bosses, customers, suppliers, co-workers, sub-contractors, city inspectors, bookkeepers and so on and through the informal exchange of opinions shared within the workplace.

As these individual experiences and conversations are gradually synthesized into more general attitudes, there are typically five distinct kinds of cognitive frameworks or schemas that develop (1) a specific cluster of opinions about what appear to be “facts” or “common sense” about business and economic life, (2) a cluster of opinions about various positive principles and values that are inculcated by the business world, (3) a cluster of opinions expressing generally positive generalizations about markets and business, (4) a cluster of opinions about the limits of markets and the proper role of government and (5) a cluster of opinions about the role and values of the “rich and powerful”.

For most ordinary voters, these five cognitive frameworks or schemas operate largely independently of each other. There is little conscious examination or effort to insure consistency. Invoking one opinion within a particular cluster generally activates a number of other opinions within the same cluster but generally does not invoke the other cognitive frameworks related to economic life.

Efforts have been made to **systematically study and map Americans’ cognitive frameworks⁴** related to economic life in real-world settings, an effort primarily conducted within the field of cognitive anthropology. But progress has been extremely limited because the collecting, conducting, transcribing and coding of extended, open-ended interviews is an extremely labor-intensive and expensive process, one that **academic funding sources have generally not been willing to support.⁵**

In political science, on the other hand, studies based on ethnographic, “in the field” interviewing techniques are extremely rare and most studies of public opinion data focus on relatively narrow topics rather than the full range of voter attitudes toward economic life.

One classic study of public opinion that did take a comprehensive approach toward understanding public attitudes toward economic issues was Herbert McClosky and John Zaller's *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes Toward Capitalism and Democracy*⁶ which appeared in the mid 1980's. The study was an attempt to understand Americans' basic views about the economic system and to evaluate if the rise of Reaganism actually signaled a sea-change in American opinion toward free-market conservatism. The American Ethos examined such an unusually wide range of economic opinions that it was possible to identify in it elements of all the major cognitive schemas noted above.

1. Opinions based on "Common sense"

Some opinions reported in The American Ethos, for example, actually expressed what people basically saw as "facts" or "realities", about issues like competition, private property and the profit motive. 88% of the respondents in one study, for example, agreed that "It is having to compete with others that keeps people on their toes" and 81% held that competition "leads to better performance and a desire for excellence". Similarly, 54% of the people in one sample agreed that "the profit system teaches people the value of hard work and success" and 85% agreed that "Giving everybody about the same income regardless of the kind of work that they do would destroy the desire to work hard and do a better job".

Average citizens do not consider opinions like these as necessarily expressing their personal values or philosophy. Rather, they see them as statements of "common sense" or "just the way things are". People do not necessarily think that these social facts are entirely desirable or always the appropriate things to encourage. But they perceive them as realities about social institutions and human conduct that it is simply foolish to ignore.

2. The positive values of business

At the same time, many people also strongly approve of some of the key values and characteristics of small business. Independence, hard work, ambition, self-discipline and individual initiative are considered positive character traits by most Americans and lead to support for a variety of small business values. 95% of the people in one sample agreed that "there is nothing wrong with a man trying to make as much money as he honestly can". 78% agreed that "under a fair economic system people with more ability would earn higher salaries" and 58% agreed that "the way property is used should mainly be decided by the individuals who own it".

Although these views have significant social implications, the specific questions make it clear that they are more accurately seen as generalizations from small business experience and not the expression of a formal ideology. The questions focus on particular individuals and express beliefs about how such individuals should be treated, rather than views about society as a whole.

3. Positive views about free enterprise

McCloskey and Zaller did find a variety of more general social or ideological attitudes favoring free enterprise and the free market. 63% of the respondents to one survey agreed that “the free enterprise system is generally a fair and efficient system”. 84% agreed that “private ownership of property is necessary for economic progress” and 82% supported the view that “our freedom depends on the free enterprise system”.

Seen in isolation, these opinions might appear to be ideological statements based on a clearly held and fully consistent conservative economic philosophy. But when viewed in the context of the other opinions McCloskey and Zaller studied, it becomes clear that, for many Americans, they are more reasonably understood as informal extensions or generalizations of their specific, common sense views about small business. This kind of belief system differs radically from views based on a formal ideology because it is rooted in common sense observation rather than abstract theory.

4. The limitations of the market and the need for government

This difference becomes dramatically clear when McClosky and Zaller turn to consider the attitudes of most Americans toward the free market as an economic system and toward people’s opinions about the proper relationship between the market and government for society as a whole. It quickly becomes clear that the same “common sense” that makes many people accept many seemingly conservative propositions about the values of work, rewards and incentives also makes them completely unwilling to accept the notion that markets can actually be left to themselves or do not need extensive government oversight and wide-ranging regulation.

McClosky and Zaller noted that even in the 1950’s only 25% of the American people believed that “Most things would run pretty well by themselves if the government just didn’t interfere”. In the late 1970’s, 85% rejected the idea that, by itself, business would “strike a fair balance between profits and the interests of the public.” In that same year, a plurality agreed that “government regulation of business is necessary to keep industry from getting too powerful,” and 62% held that “The way business is behaving, we need the government to keep an eye on them”.

5. Attitudes toward “the Rich and Powerful”

At the same time that McClosky and Zaller found majority support for the right of an individual to become wealthy and do whatever he or she wished with their wealth, 67% also agreed that “corporations and people with money really run the country”, 72% agreed that “when it comes to taxes, corporations and wealthy people don’t pay their fair share and 55 % supported the proposition that “in the American court system, a poor man usually gets treated worse than a rich man.”

The essential distinction in this area is that Americans are seen to have the right to become wealthy, but not to use their wealth to gain unfair advantage. People have a very distinct reaction to the term “the rich and powerful” than they do to the terms “people who have become rich” or “wealthy people”. It is the combination of both wealth and power that triggers this particular “populist” schema and distinguishes it from the cluster of attitudes about wealth alone.

After reviewing this and a wide variety of other data, McClosky and Zaller concluded the following:

“Popular support for laissez-faire capitalism appears surprisingly weak even at a relatively abstract level”... [only a] small group—perhaps 10-20 percent—wants a return to laissez-faire and a sharp reduction in government regulation of the economy. The balance—a substantial majority of Americans—seems reasonably satisfied with the present intermingling of business independence and government intervention”

When McClosky and Zaller presented this conclusion in the mid-1980s, it seemed startlingly at odds with the Reagan-era common wisdom that the American people had actually become much more conservative and supportive of a radical free-market point of view. But this basic conclusion has been repeatedly reconfirmed by other major studies since that time. Substantial numbers of Americans do have strongly positive opinions about small business and approve of a number of the social and personal values that are associated with it. But the same “common sense” perspective that leads them to this view makes them also strongly reject the idea that free markets are ideal or self-adjusting and can be left to operate without substantial regulation and oversight by society as a whole. The common sense perspective that leads to the belief that many small business values are beneficial to society also leads to the view that, by its nature, business is entirely governed by “the bottom line” and will inevitably ignore or undermine goals or values that Americans think are “important”, “good” or “right” if they conflict with profitability.

It is this perspective that best explains the apparently anomalous results in the *American Political Ideology 2009* study. A critical segment of ordinary Americans do not have rigid ideological views; they have variety of conceptual schemas that operate at different levels of analysis and specific topics. They can look at six municipal workers standing around a sewer pipe and react by thinking that *“government is invariably wasteful and inefficient”* and they can then see a TV report and applaud the food inspectors who catch a shipment of salmonella-tainted meat thinking that *“government regulations are necessary to protect workers and consumers.”*

In fact, one can map the questions on the Center for American Progress study into the five cognitive schemas outlined above.

1. Common sense “facts” about economic life

Government spending is always wasteful and inefficient – 61% agree
Government regulation of business does more harm than good – 43% agree

2. Positive values of business

Government programs for the poor undermine individual initiative and responsibility – 48% agree

3. Positive views of the economic system

Limited government is always better than big government – 55% agree
Free market solutions are better than government at creating jobs and economic growth – 57% agree
The primary responsibility of corporations is to produce profits and returns for their shareholders, not to improve society – 44% agree

4. Limitations of the market and the need for Government

Government regulations are necessary to keep businesses in check and protect workers and consumers – 73% agree
Government investment in education, infrastructure and science are necessary to insure America’s long-term economic growth – 79% agree
Government has a responsibility to provide financial support for the poor, the sick and the elderly – 69% agree
Government must step in to protect the national economy when the market fails – 59% agree

5. The role of the “rich and powerful”

Rich people like to believe they have made it on their own but in reality society has contributed greatly to their wealth – 60% agree

Government policies too often serve the interests of corporations and the wealthy – 65% agree

The gap between the rich and poor should be reduced, even if it means higher taxes for the wealthy – 62% agree

(Note: there are six questions in the CAP survey that have not been included above because they are focused on specific reforms—health care, unions, social security, free trade, renewable resources and tax cuts—rather than on attitudes toward business and government in general)

Once it is realized that these five schemas can be invoked and operate on a substantially independent basis, it becomes clear how many individuals can simultaneously agree with some or even all propositions in each category without feeling inconsistent. In fact, trade unionists and others who work with blue-collar and other ordinary Americans on a continuing basis can easily relate examples of individuals who—in the course of a single, long, free-flowing conversation—will express views consistent with all five schemas, and will not be troubled by any conflicts between them unless logical contradictions are explicitly pointed out. These people are not foolish, unintelligent or permanently “confused”, “ambivalent”, or “inconsistent.” Instead, they have developed a variety of cognitive schemas and perspectives at distinct levels of analysis that they have learned and internalized at various times and places during their lives and which they apply to particular situations as they arise.

They generally believe a coherent set of ideas: (1) that many aspects of economic life are just “the way things are” (2) that small business encourages many positive values (3) that markets are in general preferable to central planning (4) that extensive and substantial regulation of business is necessary and (5) that the rich and powerful have disproportionate power in society which must, at times, be constrained.

This suggests that—while the results of the CAP study do indeed indicate that progressive ideas are currently more popular than conservative ideas—the relationship between the two ideologies cannot be conceptualized as a simple “either-or” proposition. A large, and indeed pivotal, group of voters simultaneously holds a number of strong and sincere “pro-small business” views, while simultaneously supporting active government intervention in many areas. A too-rigid approach dividing voters into ideologically pure “liberal-progressives” and “conservatives” will fail to speak to and engage this critical voter group.

A more effective approach requires a strategy that is based on a clear vision of what these non-ideological voters are like and how they combine their individual viewpoints into a personal “philosophy.” A previous TDS Strategy Memo, *How Democrats Can Do a Better Job of Communicating with Young White Working-Class Obama Voters*⁷ presented a brief ethnographic portrait of one subgroup of these voters. But more research of this kind is desperately needed to support the development of successful progressive and Democratic political strategy.

¹ http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/pdf/political_ideology.pdf

² http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/levison_whtpaper.pdf

³ **The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion** (Cambridge Studies in Public Opinion and Political Psychology) by John R. Zaller. Published by The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1992.

⁴ **A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning (Publications of the Society for Psychological Anthropology)** by Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn. Published by Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁵ **Finding Culture in Talk: A Collection of Methods (Culture, Mind and Society)** Edited by Naomi Quinn. Published by Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

⁶ **The American Ethos: Public Attitudes Toward Capitalism and Democracy** by Herbert McClosky and John Zaller. Published by Harvard University Press.

⁷ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/levison_whtpaper.pdf